

## SIT AND LISTEN

---

CHRIS OSMOND

*Appalachian State University*

---

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

I know Walter as a musician, as an adventurous scholar and voracious reader, as an exuberant teacher of children. Above all, I know him as a thrillingly promiscuous mixer and cutter, whose “big ears” take him to all the corners of the echoscape our foremothers and fathers have defined for us as curriculum theory. Maybe that sense of history is why—when invited to respond to *Sonic Curriculum’s* focus on the “everything else” of sensory experience, that overflows common-sense notions of curriculum—my first association was a description of overwhelm. Because Walter and I have both been teachers of social foundations of education. That slippery and elastic course (where it still survives in the teacher ed sequence, that is), tasked with giving future teachers the “everything else” of school. The history of bias and institutionalized racism; the way that the caste system of the “RWI” (“Ridiculously White Institution” —his term) continues to feel normal, to make us its unwitting instrument of perpetuation unless we make constant, daily choices to interrupt it. It was a late aside by Madeleine Grumet (2010) directed at courses like ours that came to mind.

Although I am still convinced that understanding the past is important to actions we take in the present, and along with Freire believe that generative themes must be drawn from limiting situations, I have come to questions the usefulness of these [social foundations] courses. I am not reducing usefulness to a narrow sense of utility, a “take-away” like the handouts distributed in professional development meetings. I am concerned that the sweep of these discourses overwhelms our students with the power and resonance of these themes in human history without offering them

a realistic appraisal of the issues in teaching today that threaten their freedom of speech, their working conditions, and their dignity, together with suggestions about how to address them (p. 68).

For Grumet, the “power and resonance” of the discourses confronted is overwhelming to students, because students don’t think they are themselves agents that participate in the shape of those discourses. Anyone familiar with Grumet’s work will note that her argument points to a familiar—and strange—new aperçu from which to regard the sweep of American social injustice: the personal, the experienced, the present, the intimate, the human. If social foundations keeps it abstract and “out there,” not only will students be ineffectual: they will be overwhelmed, adrift. Finding our own place in the inchoate resonance is where we begin to act. The echoes with Walter’s book come out when he talks about the ineffable hugeness of the world when we try to really know it on its own terms:

Forms of deep listening, however, can be a means for pushing back at the forking paths of reductionism and essentialism. Both become impossible when faced with the complex intricacies that are audible when working to attune to the multiplicity of overlapping ecologies that move through one’s self as much as they surround you, crashing, reverberating waves of resonance. When any individual thing cannot be cleanly separated from other things, an understanding that is in many ways a first step in deep listening, then the ability to reduce any individual thing to its constituent parts or believing to fully understand anything as something that might be called whole, becomes what it always was already, impossible.

From these perspectives, expertise is being transparent and clear about what one believes one understands, and the limits of those understandings. One can spend a lifetime listening deeply to a specific set of possibilities and will never fully know them. Doubt and uncertainty again, springboards for inquiry and wonder (Gershon, 2017, p. 199).

Note the similar solution he comes upon. Attend more deeply, accept the whole of it, and how it imbricates you in its process. Let yourself be swept away—and, oddly, in

the moment of overwhelm, find your own place to push. Chapter 7 seems particularly supportive of this way of thinking. Its account of the shortcomings of curriculum, materials, and energy in the actual lived experience of school bring us up against the challenges of engaging deeply with students—and, simultaneously, how all we have is what is at hand in the moment, however impoverished, and it is our task to take it on its own terms and work into it. Gershon's work invites me to commit the reviewer's error of wondering about the book he didn't write—but that's the invitation of resonance, isn't it? To let the questions and urgencies a text raises interact with your own? I wonder especially about the implications of a pedagogy of resonance for social foundations teaching. What would such a pedagogy of resonance offer? What would be its medium? Its limits and affordances? What are the challenges of inviting students into a sonic interrogation of the world they find when they open to hear it—especially when regarded through the ears of implicit bias, institutionalized racism, and social justice? Would they fall into old ways of reverencing what they hear, like aging boomers pawing yet again through the Beatles' Sergeant Peppers cut-up tapes and coming away affirmed that, yes, they were geniuses and no one who follows is as much? Or more grimly, would they enact the conveniently schooled compartmentalization of so many historical and contemporary horrors ("Night and Fog" screened between PE class and lunch; no American History curriculum stretching past the Korean War since oh well, the year is over now)? Or can the synchronic urgency of sound witnessed, captured, chopped and ripped, muster a different response? Can the GarageBand mashup this generation performs so effortlessly with all they encounter be brought to bear on deepening comprehension, even empathy? These would be some of the "future directions for research" that Gershon's groundbreaking inquiry leaves open for us. He offers a powerful invitation to engaging the world as it is, on its own terms, with all our senses. The overwhelm of resonance is always present, perhaps especially in social foundations classes for me, and wherever your curriculum brings you to engage with the deepest and most challenging issues facing your own students. What does this invitation mean for you? As he says in his book's last sentence, "When was the last time you just sat and listened?"

### References

- Gershon, W.S. (2018). *Sound Curriculum: Sonic Studies in Educational Theory, Method, & Practice* (Studies in Curriculum Theory Series). Taylor and Francis. Kindle Edition.
- Grumet, M. R. (2010). The Public Expression of Citizen Teachers. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 61(1–2), 66–76.