

# Book review

**Brandon LaBelle, *Sonic Agency: Sound and Emergent Forms of Resistance*. London: Goldsmiths Press, 2018. 224 pp. ISBN: 978-1-906-89751-2. doi:10.1017/S1355771818000225**

*Sonic Agency* declares itself ‘a timely exploration of whether sound and listening can be the basis of political change’. For those of us invested in sound-related fields, including but not limited to sound studies and electroacoustic composition, this book seems like an important challenge – to locate opportunities for our work as academics, composers and artists to engage with the daily struggles of people around the world, or what LaBelle calls the ‘urgencies of contemporary life’ (p. 1).

LaBelle’s previous books, especially *Acoustic Territories* (2010), are important sound studies texts. Indeed, LaBelle’s first sentence positions this book within sound studies, but the subsequent chapters do little to demonstrate its obvious fit in the albeit diverse and ever-changing field. His theoretical foundation owes much more to political philosophy with a glaring absence of sources from sound studies (other than Pierre Schaeffer, Michel Chion, Kate Lacey, and Salomé Voegelin) and theories of listening, voice studies and Indigenous studies. His citational practice does appropriately resist an American-centricity, which is especially important when considering transnational struggles.

LaBelle proposes four figures that represent individuals, communities, collectives and relationships that belong to ‘unlikely publics’ and, thereby, are often missed in visual-focused studies of the public sphere and political action. Each figure receives its own chapter as LaBelle offers a philosophical exploration of the figure interspersed with some historical examples.

The book is divided into six chapters. The first chapter ‘Unlikely Publics’ is a bit of a citational whirlwind as LaBelle walks through each piece of his theoretical foundation and summarises the four figures discussed in chapters two to five. This whirlwind continues throughout the book and suggests more of an extended literature review with interspersed research questions than any analytical application. I kept waiting for more of LaBelle’s original analysis of sonic agency. For example, LaBelle tells the story about President Ricardo Lagos entering the door of *La Moneda* in 2003, which had been closed since the coup

30 years earlier. LaBelle’s discussion of this historical and captivating story is strongly tied to the visual as opposed to illustrating how sonic agency contributed to the power of that moment. I was left wondering how we might be able to *hear* those typically invisible in such power structures as those at play in Chile.

His figures are The Invisible, The Overheard, The Itinerant and The Weak. The Invisible asks us to think about ‘how listening may direct us toward the hidden and the uncounted, as well as the faceless’ (p. 18). It is with this latter image – the faceless – that LaBelle philosophically explores the acousmatic and Chion’s *acousmètre*, a concept familiar to electroacoustic music studies. LaBelle describes how sound collective Ultra-red builds intentionally on the work of Pierre Schaeffer but with the goal to mobilise community work and sonically question existing power structures. This section stood out as a model of the kind of politically engaged work that may interest or inspire existing electroacoustic practitioners.

Building on his previous *Acoustic Territories*, LaBelle, through *The Overheard*, explores how sounds interrupt and interfere, particularly inter-lingual voices that can be heard as strangers or trespassers in the overlapping territories within cities. LaBelle highlights territorial frictions (and concerns of surveillance) within and across neighborhoods as well as transnationally through the network culture Marshall McLuhan articulated.

The Itinerant figure captures the precariousness facing many individuals and communities, particularly since the 2008 banking crisis. The result is increased migrancy and border crossings (defined broadly). LaBelle mentions contemporary protests but also applies Édouard Glissant’s concept of creolisation to reggae. This section on reggae stands out as a rare moment when LaBelle engages directly and vividly with sound. For example, he describes the ‘deep voice of Prince Far I’ who ‘enunciates through a Jamaican *patois* a force of sounded subjectivity’ (p. 106). The reader can *hear* what LaBelle describes and then the author makes clear what the sound reveals that no other sense can: ‘His unmistakable vocalisations encapsulate the lost spirituality of the African home, told through the island culture of exile and return’ (p. 106). Another stand-out moment comes later in the chapter when LaBelle offers a short story about Haitian slaves singing ‘The Marseilles’ during the rebellion. He briefly considers the implications of this sonic agency, arguing that their singing sounds out ‘a

citizenship formed out of conditions of displacement and subjugation, inter-lingual and diasporic consciousness' (p. 119). LaBelle then flips the perspective to the listeners – the French soldiers – who would struggle to interpret the sound of their national anthem voiced by their supposed enemies. The book needed more of these moments.

The final figure is The Weak. LaBelle claims that sound's ephemerality makes it weak. Thus, sound is the perfect lens through which to consider both people and actions that are deemed weak, vulnerable and passive.

In concept, this is an easy book to support: we can learn about resistance and resilience by examining the unseen, who are in such a state because of existing socio-political power structures. Though they are unseen, they leave sonic traces that we can study. In the end, the book I anticipated and the book I read are very different. I was looking forward to LaBelle *showing* us how sonic agency is at play in diverse examples, to demonstrate how his four figures offer something new to sound studies. LaBelle's theoretical framework of the four figures would have been better communicated through a single article. In this way, the author could thoroughly explain the philosophical foundations for the figures and then outline the character and potentiality of each figure. Such an article would then provide the theoretical model for actual analysis of sonic agency in subsequent work by the author and others invested in applying sound studies to, as LaBelle states, 'daily practices and exchanges, of resilience and creative resistance' (p. 5).

I would not assign this book to students. *Sonic Agency* is not a long book (163 pages across six chapters), and yet it is not an easy read. LaBelle's writing style is dense, a labyrinth of metaphors, nominalisations and passive voice. However, LaBelle's probing questions and new theoretical framework have great potential when studying specific case studies, and I would share those elements with my students. For example, pairing LaBelle's framework with the type of pedagogical interventions Amanda M. Black and Andrea F. Bohlman describe in their essay 'Resounding the Campus' (2017) would be potentially transformative for sound studies and our classrooms.

I found myself throughout the book wondering too often where the sound was. LaBelle seemed to revert to the visual with his metaphors and historical examples. However, perhaps he has achieved his goal in the end. I am now all the more determined to locate sound and articulate sonic agency in the invisible, overheard, itinerant and weak expressions of struggle.

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## REFERENCES

- Black, A. M. and Bohlman, A. F. 2017. Resounding the Campus: Pedagogy, Race, and the Environment. *Journal of Music History Pedagogy* 8(1): 6–27.
- LaBelle, B. 2010. *Acoustic Territories: Sound Culture and Everyday Life*. New York and London: Continuum.

