

Urban History Review

Aimée Boutin. *City of Noise: Sound and Nineteenth-Century Paris*. Springfield, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2015. 208 pp. Photographs. ISBN 978-0-252-03921-8, \$95.00 cloth; 978-0-252-08078-4, \$25.00 paperback

Owen Temby

Environmental Nuisances and Political
Contestation in Canadian Cities
Volume 44, numéro 1-2, fall 2015, spring 2016

URI : id.erudit.org/iderudit/1037239ar
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1037239ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN 0703-0428 (imprimé)
1918-5138 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Temby, O. (2015). Aimée Boutin. *City of Noise: Sound and Nineteenth-Century Paris*. Springfield, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2015. 208 pp. Photographs. ISBN 978-0-252-03921-8, \$95.00 cloth; 978-0-252-08078-4, \$25.00 paperback. *Urban History Review*, 44(1-2), 71-77. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1037239ar>

Cet document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne. [<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>]

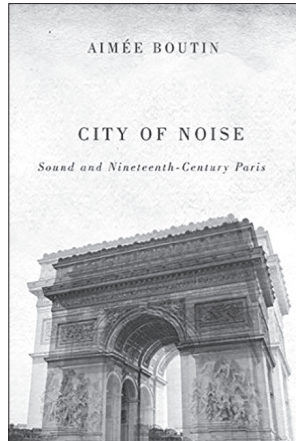


Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche. www.erudit.org

Aimée Boutin. *City of Noise: Sound and Nineteenth-Century Paris*. Springfield, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2015. 208 pp. Photographs. ISBN 978-0-252-03921-8, \$95.00 cloth; 978-0-252-08078-4, \$25.00 paperback.

Street peddling, and the noisy vocalization associated with it, was declining in Paris during the nineteenth century. The city's transformation, accelerated mid-century with Georges-Eugène Haussmann's planning reforms under France's Second Empire (1852-1870), had created a spacious urban environment less conducive to hawking wares in public. The emergence of sedentary merchants and urban elites intolerant of excessive noise made conditions more difficult for street merchants. While these changes evidenced progress, the gradual disappearance of one of the city's defining features elicited the response of artists who collectively employed it as a focus for artistic expression. The *Cris de Paris*, thus, was both an urban phenomenon objectively occurring (and transforming) and a discourse among the urban literati using it to express the experience of living in Paris.



In *City of Noise: Sound and Nineteenth-Century Paris*, Aimée Boutin undertakes an extensive assessment of the literature on the *Cris de Paris*. Boutin is a professor of modern languages and linguistics at Florida State University and a specialist in nineteenth-century French literature. Her approach reflects this; poetry, songs, literary guidebooks, figurines, photographs, and drawings comprise the analyzed materials. Assembling and examining these disparate sources, Boutin pieces together the *Cris de Paris*, highlighting salient representations of the impoverished peddlers by the educated (albeit, in some cases impoverished) artists and writers. Were the street cries elements of a "city as concert" or harsh, strident intrusions on an otherwise more peaceful bourgeois urban experience? Did they contribute a fading quaintness to the modernizing city, or did the peddlers and hawkers have seditious or criminal inclinations? Have the changes eclipsed them or did they build the iconic city in which they live and work? Questions of differentiation in social class reactions and contemporaneous perceptions of a purported nuisance are mainstays of social research on urban nuisances. In Boutin's text, they are not questions for which certain answers are provided; rather, these questions are points of nonconcurrence and contestation among authors and artists in their portrayals of noisy peddlers.

Aptly, the reader's journey begins with a chapter introducing the concept of the *flâneur*, a curious urban-dweller who explores

the city in search of interesting sights and sounds. Literature about *flâneurs* and authored by them is covered in this and the following chapters, including writing by Honoré de Balzac, Auguste Lacroix, and Victor Fournel. Boutin shows that *flâneur*-writing created a cultural memory about an idealized Paris that resonated with readers feeling nostalgic for the Paris rapidly disappearing as the Second Empire's modernizations transformed the city's sonic environment. The implications of these urban spatial changes are explored in another chapter, along with other policy changes that made Paris inhospitable for peddlers and hawkers relying on vocalization. Here we an alternative understanding of peddler cries represented. This type of noise, and the people making it, was associated with the poverty and criminality that policymakers sought to address through mitigation and concealment. Readers interested in urban nuisance policy history will find this section particularly interesting. As Boutin explains, the *flâneur*-writing tradition offered an anesthetized "mutely picturesque" depiction of peddlers that failed to root their cries in the broader (and disquieting) political-economic context (p. 21). This distinction is explored in a subsequent chapter in which writings on glaziers (window makers who, in this instance, solicited their services through street cries) offering divergent representations of their activities are analyzed. Here poems by Charles Baudelaire and Arsene Houssaye are compared, as are efforts by musicians to document the sound of the glazier's cry through musical notation. Following up on Baudelaire's depiction of street cries as shrill, dissonant, and sinister, Boutin then examines representation of peddlers by Baudelaire's avant-garde poet followers who used the topic to reflect on the social changes Paris was undergoing at the time.

Boutin points out that we can never know what Paris sounded like in the nineteenth century because today we do not perceive noise in the same way as the city's inhabitants did then, and because we have only second-hand accounts. Yet, with this welcome contribution, we can have a good sense of how it was perceived by the educated classes who suffered it, lamented its diminution, or used it as a focal point to describe the experience of living in Paris. This is useful information for those of us interested in social responses to urban environmental nuisances. As a specialist in urban air pollution policy history, I did not expect to thoroughly enjoy and benefit from an in-depth exploration of French literature. It is a challenging read, to be sure. Readers without competence in the French language and without knowledge of French literature and history will be doubly disadvantaged. But those with the patience to read carefully and consult external sources on the French language and the historical places and people presented in the book will be rewarded with an enlightening experience.

Owen Temby
University of Texas Rio Grande Valley