A Station for Women in Montevideo

Radio Femenina

In 1999, National Public Radio’s *All Things Considered* first broadcast a Kitchen Sisters documentary on the history of radio station WHER in Memphis, Tennessee. When it went on the air in October 1955, WHER – owned by Sam Phillips, the man credited with discovering Elvis Presley – billed itself as the “first all-girl station in the world,” a claim that was repeated in subsequent histories of the station.¹ Although the story of WHER is unquestionably an important chapter in the history of radio in the United States, and of women’s radio history more broadly, the claim to be the “first all girl’s station in the world” is erroneous.² Even though much of the history of women’s radio remains unwritten, we do know that exactly twenty years earlier, in October 1935, Radio Femenina went on the air with programming made by and for women in the unassuming but progressive South American city of Montevideo, Uruguay. Like WHER, the story of Radio Femenina had been all but forgotten,

² In her history of women and U.S. broadcasting, Donna Halper addresses this claim and partially corrects the historical record by stating that Phillips was “perhaps unaware that there was at least one all-female station in the 1920s (WASN in Boston) and several more during the war years.” Halper, *Invisible Stars*: 146. Halper earlier explained that WASN (All Shopping News), which “tried years ahead of its time to do home shopping,” went on the air in 1927 and lasted only six months. Halper, *Invisible Stars*, 47.
Despite its historical importance in the rioplatense cultural zone, Radio Femenina was created for primarily commercial reasons, its owners being more interested in capturing women as consumers than in shaping them into political beings. The fact that the station soon became something more than that speaks to the ways some women appropriated radio and used it to carve out new spaces for female citizenship at a time when Uruguayan women had recently won—but had yet to exercise—the vote. Within a few years, women intellectuals, feminists, and others were able

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to occupy space on frequency CX48 (1490 kilocycles, near the far right of the AM dial) and transform it into an unusual forum for women’s voices and women’s programming.

When it went on the air in October 1935, Radio Femenina likely became the first sustained and successful experiment with a radio station dedicated exclusively to an “all-woman” format in the Western Hemisphere. There seems no doubt that Radio Femenina predated any equivalent example in the United States. In early 1939, the Uruguayan radio programming guide POEUR reported on an interview Uruguayan feminist Paulina Luisi conducted with a North American sociologist named Mrs. Frances Benedict Stewart. Stewart was said to be surprised by the radio station, remarking “we have nothing like this, even in the United States, where at one time a similar project was tried, but until now has not arrived at anything concrete.” In Europe, where radio was more state-controlled, there were women’s departments and women’s programming, such as the Frauenfunk, separate women’s departments set up within German radio stations starting in the mid-1920s. In Britain, the BBC’s Woman’s Hour went on the air only in 1946. But this differed from the Uruguayan experiment in that we still are not talking about a separate women’s station, only the existence of substantial women’s programming. Holes in the historical record notwithstanding, the very precociousness of the Radio Femenina experiment, and the fact that the station remained on the air for decades, makes the story of Radio Femenina worth telling. It also underscores the important differences between Montevidean and Buenos Aires radio, and reminds us that we cannot and should not assume that all of the most interesting or important radio innovations took place in the largest urban radio markets.

While Silvia Guerrico was making a name for herself as the voice of and for “intelligent women” on Buenos Aires radio, the voices of other intellectual and political women were making themselves heard on the airwaves in her hometown, laying the groundwork for what would come later on Radio Femenina. One of many exiles to take up residence in Montevideo over its history was Mercedes Pinto, a freethinking anticlerical and feminist forced out of Spain for her pro-divorce advocacy and

4 “La Doctora P. Luisi en CX48.” POEUR, No. 389, 6 January 1939.
5 Lacey, Feminine Frequencies, 9
6 Women had a presence on the BBC prior to this, of course. For information on Hilda Matheson, a pioneering broadcaster on the BBC starting in the late 1920s, see Katherine Murphy, “On an Equal Footing with Men?: Women and Work at the BBC, 1922–1939.” Ph.D. diss., University of London, 2011.
other positions. Pinto lived in Montevideo from about 1924 to 1932, and during those years she became an important figure in the city’s intellectual scene. Among her many literary and cultural activities in the city, Pinto penned a regular column in the magazine Mundo Uruguayo under the religious pseudonym “Sor Suplicio” [Sister Suffering], in which she responded to readers’ letters asking for advice and help with their problems. The column’s popularity was such that around 1930, a radio version began airing on CX26 Radio Uruguay. August 1931 program listings show Sor Suplicio hosting both a “Feminine” advice column (Consultorio femenino) on Tuesdays from 8:00 to 9:30 PM, and a “Spiritual” advice column (Consultorio espiritual) on Fridays from 8:00 to 9:00 PM.7 The fact that Pinto adopted a (somewhat tongue-in-cheek) religious identity is noteworthy. As Franc¸oise Heinz observes, in her print and especially media columns “we have here an interesting step from the private confessional in a religious arena to a public confession in modern media space.”8 Pinto was silenced in Spain, but given a microphone in Uruguay.

Pinto left Uruguay around 1932, at about the same time a new female voice took to the airwaves, one that would become the most enduring and well-remembered woman’s voice on Montevidean radio. For a number of years prior, educator and feminist Adela Barbitta Colombo (using the penname Elizabeth Durand) had been contributing regularly to the Montevidean newspaper El Imparcial, on both the “women’s page” and for the Theater section, where she reported working for then-director of that section, Silvia Guerrico.9 Sometime around 1932, according to Barbero, the directors of Radio Carve were looking for someone to produce daytime programming aimed at the “weaker sex.” “Impressed with Durand’s work,” they sat down with Barbitta Colombo and were pleased to discover that the capable writer also had a “pleasing voice” and “perfect diction.” They hired her immediately, marking the beginning of a very long career that would earn Durand the moniker “La dama de Carve” [the Lady of (Radio) Carve].10 By early 1933, her program Spiritual Montevideo, which aired weekdays at 4:45 in the afternoon, was

7 POEUR, No. 1, 8 August 1931.
10 Ra ´ul E. Barbero, Por siempre CARVE. Montevideo: Impresora Central ,1999, n/p.
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attracting both male and female listeners. In August of 1934, the same publication commented that Durand’s was surely the program “with the most listeners” because of her “easy and friendly speech.” Later, in 1935, shortly after Radio Femenina went on the air, Durand was named “Queen of Radio” in the category of “Intellectual.” In many ways, Durand was the Silvia Guerrico of Montevidean radio. In the dedication on the pages of POEUR, an I. Dominguez Riera credited Durand for changing his ideas about intellectual women. “I didn’t believe in intellectual women,” he wrote. “They seemed insufferably refined...jumping in and taking over every space in the conversation. Elizabeth Durand showed me that not all are this way.” It bears noting here that the author accuses intellectual women of talking too much and in a pedantic, unfeminine, way. Although the radio careers of both Pinto and Durand are fascinating in their own right, our interest here is in how they created space for the voices of “intellectual” women on the Montevidean airwaves, thus laying important groundwork for the Radio Femenina experiment.

“The Last Bit of Air on the Dial”: Origins and Early History of CX48

In January 1933, the Uruguayan radio magazine La Cancionera announced a contest to name the new radio station that was due to open, using the highest antennas and occupying “the last little piece of air available on the dial.” Over the following months, every issue of the weekly magazine contained a coupon that readers could fill out and send in, with their name and address and their proposed name for the new station. There were at least fifteen weeks of coupons, from January through the end of April. By mid-February, the magazine reported it had received 662 coupons, 90 percent of them from women, and by the end of March the magazine reported having received “thousands,” exclaiming “the interest awakened among our readers for CX48 is

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11 “Elisabeth Durand.” La Cancionera, No. 132, 1 August 1934.
13 Pinto and Durand were not alone. Lawyer (and future Senator) Sofía Álvarez Vignoli de Demicheli, writer Laura Cortinas, and others associated with women’s rights campaigns in Uruguay also spoke on Montevidean radio during the early 1930s. Celebrated author Juana de Ibarbourou also did programing aimed at children.
14 “La CX48 será la Radio de las antenas mas altas.” La Cancionera, No. 50, 6 January 1933.
enormous.”¹⁵ In May of that year, the radio magazine Antena Uruguaya listed CX48 as “under construction.”¹⁶ It is unclear what exactly happened to the contest and to the station’s plans. CX48 was supposed to go on the air in 1933, then in 1934, and it seems no official contest results were ever announced. By the time the station did go on the air, a year and a half later, it was under new ownership (Vázquez y Cía instead of Abella y Cía). La Estación Femenina del Uruguay (otherwise known as “Radio Femenina”) finally began transmissions on frequency CX48 in early October 1935. At that time, the radio program guide POEUR commented that “our listeners will have a new station dedicated to the Uruguayan woman, and its programs will be the woman’s page that instructs, counsels, informs or delights.”¹⁷ So was “Radio Femenina” a suggestion that emerged from the naming contest? Were the new owners inspired by the high rates of female participation in the contest? Lacking any documentation, we can only speculate.

Other information on the station’s inauguration emphasized its technical sophistication and the fact that its broadcasts will be heard “throughout the Republic.”¹⁸ This would also have meant that the station could be heard in parts of neighboring Argentina. The Uruguayan radio press, in fact, announced that many Argentine radio stations had collaborated on this project, and that many Argentine stations were planning special broadcasting programs to commemorate the inauguration of CX48.¹⁹ It also seems that Argentine interests were an important part of the station’s funding; indeed, locating the station in Montevideo may have had everything to do with the fact that the airwaves were more accessible than in Buenos Aires. It is important to remember that Argentine authorities had by this point placed severe restrictions on new radio stations in Buenos Aires and environs, so it made sense that broadcasters and sponsors might look to acquire a piece of whatever remained of the radio spectrum in Montevideo. Radio Femenina’s main sponsor, for the first few years at least, was Dairyco, the official brand of the River Plate Dairy Company. An Argentine company founded early in the century, Dairyco had recently begun the process of registering its brand for the Uruguayan market when

¹⁵ “Es enorme el interes, . . . ” La Cancionera, No. 62, 31 March 1933.
¹⁶ Antena Uruguaya, No. 2, 25 May 1933.
¹⁷ “La primera transmisión oficial del CX48.” POEUR, No. 219, 4 October 1935.
¹⁸ Ibid.
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the station opened. It remains unclear how many of CX48’s listeners were across the river in Buenos Aires or other parts of Argentina and how much of this project was, in fact, Argentine.

But even if this project was in part about reaching Argentine listeners, CX48 became quickly rooted in its local context. Radio Femenina emerged at an interesting moment in the history of feminist organizing in Uruguay. Having won the vote in 1932 (although still not able to exercise it because of the coup d’etat of March 1933), many feminists shifted their focus in various directions. And many understood radio as an important forum for getting their respective messages out to newly enfranchised housewives by bringing their ideas and causes directly into the home. Radio Femenina’s first transmissions were primarily music, but gradually more and more spoken programming was added. Early broadcasts covered the usual territory of women’s daytime radio, with programs on fashion, recipes, home economics, and gossip. But CX48 also aired women’s exercise programs and readings of children’s literature, which were not so common on other stations at that time. Radio Femenina even attracted the attention, and the voices, of foreign women. From its inception, the station featured a biweekly program on “Women’s Sports” hosted by a Miss Rita Pinkerton, a North American who used the on-air pseudonym “Ted.” And in December 1935, Radio Femenina hosted noted New Zealander pilot Jean Batten during a visit to Montevideo,

20 Hugo Fernández Echeverría, personal correspondence with the author, 10 May 2005 (faxed communication). It may also be significant that Radio Femenina, with Dairyco’s sponsorship, went on the air only a couple of months before the official creation of Conaprole (December 1935), the National Dairy Producer’s Cooperative in Uruguay, that involved the partial nationalization and significant reorganization of the dairy industry in the department of Montevideo. Was Dairyco’s sponsorship of this new women’s radio station a way to counteract the creation of Conaprole, and maintain market share in the face of new competition from the state?

21 In his history of Argentine broadcasting, Ricardo Gallo mentions exercise programs airing on Radio Cultura as early as 1925. In this case, listeners were provided with written instructions and illustrations in the station’s magazine of the same name. Ricardo Gallo, La radio: Ese mundo tan sonoro. Tomo I: Los años olvidados. Buenos Aires: Corregidor, 1991, 142–143.

prompting the middle-class magazine *Mundo Uruguayo* to comment: “even though she crosses the sea wrapped up in a masculine looking flight suit, she is still a charming woman.” 23 Having recently completed her record-setting Trans-Atlantic flight from Africa to Brazil, thus becoming the first woman to fly solo across the South Atlantic, Batten received a hero’s welcome in Uruguay. It is fitting that the two radio stations she spoke on were the official government radio CX6 and Radio Femenina. The appearance of the so-called Garbo of the Skies on a new women’s radio station was a potent symbol, evidence to many perhaps that the era

23 “Jean Batten, la valiente aviadora neozelandesa en CX6 y CX48.” *Mundo Uruguayo*, 12 December 1935, 60.
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of the “Modern Girl” had arrived.\textsuperscript{24} Radio Femenina, in other words, was hitching its wagon to the Modern Girl image to generate interest in the station among mostly female audiences.

As time went on, CX\textsuperscript{48}’s programming became more intellectually and politically substantive. By April 1936, well-known Uruguayan artist and art critic Amalia Nieto was doing shows on topics such as Dadaism in France and Italy, whereas other radio programs dealt with topics like “women’s economic independence.”\textsuperscript{25} And in July 1936, Dr. Juana Amestoy de Mochó, a physician and liberal feminist (and mother), spoke on Radio Femenina about “Women’s activities and maternity,” arguing that “activities outside the home do not endanger motherhood.” In reporting on this broadcast, the middle-class Uruguayan magazine \textit{Mundo Uruguayo} remarked that Amestoy de Mochó was living proof that women could be dedicated professionals and mothers at the same time. “With words and lives like this, the triumph of the feminist cause is assured,” the magazine proclaimed.\textsuperscript{26}

At least some of the women active with Radio Femenina were keenly aware of the significance of this experiment in women’s radio. In November 1936, \textit{Cine, Radio Actualidad} ran a column by Herma Astor Fonseca, co-host (with poet Selva Márquez) of a Radio Femenina program “Voces” (Voices), which aired Monday and Thursday nights on CX\textsuperscript{48}. Not much is known about the program’s content, but they did a show in 1937 on the effect of war toys on children. Most interesting in this article, however, is Fonseca’s discussion of the importance of radio for women. Titled “Helping Women Find Themselves: This Must be the Goal of Women’s Performance on Radio,” the column reflects self-consciousness on the author’s part of the importance of women speaking on the radio and the importance of radio for female audiences. “The radio in our twentieth century is a kind of mentor whose spiritual influence cannot be underestimated,” Astor Fonseca wrote. Women who speak on the radio, she argued, need to be aware of the medium’s importance, and of their responsibility in preparing women for the challenges of modernity.


\textsuperscript{25} \textit{POEUR}, 3 April 1936.

\textsuperscript{26} “La doctora Juana Amestoy de Mochó.” \textit{Mundo Uruguayo}, 23 July 1936, 84.
Speaking through the radio, women must “try and convey to feminine souls an exact idea of what women need to be today: strong as a man but ‘femininely’ accessible to emotion.” Astor Fonseca clearly understood radio as a key tool for preparing women for citizenship and participation in the public sphere, with a vision deeply informed by the cultural feminism so common in Latin liberal feminist circles.

Initially, the most important early radio outlet for feminists in Montevideo was CX24 La Voz del Aire, a station with some ties to the Socialist Party. Although it is not clear who or what initiated the shift, much of that early feminist radio presence, on CX24 and elsewhere, began to migrate toward Radio Femenina over the course of 1936. In March, the Anti-Alcohol League (which, not surprisingly, had many liberal feminists as members) reported that it was beginning regular monthly broadcasts on Radio Femenina, “thanks to the kindness of its director Sara Vázquez.” Noted educator and liberal feminist Ángela Pérez, who had also participated in the Radio School, mentioned earlier, gave many of these talks. “The half hour of the *Lazo Blanco*” featured topics such as “Women and the alcoholic spouse,” “Alcohol damages the blood,” and “Alcohol and traffic safety.” In August 1936, the Women’s Independent Democratic Party [*Partido Independiente Democrático Femenino*] announced its move to CX48; the Uruguayan Association of Women University Graduates made a similar announcement around the same time.

Formed in early 1933 shortly after women’s suffrage was enacted, the Partido Femenino (sometimes called the Partido Feminista) was headed by attorney Sara Rey Alvarez. Given Partido Femenino’s separatist bent and its more conservative political orientation (that would have made La Voz del Aire a less-than-comfortable space), Radio Femenina was an ideal home. By the southern spring of 1936, the Party had a weekly show on Fridays at 3:00 PM, entitled *For the Woman: The Feminist Party*. The main announcer, it seems, was not Rey Alvarez, but a woman named María Isabel Cedro Gilardo (also listed as a leader of the Women’s...
Anti-War Union mentioned previously). In mid-1937, the official publication of the Women’s Party saluted Radio Femenina as the “genuine representation of the advanced conquest of the airwaves by women.” By late 1937, Rey Alvarez herself had a show Tuesday afternoons at 4:30, along with the ongoing Friday afternoon program (followed by a program of Women’s Catholic Action, which also had a show on Wednesday afternoons). Finally, in December 1936, with war looming in Europe, the newly organized Women’s Anti-War Union announced programming on CX48, and issued a call in La Cancionera to “those women who have in your hands the serious responsibility of educating our children, the Women’s [Anti-War] Union will speak to you on La estación femenina Sundays, Tuesdays and Thursdays at 5:00 PM.” The article spoke of the importance of inculcating sentiments of peace and “love for all men” in the youth, in order to “save the future generations from dying blown apart in the trenches” and “create a happy future for our young continent.”

By 1938, therefore, as Uruguayan women prepared to vote for the first time, Radio Femenina had carved out an unusual and significant place for itself in Uruguayan radio. CX48 had taken shape as a commercial station dedicated to high-level intellectual programming and welcoming Uruguayan women into their new place as full citizens and members of the public sphere. It was now a forum for the female voice, with programs celebrating women’s achievements in the arts, athletics, science, and education, and addressing their (presumably mostly female) audiences as intelligent subjects capable of understanding, appreciating and achieving similar goals. Indeed, from the perspective of what we know about the content of radio broadcasting worldwide, Radio Femenina’s programming in 1938–1939 is nothing short of remarkable. In January 1938, the station mounted a big homage to renowned Chilean poet Gabriela Mistral, who was in town at the time. This was an ambitious undertaking, and an impressive showcase of female artistic talent. Women poets (in addition to Mistral herself) read their work, the music of female composers was played, and women singers performed. In the meantime, the station’s musical programming also continued, featuring recorded music (classical and otherwise) as well as broadcasts of live performances, featuring female singers and musicians. During that same month the station also announced the beginning of a program cycle meant to “bring to the

32 “La mujer en la radiotelefonía.” Ideas y Acción, No. 76, 5 June 1937, 8.
33 “Por la estación femenina.” La Cancionera, 18 December 1936.
microphone the voice of all the well-known actresses” of the country.³⁴ It is perhaps worth noting here that all of this programming was aired during the southern summer, when many middle-class Montevideans (and especially radio celebrities) were on holiday, making these months something of a dead time as broadcasters prepared to launch their new “season” in the fall (around March). But the station’s programming trajectory continued with the arrival of autumn. In May 1938, Radio Femenina aired parts of the First Exposition of Women’s Labor, which included presentations and speeches by educators, poets, and scientists on topics such as psychology and the “industrial arts.” During that month the station also featured prominent speakers like female educator Leonor Hourticou, attorney and Women’s Party head Sara Rey Álvarez, poet Ester de Cáceres, and presented an homage to famed Uruguayan poet Delmira Agustini.³⁵

Radio Femenina also established some on-air advice programs during this time, giving its audience medical and legal counsel, presumably in response to listener letters. In 1938, a program hosted by a nurse giving medical advice was introduced, and in mid-1939 Elvira Martorelli, a lawyer who had a history in liberal feminism going back for at least a decade, announced she was starting a legal advice show with a focus on women, children, and the law. In both cases, listeners could mail in requests and questions and a selected number were answered on the air. And in mid-1939, noted educator Débora Vitale D’Amico (another veteran liberal feminist) began broadcasting on-air classes for normal school students over the airwaves of Radio Femenina. CX48 also continued its promotion of women’s exercise and sports. In late February 1938, Radio Femenina announced the “first transmission of a women’s volleyball game” in honor of famous tennis player Anita Lizama, a Chilean tennis player who had recently won the U.S. Open (and is still one of South America’s most famous female tennis players). In August, POEUR ran a story about women’s exercise programs, aired daily at 10:00 AM, on Radio Femenina. The shows were hosted by Nilda de Malaspina and built on the idea that “beauty is, more than anything, hygiene and health.”³⁶

The following month, CX48 began a series of radio talks by members of the Uruguayan branch of the Association of University Women [Asociación de Mujeres Tituladas]. The cycle was kicked off by Gloría Alonso

³⁶ “Todos los días a la 10 horas.” POEUR, No. 369, 18 August 1938.
de May, a physician, who spoke about “Women and Sports,” and the popularity of women’s radio exercise programs. As with “Ted’s” show from Radio Femenina’s early days, it is noteworthy the degree to which Radio Femenina seems to have emphasized women’s exercise and activities in the sports world. This emphasis and promotion of women’s physical activity and fitness appears to have been quite unusual for the day. Although it arguably played into eugenics-based notions of fitness for motherhood, in other ways such programming rubbed against the grain of prevailing patriarchal notions of feminine weakness and passivity.

CX48 featured feminist voices discussing women’s political rights as well. Gloría Alonso de May and the University Women followed up their talk on women and sports with a program on the topic of “Women’s Civil Rights.” Later that year, the program featured Notary Public (and longtime active feminist) Luisa Machado de Abella as well as Juana Amestoy de Mochó (the physician and mother mentioned previously). Paulina Luisi, Uruguay’s most famous feminist, the subject of the proceeding chapter, also began speaking on CX48 in 1936; by 1938, she had become something of a regular presence on Radio Femenina. In late November and early December of that year, for example, she gave two radio conferences on Radio Femenina on “Women’s Civil Rights” on the hour reserved for the Uruguayan Association of University Women (Mondays from 7:30 to 8:00 PM). POEUR praised Luisi’s participation in the program for bringing her “authoritative word to all people who are concerned about women’s future, one of the most disquieting futures of our present time.” Luisi’s clear, concise, and natural speaking style also received high praise, and her talk was described “as if she was speaking before a small group of friends.” The article concluded by noting that Luisi had promised to give more talks on CX48. Indeed, by the time World War II officially began, Luisi seems to have become quite comfortable speaking on the radio and convinced of the medium’s effectiveness, a topic to which we return in the next chapter.

Radio Femenina received praise from many quarters during these years, but especially on the pages of POEUR. In April 1938, the publication commented that there were few stations in Uruguay with “this level of cultural quality.” The following month, POEUR ran a front-page interview with Nelsa Tejera Nieto, a poet and elocution teacher who had

\[37 \text{“Pro derechos civiles de la mujer.” POEUR, No. 384, 2 December 1938.}\]

\[38 \text{“En el auditorium de Radio Femenina.” POEUR, No. 351, 15 April 1938.}\]
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recently established a permanent base on CX48. During her on-air recitation of a verse by acclaimed Uruguayan poet Juana de Ibarbourou, Tejera Nieto’s voice was described as “a voice of pure water, the voice that dew might have.” Tejera Nieto spoke surrounded by the children who were to participate in her program, which also served as an elocution class. “This is a true innovation in radio,” she explained. “I bring together in this room all the children who want to learn to recite [poetry],” and when they are ready, “I have them recite before the microphone.” She described the station as a place “whose exceptional environment makes all those who pass through its studios definitively attracted to it,” and concluded her remarks by saying “I am happy and proud to belong to Radio Femenina, a place of real culture made up exclusively of women who try in all ways to elevate the cultural level of our country.”

It bears underscoring here how radio is providing a modern forum for more traditional emphasis on elocution and recitation, an interesting example of radio’s role in “secondary orality” and in the placement of female voices into the public sphere. Sadly, there is no known audio of any Radio Femenina broadcasts (and very few scripts), but – by applying a bit of “sonic thinking” to this story – it seems clear that, although the content of Radio Femenina’s broadcast programming was groundbreaking, so too was the aural presence of a station populated by – as far as we can tell – exclusively female voices. The pairing of those female voices with intellectual and political programming content was a potent combination indeed, a merging of medium and message that retuned the gendered soundscape and created new spaces for women’s voices (in all dimensions) in the public sphere.

Radio Femenina’s Influence on Rioplatense Broadcasting

A more complete assessment of Radio Femenina’s importance and influence would require data we do not possess – a sense of the size and composition of the station’s listening audience. In the absence of such data, we fall back on the old adage about imitation being the sincerest form of flattery. In fact, Radio Femenina’s format appears to have had an impact on other stations’ broadcasting and programming in both Montevideo and Buenos Aires. Especially in 1938 and 1939, when Radio Femenina was at its height, other leading commercial broadcasters in Montevideo

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seemed to be jumping on the bandwagon, creating new women’s programming and giving airtime to leading feminist and women’s anti-war groups. In May 1938, for example, Radio Águila announced its own special programming “for the home and women.” Radio Águila adopted a slightly different, more commercial, strategy by promising material benefits to listeners, with on-air drawings for furniture, jewelry, radios, and “an infinity of valuable objects.” Radio Águila, in other words, used the lure of consumer objects—a technique that Radio Femenina appears not to have employed—to draw female listeners to its frequency.

But Radio Femenina’s greatest compliment came from across the river in Buenos Aires, where one significant station tried—ultimately unsuccessfully—to copy the all-woman format. In November 1936, Radio Cultura in Buenos Aires announced it was preparing to become “the station for women.” On the air since 1922, Radio Cultura was one of Buenos Aires’ first radio stations, claiming to be both the first radio station in South America and one of the first stations in the world to sell advertising time. But Radio Cultura was in trouble by 1936, and in the midst of a major reorganization in an attempt to keep itself afloat. An advertising agency, Agencia Atwell, had taken control of the station, and they announced that starting in mid-November Radio Cultura’s programming would be entirely aimed at women. From now on, it was explained, Radio Cultura’s station identification would be “Señoras, this is your station, LR 10 Radio Cultura, the station for women.” Radio Cultura’s management even hired a Uruguayan radioman to oversee the change. Ignacio Domínguez Riera (we assume the same I. Domínguez Reira mentioned earlier praising Elizabeth Durand) had been a sports announcer for many years on leading Uruguayan station Radio Carve and had been working at Buenos Aires’ Radio Belgrano when he was named Radio Cultura’s new Artistic Director. An editorial in the Argentine radio magazine Sintonía later that month was mostly positive in its assessment of

40 “Desde el primer de junio Radio Águila irradiará una gran audición para el hogar y la mujer.” POEUR, No. 357, 27 May 1938.
41 Claxton, From Parsifal to Perón, 45.
42 In 1936, Radio Cultura had recently been sued by RCA Victor Argentina in a dispute over fees RCA claimed it was owed for the station’s unauthorized broadcast of a phonographic recording of a famous Carlos Gardel tango. The relationship of this legal dispute to Radio Cultura’s financial difficulties is unclear, but it seems that at about the same time there was a big shake-up in the station’s ownership and management. Gertrude Rosenstein, Compañía RCA Victor Argentina v. Radio Cultura, September 4, 1936; radio diffusion of phonographic recordings. Buenos Aires, 1937.
the format change. The article praised the choice of Domínguez Riera as artistic director, because of his vast radio experience but mostly because he was Uruguayan, and thus had had ample opportunity to observe the pros and cons of women’s broadcasting, “given that in Montevideo there is a station, CX34 [sic], that a few years ago made the same change as Radio Cultura,” and as Radio Femenina, “has achieved unexpected success.” A later item in *Sintonía* stated that in fact the idea of turning Radio Cultura into an all-woman format was Domínguez Riera’s. But whatever the case, it is testimony to the overlap and mutual influence of the rioplatense cultural zone, whereby an Argentine company first set up Radio Femenina in Montevideo and later a Montevidean helped set up Radio Cultura in Buenos Aires in an attempt to replicate the Montevidean experiment.

Radio Cultura received a short burst of publicity with its format change, after which it fell out of the sightlines of the radio press once again. It seems quite clear, however, that the station’s format change was not a successful one. By 1938, Radio Cultura had returned to the usual fare. In his history of Argentine radio, Ricardo Gallo noted that Radio Cultura’s experiment “had a short life and in less than a year, Radio Cultura abandoned its feminist line.” So why was Radio Cultura’s attempt to replicate Radio Femenina’s success such an apparent failure? Crucial questions remain unanswered: Did Radio Cultura cultivate positive relations with, and seek the collaboration of, organized feminists and prominent female intellectuals? How well did Domínguez Riera do his job of copying the Radio Femenina model? Was choosing a man to oversee Cultura’s transition to the “Station for Women” the right move? Did the station ever attempt to create a more direct partnership with Radio Femenina? Was Radio Femenina successful because Montevideo (and more specifically Montevidean radio) was more welcoming and accessible to intellectual and politically active women? Was this environment more cause or effect of Radio Femenina’s success? Was Buenos Aires’ more commercialized environment, with a radio press with a greater hostility toward women’s “intellectual radio” a factor here? Whatever the reason, there was decidedly no equivalent to Radio Femenina in Buenos Aires, with the result being that the window whereby radio was utilized

44 “Es deseable que LR10 pueda desarrollar sin trabas, . . . ” *Sintonía*, No. 187, 19 November 1936.
45 “Domínguez Riera y las mujeres.” *Sintonía*, No.188, 26 November 1936.
by intellectual and/or activist women to advance women’s citizenship and place in the public sphere was open longer and wider in Montevideo than it was across the river. The coming of World War II did not leave radio in either city untouched, however. Political polarization and increased state intervention shut off opportunities for many women’s voices, while opening new paths for others.

**Radio Femenina Nazi?**

While Radio Femenina was establishing itself as a station of substantive programming aimed largely at women, Europe was rapidly sliding into war, and the environment in Uruguay, as elsewhere, was becoming much more politically charged. Even though the sympathies of Uruguayans lay largely with the Allied, anti-fascist cause, there was no shortage of pro-Axis (or pro-neutrality) programming available to the Uruguayan radio listener in the years leading up the war. Uruguayans were both shortwave and longwave radio listeners, and so both direct broadcasts from Berlin and local programming sympathetic to the fascist cause were readily available by the later 1930s.47 Those with shortwave receptors could tune in to regular broadcasts of the *Hitler Youth*, on Wednesday and Saturday evenings, and on long wave, CX26 Radio Uruguay had regular broadcasts of the *German Cultural Hour*, which was accused of being a propaganda outlet for the Uruguayan branch of the Nazi party (associated primarily with the German community).48 This same station also aired regular Italian programming as well. Although it is unclear how popular or influential these programs were, their presence was significant and became the subject of much controversy and government attention during the war years. In all likelihood, stations like CX26 were paid to air pro-Axis programs; sponsors could have been sympathetic individuals and/or groups within the region, or the German government itself. As Gisela

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48 Hugo Fernández Artucio, *Nazis en el Uruguay*. Montevideo: Talleres gráficos sur, 1940, 29–30. It is worth noting that the author mentions several stations that he accuses of transmitting Nazi propaganda, and CX48 is not one of them. Pro-Nazi programming aired, but there were also stations like CX34, Radio Artigas, that aired the “Hora Israelita” and the “Hora Cultural Israelita” on a daily basis. Artigas’s owners are listed as “Figueira, Cánepa y Cía,” the same as Radio Femenina, and this station also ended up on the blacklist.

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Cramer has noted in her study of rioplatense radio and World War II, the overcrowded and highly competitive nature of the Montevidean radio market meant that stations there were particularly vulnerable to such “sponsorship” efforts. Cramer’s valuable work on the U.S. government’s infiltration of the airwaves of the Río de la Plata (via the OIAA, or Office of Inter-American Affairs), coupled with what we know about pro-Axis programming on Montevidean radio, helps readers to understand the ways in which World War II was fought, figuratively and ideologically, on the Uruguayan airwaves.49

World War II was more of a presence in Uruguay than one might think. Its large immigrant population especially had strong ties to Europe, particularly nations such as Italy and Spain that had already seen the rise of Mussolini and the bloody conflicts of the Spanish Civil War, and many feared that these battles could soon arrive on South American shores. Uruguay’s strategic importance resided in the fact that Argentina was considered by some in the United States to be a key element in the so-called fifth column.50 By the late 1930s, anxieties about Nazi presence and infiltration in the Río de la Plata were growing; in Uruguay, this played into preexisting concerns about their larger neighbors. Concerns about Argentina’s expansionist designs, merged with fears that the country’s stronger anti-democratic elements were in ascendance, meant that many Uruguayans perceived a threat from across the Atlantic and across the river. In April and May of 1939, the middle-class weekly Mundo Uruguayo published a number of articles exploring Nazi activities in Argentina, and in July the magazine ran a long feature on Uruguay’s military preparedness (or lack thereof) with the headline “How would we defend ourselves if we were attacked?”51 Like most of its neighbors, Uruguay did not immediately side with the Allied cause, instead declaring its neutrality in September 1939. After the Japanese attacks on Pearl Harbor, however, Uruguay joined most of the region in breaking relations with the Axis in early 1942. Argentina and Chile were the only holdouts.

World War II was also the first major radio war, and radio propaganda and consequent struggles over who controlled the airwaves emerged as an important battleground in the Río de la Plata as in many other parts of the Americas and beyond. Most specifically, the war brought a

49 Cramer, “The Word War at the River Plate.”
50 See, for example, Carleton Beals, “Totalitarian Inroads in Latin America.” Foreign Affairs, 17:1 (October 1938): 78–89.
51 Mundo Uruguayo, 27 July 1939.
significant – and in most ways unprecedented – crackdown on broadcast freedom to Montevidean radio, targeting mostly, but not exclusively, right-wing alleged pro-Axis broadcasts. The earliest significant radio regulation in Uruguay dates to 1928, but Uruguayan radio was relatively free and unrestricted in its early years. Pressure on broadcasters appears to have been on the increase even before World War II officially began. Dating back to at least 1936, there were periodic calls for tighter government controls over (or even nationalization of) radio. In this, Uruguayans were to some extent following the lead of the Argentine government which, as discussed earlier, began placing new significant restrictions on broadcasters in 1934.

In 1939, the Uruguayan state approved a new radio law. A substantial modification of the 1928 law, this new legislation sought to assert more government control over radio broadcasts and to clarify and streamline prior piecemeal radio legislation. It also imposed new and significant restrictions on political broadcasts, holding station owners directly responsible for any radio broadcasts that might incite rebellion, offend neighboring countries, or harm Uruguay’s international relations (thus undoubtedly encouraging a good deal of self-censorship). The new regulations prohibited “political propaganda by the extreme right or the extreme left,” language that mocked the speech of foreigners, or any kind of speaking in code.

Not surprisingly, commercial broadcasters were united in their opposition to the new regulations. In October 1939, the new editor of POEUR, prominent intellectual Tristán Narvaja, complained defiantly about political pressure on broadcasters, writing: “only the disapproval of our readers will make us change the nature of our undertaking.” But by November, the tenor had changed somewhat, with Narvaja insisting that: “We must not forget that, news is one thing, programs prepared by propaganda experts in Berlin and London (and Moscow) are something very different.” Narvaja’s concern seems to
have been mostly focused on shortwave, rather than longwave broadcasting, perhaps as a way to shelter commercial broadcasters. Subsequent issues from later that same month protested “the unrestricted use of short wave [which has] turned Uruguay into a distribution center for the belligerents’ propaganda (Berlin and London),” and argued “only a country of madmen would permit the free use of short wave.” A series of incidents over the next two years convinced many Uruguayans of the seriousness of the fascist threat, which in turn gave government officials a freer hand in censoring and shutting down suspect media outlets.

World War II arrived somewhat unexpectedly and dramatically in Uruguay, via the infamous Battle of the River Plate, the first major naval battle of World War II. In December 1939, a German battleship, the Admiral Graf Spee, engaged a battle with three British ships in the South Atlantic. The German ship was badly damaged and limped into Montevideo, a neutral port, for repairs. In compliance with international law, the Graf Spee was given seventy-two hours to make repairs before it would have to vacate the port. Allied ships hovered just inside international waters waiting for the battleship to leave the protected space. This was a major radio event, and listeners in England and the United States followed the drama closely. Misled by decoy broadcasts about newly arriving British ships (there were none), the German captain opted to scuttle the Graf Spee just outside the harbor. Montevideans lined the shores and to watch the ship burn, which it did for three days.

The Graf Spee incident only fueled fears about German designs on the region. In mid-1940, Uruguayans were witness to some sensational allegations of a conspiracy, reporting that German nationals resident in Uruguay were planning to overthrow the existing government and turn the country into an agricultural colony of the Third Reich (there were an estimated 8,000 Germans in Uruguay at this time). An exposé titled Nazis en el Uruguay by Hugo Fernández Artucio spelled out details of the alleged Nazi coup plot. Radio was a key part of this conspiracy, and the book accused several radio stations of distributing Nazi propaganda, including Radio Artigas and Fada Radio. Amidst a general climate of fear, the government reportedly cancelled the licenses of all amateur radio stations (there were reportedly more than 500 of them).
These and later events were occasion for government crackdowns on suspected fascists of various stripes, accompanied by restrictions on the content of radio broadcasts. Shortly after the publication of Fernández Artucio’s book, the Uruguayan government undertook new steps to monitor and restrict pro-Axis activities in the country. In May 1940, the Investigative Commission of Anti-National Activities [Comisión investigadora de actividades antinacionales] was created to identify and document suspicious and “subversive” activities by various groups, individuals and media outlets. In June, a new “Public Order” law (also known as the “Law of Illicit Associations”) outlawed certain types of associations and political displays outright. Clearly aimed at Nazis and other fascist sympathizers, the law defined “illicit associations” as groups that “spread ideas contrary to the democratic-republican government” and those who, for example, “used symbols, salutes or uniforms associated with foreign elements.” The state gave itself the right to shut down such groups. The law also imposed new restrictions on the media. “Neither the radio nor the press,” the law continued, “may disseminate any propaganda that insults countries with whom our country retains relations, or that incites disorder or public tumult . . . related to the current European conflict.” In such a case, the state now had the right to shut a station down for one to fifteen days on a first offense, and one to three months for subsequent offenses.57

A few months later, in September 1940, a number of Germans living in Uruguay were arrested and charged with the alleged Nazi plot against the Uruguayan state. The text of the indictment, in part, cited the fact that “the [Nazi] party carries out in our country an intense campaign of propaganda by word of mouth, by radio, and in the German and local press.”58 In June 1940, the New York Times reported that the Third Reich threatened to break diplomatic relations with Uruguay owing to the “unfriendly anti-German campaign there.”59 An article published later that year noted that, “[s]everal nations have gone to war in an effort to check the Nazi party’s drive for world domination, but little Uruguay is the first country that has dared bring the party, and with it the German


government, before a court for trial.” Although the legal proceedings were long and complex, eight Germans of varying nationalities living in Uruguay were finally convicted and sentenced for “plotting against the integrity and independence of the state” in 1944, with prison sentences that ranged from time served to thirteen years.

By the time the United States officially entered the war in late 1941, Uruguayan politics were undergoing an important realignment, one that would result in a significant marginalization of traditional rightist factions in the country. President Alfredo Baldomir, elected in 1938 in the first election in which Uruguayan women voted, had been moving away from traditional conservatives and toward more left-leaning (and pro-Allied) political forces including, to a limited extent, the Communist Party. In January 1942, reflecting both internal political realignments and growing pressure from the United States, Uruguay officially broke relations with the Axis. Finally, in February 1942, in what is known as “the good coup,” Baldomir dissolved Parliament and undertook something of a purge of rightist political rivals in government. Elections in late 1942 ratified a new Constitution and brought to the presidency Colorado candidate Juan José de Amézaga, who continued in the pro-Allied path of his predecessor, breaking relations with Vichy France, renewing relations with the USSR, and symbolically declaring war on Germany and Japan in the early months of 1945.

This new political environment had an immediate and significant impact on radio. Shortly before the coup, Baldomir imposed new restrictions on “anti-democratic propaganda.” The law also prohibited any radio broadcasts in a language other than Spanish without prior government consent. The events of early 1942 also accelerated the process of identifying and blacklisting suspected “disloyal” and pro-Axis elements.

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Radio and the Gendered Soundscape

assistance of U.S. intelligence services), the blacklist targeted media outlets such as newspapers and radio stations, but also German-owned bakeries and other businesses alleged to have ties to Nazis or Nazi sympathizers. Radio Femenina, along with Radio Uruguay (CX 26) and Radio Artigas (CX 34), eventually landed on the blacklist, although evidence suggests that Radio Femenina was added at a later date.

CX 26 Radio Uruguay had long been broadcasting German and Italian news and programming. Indeed, Radio Uruguay’s broadcasts of the German Hour and other related programming predates the rise of Hitler to power, so it may have initially had less to do with political orientation and more to do with some connection to the German community in Uruguay. But, whatever its historical origins, by the inception of the war Radio Uruguay was clearly an outlet for pro-Axis propaganda, as the station continued to broadcast news reports from Berlin and Rome (as well as London) in 1940–1941. Radio Femenina’s turn toward Berlin was more sudden, and more short-lived. In August 1938, with the headline “Berlin on CX 48,” POEUR announced the upcoming broadcast of a concert and recital from Berlin featuring Uruguayan writers and the words of Uruguay’s Minister in Germany. This concert, which CX 48 aired at prime time on Thursday from 9:00 to 10:00 PM, must have been a deliberate German attempt to court favor among the Uruguayan population. The following month, in September 1938, the POEUR headline was “Hitler and Mussolini on CX 48.” “In the interests of absolute impartiality” the article stated, “and only trying to keep our listeners up to date on the serious political events in Europe, Radio Femenina retransmitted speeches of Hitler and Mussolini made September 26 in Germany and Italy. The programs were aired without comment of any kind, so the listener could interpret the words for himself.” During that same week, the German concert from August was also rebroadcast. The following week, perhaps in an attempt to deflect criticism of their previous broadcasts, Radio Femenina announced that it had also broadcast speeches by the Pope and British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain. The defensiveness of the accompanying article implies that the Hitler/Mussolini broadcasts

64 Raúl Barbero, interview with the author, 7 September 2007, Montevideo, Uruguay.
67 “Hitler y Mussolini por la onda de CX 48.” POEUR, No. 375, 30 September 1938.
elicited some negative response: “The directors of the station have authorized us to say that they will continue with their decision to broadcast directly from the original source any important communication or the words of European political leaders that can help the listeners have a clearer idea of the march of world events.”

Yet despite the directors’ defiance, there were apparently no further Hitler speeches, and programming on CX remained unchanged. In fact, the upward trajectory of the station’s programming quality continued. And, perhaps most significantly, Paulina Luisi continued to broadcast on the station. If the station had been openly pro-Axis in its sympathies, it is hard to believe Luisi — a savvy and dedicated anti-fascist activist — would have had anything to do with Radio Femenina. Yet she does appear to have eventually distanced herself from the station in the months immediately preceding the outbreak of World War II. In January 1939, Paulina Luisi spoke on Radio Femenina. She said she was going on a summer vacation, but that she would be back on the air at CX after that. Yet this seems to have been her last broadcast on the station. Later that year, however, the newly organized Uruguayan branch of the Women’s Peace and Freedom Committee, headed up by Luisi, began actively seeking radio outlets. In August 1939, POEUR announced that the group had approached a number of stations with a plan for a weekly program of “radio propaganda” related to the war in Europe, which by this point was imminent. According to League minutes in Luisi’s archives, even at this late date Radio Femenina was on the list of potential radio outlets, and had agreed to the group’s request for airtime. Tellingly, perhaps, the broadcast does not appear to have aired on CX. It bears mentioning, however, that Radio Femenina was listed among many stations that broadcast a large pro-Allied event held in Radio City auditorium in December 1939 (neither Radio Uruguay or Artigas aired the program).

But behind the scenes, things were getting ready to change dramatically, for Radio Femenina and for Uruguayan broadcasting generally.

By December 1939, one sees a radical change in Radio Femenina’s format. Gone are the most substantive, educational, and political programming, and the station abruptly returned to gossip, recipes, and

68 “En la onda femenina.” POEUR, No. 376, 7 October 1938.
69 “Audiciones del Comité Femenino Paz y Libertad.” POEUR, No. 419, 4 August 1939.
71 “En favor de la causa aliada.” El Día, 5 December 1939, 8.
fashion, in addition to music. From whose impetus did this change come? Did those women leave the station (i.e., did those programs voluntarily abandon the station due to political issues)? Did the owners initiate the change, or was it the Uruguayan state? The format change is likely related to an apparent change in ownership of Radio Femenina that seems to have taken place sometime in late 1939. As late as November of that year, some publications still list Radio Femenina’s ownership as “Vásquez y Cía,” the station’s owners throughout CX48’s golden years (and during the airing of the Hitler and Mussolini broadcasts). But by the early 1940s, the owners were listed as “Filgueira, Cánepa y Cía.” This is clearly the same Cánepa of the “Cánepa y Cía” who had long been listed as owners of the controversial CX26 Radio Uruguay and CX34 Radio Artigas, both stations with rather clear rightist orientations. Listings in the main radio magazines for CX48 remained through 1940 and 1941. As late as March 1941 Cine, Radio, Actualidad was still featuring the station in some of its photo spreads, when it included three photographs from Radio Femenina’s studios, including a shot of Argentine writer Doctora Gisberta Smith de Kurth giving a talk on women in history. Then, by 1942, Cine, Radio, Actualidad was no longer listing the station. This publication also stopped running listings for Radio Uruguay (CX26) at around this same time, direct evidence of the impact of the blacklist.

The United States Government and Radio Femenina

Sorting out what exactly happened here (and when) is not an easy business, as Radio Femenina’s story is enmeshed in a tangled web of regional and Pan-American radio politics, involving both German and U.S. intervention in the airwaves, as well as Uruguay’s sometimes privileged, sometimes compromised, place in the conflicts between the United States and Argentina. The U.S. government was quite interested in and concerned about Nazi propaganda and influence on mediums of communication in Latin America, and monitored content and ownership of newspapers and radio quite closely. Using the archives of the U.S. State Department and the Office of Inter-American Affairs (OIAA), we can conclude that Radio Femenina landed on the blacklist largely because of its ownership, rather than its broadcast content, and that it remained a minor player in the
drama that unfolded over the airwaves in Montevideo from 1940–1944. None of this, however, saved the station from significant sanction near the war’s end.

As we recall, the Radio Law of late 1939 gave the Uruguayan government unprecedented rights to suspend or revoke broadcast licenses for a variety of offenses, including broadcasts deemed offensive to foreign governments or those that could be damaging to Uruguayan international relations. In May 1941, Radio Artigas was shut down for two days, after airing a speech by a Spanish journalist judged to be offensive to the government of the United States.73 Crackdowns on radio did not exclusively target the political right. In September 1941, government officials temporarily shut down La Voz del Aire for a broadcast of the Committee for Aid to Spanish Child Refugees determined to have insulted the Spanish (Franco) government. This last action reportedly provoked outrage among the Uruguayan public, and even some concern among U.S. intelligence officials, who feared that a too heavy-handed approach in censoring radio stations would ultimately serve the purposes of the Axis.74

In the many U.S. government papers reporting on allegedly pro-Axis Uruguayan radio outlets and related schemes by the OIAA to gain greater control over the Uruguayan airwaves, Radio Femenina is absent, as it was simply not considered a major player in this story. There are a few FBI memos that mention the station, and these are quite useful, especially because as internal agency reports—not propaganda meant for public consumption—some emphasis was placed on accurate gathering and reporting of facts on the ground. Two memos from August 1942 and sent to the Assistant U.S. Secretary of State by FBI director J. Edgar Hoover reported information on Uruguayan radio via unnamed confidential sources. The earlier memo contains an annotated list of alleged pro-Nazi elements in Uruguay. On that list is one “Señor Cánepa,” who was identified as both the “owner of ‘Femenina’ and ‘Uruguay’ radio stations,” and as a “Nazi sympathizer.” The follow-up memo, which dealt specifically with the subject of “Radio Stations in Uruguay,” clarified somewhat the informant’s position on Radio Femenina. “Informant... advised,” the memo reported, “that radio station ‘Femenina’ apparently does not broadcast

any actual Nazi or Fascist propaganda. However, they are alleged to have employees who are Nazi sympathizers.” The memo went on to reiterate that “Sr. Canepi [sic], owner of ‘Radio Uruguay’ is reported to be pro-Nazi.” This memo does not make it clear, as does the first memo, that C´anepa was the owner of both “Radio Uruguay” and “Radio Femenina.” FBI sources seemed to have been more concerned with content than with ownership, given that a December 1942 FBI report still listed Radio Femenina as “pro-Ally.” The memo was followed up by correspondence with the U.S. Embassy in Montevideo asking for clarification about discrepancies between the aforementioned FBI list and the Embassy’s List of radio stations’ political affiliations. Radio Femenina’s classification as “pro-Ally” was, apparently, consistent on both lists. This classification is interesting, given that it seems quite clear from other sources that CX48 had already been at least partially blacklisted within Uruguay itself. A March 1943 memo reported on the results of an investigation by the Uruguayan Anti-National Activities Investigating Commission. Even though the Commission listed Radio Femenina among those stations whose “foreign hour” broadcasts had raised concerns, Radio Femenina was not on the list of radio stations recommended for closure by the Commission. Despite Radio Femenina’s omission from this recommendation, following the station’s trial in the radio press becomes quite difficult after 1943. The print media were being very careful about reporting on stations tainted with blacklist association; it is also possible that Femenina had lost so many sponsors it could no longer afford to pay for program listings. So all we have are fragments and brief notations of events with little explanation or detail. La Cancionera reported in late 1943, for example, that Radio Femenina, along with Radios Artigas and Uruguay “had been denounced by the Anti-Nazi [sic] Investigative Commission,” and also reported that these stations had previously been “disaffiliated from Andebu [the Uruguayan National Broadcasters’ Association] because of their notorious totalitarian affiliation.” But this is the extent of the report, nearly a year before the official closing of Radio Femenina.

75 J. Edgar Hoover, Federal Bureau of Investigation, to Adolf Berle, Assistant Secretary of State, 29 December 1942. U.S. Department of State, Decimal File 833.74/36. United States National Archives, College Park, Maryland.
76 J. Edgar Hoover, Federal Bureau of Investigation, to Adolf Berle, Assistant Secretary of State, 9 March, 1943. United States Department of State, Decimal File 833.74/40. United States National Archives, College Park, Maryland.
77 La Cancionera, No. 464, 18 November 1943.
What was going on during that year? At this point, it bears noting that, as Cramer has documented, United States government interests in Uruguayan radio went beyond mere monitoring of content and government regulations. Motivated in large part by tensions with Argentina – especially after the June 1943 coup which brought a group of rightist nationalist military officers to power – U.S. government officials sought to take over a Uruguayan frequency and turn it into a pro-Ally/pro-U.S. mouthpiece aimed at listeners in Argentina. The so-called Prencin-radio project, which ultimately never got off the ground and was finally abandoned in mid-1944, nevertheless provoked strong response from...
Argentina. By early 1944, the Argentine government was bringing significant pressure to bear on Uruguay for its acquiescence in the OIAA plan to use its radio frequencies as a platform from which to launch pro-U.S. and anti-Argentine government propaganda into the neighboring country. In response, sometime around March 1944, the Uruguayan government shut down local station CW-7 Radio Carmelo and temporarily suspended Radio Carve for broadcasts deemed offensive to the Argentine government. The Uruguayan government, it seems, was making great efforts to maintain its neutrality at a time when neutrality was hardly possible.\footnote{Cramer, “Word War,” 24.} This was likely the backdrop for Uruguayan officials to finally move forward with shuttering the alleged pro-Axis stations in 1944.

In June 1944, a Presidential decree reiterated its claim that broadcast licenses were granted temporarily and conditionally and could be revoked at any time without financial compensation to the license holders.\footnote{“Estaciones Radiodifusoras.” Registro de Leyes y Decretos de la República Oriental del Uruguay, June 1944, 489–497. It appears from this decree that at an earlier point in the late 1930s, Andebu had been granted authority to renew and revoke broadcasting licenses, but that subsequently the Uruguayan government had reasserted its direct control.} If this is true, the decree argues, even in “normal times,” it is particularly the case in the present circumstances (i.e., the war). Even though stations like Artigas and Femenina had apparently already been “disaffiliated” from Andebu, the broadcasters’ association nonetheless issued a strongly worded response to the decree, seeking to limit government reach in this arena. Three months later, in September 1944, another executive decree canceled the broadcast authorization of CX26 (Uruguay), CX34 (Artigas) and CX48 (Femenina). The language of the decree suggests that the license revocation was the final step in a longer-term (and apparently successful) strategy of the blacklist, which was to starve the stations of sponsors, performers and publicity. The state’s seizure, and in some cases ultimate reassignment, of these frequencies, was thus further justified by the fact that, by 1944, the stations were basically nonfunctional. Cine, Radio, Actualidad did speak up in support of this move, and – in fact – they criticized the Uruguayan government for not acting sooner to shut down these stations “for their connections...with reactionary forces of totalitarian leanings.” The article went on to argue that these closures were further justified by the fact that none of the stations (which,
interestingly, they never name) had any “transcendent” programming that justified “their presence on the dial.”

Unlike Radios Uruguay and Artigas, however, Radio Femenina was only shut down for a few months. In March 1945, six months after the decree shutting them down, Radio Femenina CX48 was listed among the stations whose broadcast licenses had been renewed through March 1946. Radio Artigas was back on the air by the later 1940s. In 1947, Radio Uruguay’s frequency CX26 was transferred to the Uruguayan government, first to the Ministry of Livestock and Agriculture and later, in 1952, to the government radio service, SODRE. Interestingly, in 2006, SODRE was granted permission to give the station its old name back, and CX26 (1050 AM) is once again Radio Uruguay, only now designated as a government news station.

Conclusion

This chapter fills an important gap in the history of women’s radio, not just in South America, but worldwide. Although much more comparative work still needs to be done, it is clear that Radio Femenina was an extraordinarily unique example of an all-women’s format radio station, which – for a short while at least – gave voice to prominent intellectual and politically active women and that sought to produce high quality cultural programming aimed at a primarily female audience. All of this was happening at a moment when Uruguayan women were exercising their formal citizenship rights for the first time, following a six-year hiatus between the sanctioning of women’s suffrage and women’s first participation in a national election. In less than a decade, a station that began as a mostly commercially-oriented enterprise aimed at the housewife-consumer became an outlet for feminists and female intellectuals of various stripes, and was then blacklisted and sanctioned for its alleged Nazi affiliations. That these years also coincided with radio’s emergence as a mass medium – in Uruguay, and elsewhere –further underscores the need for women’s historians and radio historians to take stock of each other and seek points of contact with each other’s work.

80 “Cancelaron concesiones a broadcastings incluidas en la lista negra.” Cine, Radio, Actualidad, No. 427, 15 September 1944. It is important to note that official documentation suggests that Cine, Radio Actualidad was at least at times on the payroll of the Office of Inter-American Affairs, an agency of the U.S. government.

81 República Oriental del Uruguay, Registro de Leyes y Decretos, March 1945, 214.

The station received extensive, and almost exclusively favorable, coverage in both the radio programming guide POEUR and in Mundo Uruguayo, a popular general interest middle-class magazine that for a time had regular coverage of radio programs and events. These publications, the main sources of information about CX48’s programming, suggest a good deal of pride in the accomplishments and “high cultural quality” of the station and, by extension, Uruguayan women. Uruguayan radio publications are surprisingly free of the kind of harsh criticism and mockery of female speakers in comparable Buenos Aires publications (as we saw in the previous chapter). This should not, of course, be taken to mean Montevidean radio or radio critics were free of the prejudices carried by their counterparts across the river. The upshot was that this window of opportunity described in the previous chapter for Argentina remained open longer in Montevideo, but seems to have closed during, and in large part because of, World War II. Finally, this chapter supports two main arguments of this larger project – namely, that radio was a crucial forum for the assertion of women’s citizenship during the 1930s and 1940s, and that radio was very much a constitutive part of the gendered soundscape.

Radio Femenina’s decline and fall over the course of the war did not mean that politically active and/or feminist women found themselves entirely without a home or an outlet. Paulina Luisi, in particular, who had begun speaking on air on La Voz del Aire, returned to that station after 1940 or so. This coincided with her decision to officially affiliate herself with the Socialist Party, a group with whom she had long maintained close relations. At the same time that Paulina Luisi aired her Popular Front broadcasts, programs made under the supervision and sponsorship of the United States government – some of which was aimed directly at a female audience – were broadcast on Uruguayan radio. Meanwhile, across the river, the war years brought a particularly Argentine form of populism to power, one that came to rely heavily upon one of the most recognizable female voices in the region.

Despite all of the history we have been able to reconstruct from a wide variety of diverse and often fragmentary sources, there is much we still do not know about the story of Radio Femenina. We know next to nothing, for example, about the station’s audience – how many listened, who was listening, and how many of the station’s listeners were in fact in Argentina. We also sadly lack any recordings, of any Radio Femenina broadcasts, or any known personal archives that might provide insight into the station’s trajectory during these years. But, nevertheless, we can assert that Radio
Femenina was an important chapter in our study of women’s radio voices and the gendered soundscape in the rioplatanse zone. Although the motivations were complicated, Radio Femenina created a radio space where women’s voices were not just accepted, but expected. That many of these voices belonged to leading Uruguayan intellectuals and activists speaking about various aspects of education and cultural uplift makes the impact of the station on the gendered soundscape that much more important. Despite its not insignificant elitism, Radio Femenina was certainly a platform for asserting women’s voices into the public sphere, at a time when women had recently been enfranchised and sought to use their newly acquired rights to shape a better, and more peaceful, world.