

A SOUND CURRICULUM OF RESONANCES

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Sound Curriculum: Sonic Studies in Educational Theory, Method, & Practice

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Sound Curriculum: Sonic Studies in Educational Theory, Method, & Practice ends, well almost, with Walter Gershon asking, “When was the last time you just sat and listened?” Had this question been posed at the opening of the text, I would not have known what to do with it. I am astounded how much I rely on sound; how little I know of how I live with it, experience it, understand it, understand with it. Reading, hearing and listening to this text was a journey in studenting—a term Gershon creates to make the work of students parallel to the engagements of teaching. Pondering Gershon’s question, at the end of a text of chapters layered like tracks in a sound file, resonated.

When I was a child, I joined my two favorite cousins for their family reunion and then returned with them year after year until I was in my twenties. My cousins were a few years older than I, and I always felt a little more grown-up with them than I did on my own. A tradition at the reunion was a series of orations from the elders. We sat through them, hearing, but not fully tuning-in. We showed our respect and sat through them all, were quiet and still, but we also had an aloof undertone to our listening. As Dr. Gershon points out, quoting Kim-Cohen, our ears do not blink: “[t]he blink of an eye lasts three hundred milliseconds. The blink of an ear lasts considerably longer. From birth to death the ear never closes” (cited in Gerson, 2017, p. 34). Thus, ontological perception is more about filtering than focusing in a particular direction as we do with sight. So we heard the elders, and given the attentive quiet of the room, there were few sounds available for us to filter.

One elder told a story about an ancestor, an enslaved male child. I must have heard this tale a dozen times and felt no need to attune to it, until my now spouse started

poking my arm, giving me wide-eyed looks, and whispering in my ear. I was stunned by his behavior for two distinct reasons. First, we needed to sit still and look attentive to show respect, and his behavior looked too much like disruption. Second, I wondered whether he was unaccustomed to having elders speak at family reunions. Then it dawned on me that he was attending a family reunion outside his racial, ethnic, and cultural context. So I began listening to this unremarkable event. This child had the task of taking lunch to the school teacher each day. He would deliver it and then sneak under the school house to hear what the teacher said, before returning to his tasks for the day. In the evenings, he shared what he learned with his comrades in bondage. The moral of the story for the youth of the family reunion was that we were in the school house, we could see everything, and had no excuse to not learn.

I've thought about a brave young person listening to lessons over the years, usually when I was bored in middle or high school. But it wasn't until the disruptive pokes in my arm that his origin in my memory returned to the family reunion tradition of hearing our elders. And it wasn't until the question — "When was the last time you just sat and listened?" — returned me to this child, my cousins' ancestor, the orations of elders, the untuned listening of young adolescents that I realized all of this was a sound curriculum of resonances.

Understandings are kinds of resonances, movements across/through barriers both metaphoric and practical. If all things vibrate, then all things have the potential to vibrate with all other things, both internally and externally, over history and time, space, and place. (p. 49)

The chapters of this text each take up a different instrumentation of sound curriculum layer and reverberate with each other and their surrounds to create a curricular space for sound that cannot contain it. First, "Sound curriculum: Breaking frames and opening ears" explores our over-reliance on sight for making sense to consider reconceptualizing sound by examining the discourse in curriculum studies for "sonic knowledge and aural understandings" both present and absent, "to take seriously aural terminology... (i.e., pitch, tone, tenor, polyphony) as literal examinations of sound..." and to represent sounds "sonically, beyond the text and, perhaps, without visual accompaniment" (p. 16-17). "Sounds as educational systems of meaning," the second chapter, explores sound as embodied knowledge through soundscape, acoustemology, sound art, sound/methodology, and deep listening in

educational contexts created by Mrs. Grindall. Third, “Resonance, reverberation, and scale: Towards a sound philosophy of education” offers a philosophical rethinking suggesting “that the greater the dissonance in a learning ecology, the greater the opportunity for resonance; the more room for diversity, the greater the likelihood that a student will resonate with a given idea, ideal, or process” (p. 64). “Policing deafness: Everyday sonic oppression in schools,” chapter explicates the suppression of sound in hearing schools, the expression of sound in deaf schools, and the racialized aspects of silencing student voices.

Chapter 5, “Student as improvisers: The extra-ordinary negotiations of daily life in schools” is a lesson in jazz improvisation, straight ahead jazz, Iranian *musiqu-e assil*, and collective improvisation that Gershon uses to theorize the classroom ecology as student interactions of “accumulations of prescribed improvisational possibilities” (p. 112) that require “knowledge and skill of both classroom structures and the pathways through them” (p. 16). This is the chapter I can imagine using in my undergraduate foundations of education class, and it was this chapter that first brought the story of the young ancestor to the forefront of my memory. Theoretically riffing, Gershon compares the studenting and teaching actions to improvisations as he describes how a fifth grade boy, after finishing his assignment, crawled across the floor without the teacher noticing or the students telling until he reached the teachers desk. As I read, I was reminded how I thought about the efforts expended and risks taken by an enslaved child and his elders so he could sneak under the school house and stay long enough to learn something to share. On some days, I wondered if the school teacher knew and knowingly risked welcoming the additional student. On other days, I worried about what could have happened if the teacher caught him eavesdropping. How did they improvise these interactions and avoidances? I speculated that he tried to see the walls and books in the room to make sense of what he heard and tried to reason for myself if it would be better to listen first and then deliver the lunch or to give the teacher the lunch first. Which would be safer? Which better pedagogy—sound or sight first? How did he make sense of the bits and pieces he collected each day? I thought about how the teacher-child shared information in the evening, the questions he was asked.

Gershon explores “Qualitative sound methods” in chapter 6 in terms of sonic ethnography, cartography, and narratives as well as the necessary technical knowledge. In chapter 7, “Songs to nowhere: When critically creative processes meet impotent curricular products,” Gershon shares the details of a sound study of fifth grade students and their music making in social studies to reveal the superfluous

curriculum of students' lyrics—"All the states have different capitals" and "They all have different names" (p. 176).

Superfluous curriculum can be understood as the opposite side of the coin from the null curriculum, knowledge that is most noticeable for its absence. Superfluous curriculum ... is knowledge that while generally understood to be factual in nature is so broadly applicable ... or so irrelevant to the conversation that its meaning lies not in its content but instead its function ... substituting relevant knowledge with largely redundant information. ... [L]ike the null curriculum, the superfluous curriculum is a curriculum of negation, removing more relevant for less or irrelevant knowledge. (p. 176)

There was nothing irrelevant about the eighth chapter, "Sound art, social justice: Black Lives Matter." Here Gershon shares his experiences of the "violence of policing"—terminology Erica Meiners suggest over police violence—that resulted in the shootings of Eric Gardener, Michael Brown, John Crawford and the sound art he created for audio and video files of their murders on the internet. The chapter describes the methodology that resulted in about 10 minutes of sound art, I did not want to hear. But I listened with earbuds, feeling the file would be too intimate to hear in the fullness of a room.

At first, I found myself in protection mode listening to the quality of the recording—the ways specific sounds hit my hearing from different directions and how I felt different parts of my mind (head) processing the information. I was surprised how I could hear different words coming from different people, different times into different ears and process them, understand them simultaneously. The saxophone Gershon played in response to the tracks seems to glide into my being under the radar of my mind and somehow through the back of my neck. I closed my eyes for a moment, hearing a couple of young men laughing and talking; feeling a little relief until their laughter stopped. I felt the grief and pessimism of our existence well up into a sickening feeling I had not felt during my online, mainly visual investigations into the violence of policing Black and Brown men and women. Not trusting these sounds in darkness, I opened my eye for the remaining minutes of the sound art. I got through the recording, but was left with a heavy sense of loss and impotence for a few days. In my experience of this sound art and thinking of this book, Eric

Gardener, Michael Brown, John Crawford, and the teacher-child ancestor don't seem that far apart even though they are divided by more than a century.

Gershon paired this text with a website of mp3 sound files that I accessed with my cell phone. I found it ironic that while I read on my iPad, which evolved from a device created for sound—the iPod, the sound files were not seamlessly integrated into the text. While Gershon mediated the challenges of a digital book designed for vision with hyperlinks and QR codes, I couldn't help but consider how an attention to sound curriculum would modify the digital book. I wish the text and sound files existed together, that I could hear the sounds of fifth graders making songs without leaving the reader or having to get a second digital device. I longed for images in the text, like sound waves of the files, to challenge my visual dominance into seeing sound. I sincerely hope that publishers and coders will do the work projects like scalar.usc.edu has done to take full advantage of digital publishing, instead of simply reading on digital devices rather than the printed page. As I consider these hopes for future digital books, I am fully aware of the grief from the sound art still reverberating in and around me. I return to the ancestor-child wondering how long he survived, how much teaching he did in the time he had.

In the ninth and last chapter, "Becoming attuned: Educational deep listening," Gershon encourages educational sonic meditations inspired by Pauline Oliveros' deep listening by 1) actively making sounds, 2) actively imagining sounds, 3) listening to present sounds, and 4) remembering sounds. Gershon encourages "listening deeply to children and youth as daily educational practices [that] could deepen what education could mean and how it might function." As I read what I thought was the last line of the book, "When was the last time you just sat and listened?" I posed the question to the teacher-child ancestor, wonder what he'd have to say about sound curriculum?

References

Gershon, Walter S. (2018). *Sound Curriculum: Sonic Studies in Educational Theory, Method, & Practice*. London: Routledge.