
by Vincent Meelberg

One of the many challenges that sound studies faces is how to convincingly and productively convey knowledge and insights regarding sound. Sound is an ephemeral, elusive, temporal phenomenon, just as experiencing sound is. So how can we communicate to others our sonic experiences and our sonic ideas when the default mode of communication within academia still is the written word?

The Journal of Sonic Studies was established to provide a solution to this very problem. By offering alternative, digital modes of communication beyond verbal language we hoped that scholars would be motivated to come up with new forms of presentation of their research that would be better suited to sound studies. And although not every contribution to our journal does make optimal use of these new possibilities, many do show the potential that digital media has to present sonic research.

Digital Sound Studies, edited by Mary Caton Lingold, Darren Mueller and Whitney Trettien, focuses on exactly this issue: how can digital technologies help scholars to “write” about sound in sound? The editors assert that “[s]ound productively unsettles many of our ingrained assumptions about the limitations and possibilities of both print and digital authorship” (viii), and this is why there is a need to “[...] bring the insights of sound studies to bear upon the emergent field of digital humanities” (viii). The editors stress that digital scholarship does not negate the need for traditional approaches such as close listening/reading, hermeneutics, or critical analysis. Rather, “[...] these humanistic modes of interpretation provide the very foundation of digital sound studies” (4). The editors are convinced that bringing sound studies into meaningful conversation with digital humanities “[...] has the power to inspire new questions and foment new methods that are radically different from those of print” (11). Not only will digital humanities enable new research perspectives on sound, the editors point out, but sonic experience may also shed new, critical light on digital technologies in general, and the use of these technologies in scholarly research in particular.
In order to articulate these possibilities, *Digital Sound Studies* is divided into three parts. Part 1, “Theories and Genealogies,” links digital sound studies to important shifts in academic thought and practice that took place in the twentieth century. Part 2, “Digital Communities,” highlights the way scholars are using social media and digital pedagogy to build communities of thought around sonic research. Part 3, “Disciplinary Translations,” aims to build new conceptual frameworks for digital sound studies. The fourth and final part, “Points Forward,” identifies key challenges that the field needs to address in order to advance.

The chapters in Part 1 provide examples of how established practices within the humanities can be enhanced by adopting a digital sound studies approach. “Ethnodigital Sonics and the Historical Imagination,” by Richard Cullen Rath, for instance, takes an ethnographical approach by creating and playing digital replicas of historical instruments that used to be played by enslaved Africans. This approach, which Rath calls “ethnodigital sonics,” allows scholars to “[... ] understand histories and musics that are otherwise somewhat incomprehensible through traditional single-disciplinary approaches” (30). Yet, as the author admits, this approach cannot escape bias, as “[... ] ethnodigital musicians battle an implicit Eurocentrism in music software and hardware” (38).

In “Performing Zora: Critical Ethnography, Digital Sound and Not Forgetting,” Myron M. Beasley investigates how archives may misrepresent the work of female artists and scholars by identifying their work with their white male colleagues by focusing on what he calls the politics of metadata. Since metadata are a crucial part of digital humanities, and of digitisation in general, it is paramount to carefully study how these metadata are created. If metadata have mistakes, or are related to the wrong data, information may be impossible to retrieve correctly.

Jonathan W. Stone focuses on another aspect of digital life, namely the connecting potential of digital technologies. In “Rhetorical Folkness: Reanimating Walter J. Ong in the Pursuit of Digital Humanity,” he introduces the term “digital humanity,” which gestures “[... ] toward the ways that people utilize technology to generate new knowledge, tools, and networks for understanding the world and other people” (68).

In his elaboration of this term, Stone refers to Walter Ong, who, according to Stone, anticipated the current media landscape. In particular, he incorporates the notion of “secondary orality” that was originally developed by Ong. This notion describes “[... ] the state of human consciousness in the then—emerging electronic age in which the visual’s dominance was beginning to wane [... ] [T]echnological advance brought sound back into prominence within communication technologies in a way not emphasized since the days of ancient, or ‘primary,’ orality” (70). Stone elaborates this idea by looking at digital networks such as YouTube and concludes that these enable the emergence of what he calls purposive communities, a digital humanity that “[... ] invites a new and emergent folkness” (75).

Part 2 of the book further investigates the notion of digital communities. “The Pleasure (Is) Principle: *Sounding Out!* and the Digitizing of Community,” by Aaron Trammell, Jennifer Lynn Stoever, and Liana Silva, examines how digital media may contribute to creating (academic) communities revolving around the study of sound. By stressing that *Sounding Out!* should be regarded a blog rather than a journal, the authors explain how this format forces readers and writers to think differently about (academic) publications, stressing the dynamic and ever-changing nature of (sonic) research.
Regina N. Bradley, for her part, discusses in “Becoming OutKasted: Archiving Contemporary Black Southerness in a Digital Age” how the analysis of sound and social media can lead to new insights into the relation between popular music and identity. And while her contribution may be useful for those who are interested in these kinds of relations, it does not really address the issues that I introduced at the beginning of this review. Remarkably, none of the contributions that I discussed thus far actually do. W.F. Umi Hsu’s chapter is the first contribution that does discuss these challenges, albeit still rather indirectly. In “Reprogramming Sounds of Learning: Pedagogical Experiments with Critical Making and Community-Based Ethnography,” Hsu explains how the use of sound can lead to a rethinking of hierarchies in institutional learning. More specifically, by incorporating remediation, reflexivity, and resonance, the way sounds are learned can be “reprogrammed” (134). Sonification, the act of turning nonsonic materials into sounds, Hsu asserts, is “[...] well poised as a remediation practice for providing a new sensory context for students to grapple with knowledge” (135). Moreover, this practice “[...] encourages students to engage with sonic argumentation - to demonstrate, extend, or undermine concepts in the reading [which they were supposed to sonify] - through audio production techniques” (136). Recording, Hsu insists, here is considered “[...] as a reflexive research practice that extends the technique and purpose of close listening. “Recording is itself a form of research” (139). This assertion resonated with me, as I believe one of the potential values of sonic studies, digital or otherwise, is exactly this: to do research and critical reflection via the creation of sounds.

Michael J. Kramer attempts to achieve something similar in “‘A Foreign Sound to Your Ear’: Digital Image Sonification for Historical Interpretation.” By sonifying visual data Kramer tries to arrive at new insights into historical events that are depicted in these visual media. According to Kramer “[...] data sonification unleashes sounds from the data of the visual medium itself. Hearing the data of an image allows one to see it differently” (182). Sonification, Kramer concludes, “[...] might prove effective for perceiving undetected patterns in these kinds of semantic data extractions, for it produces a different kind of sensory experience of the data than visualization does” (201). Moreover, “[...] data sonification allows us to better appreciate the multifaceted and multidimensional historical truths contained within the codification of the world into ones and zeroes” (202). This kind of what Kramer calls digital hermeneutics may lead to new and unexpected interpretations of the historical information contained within an image.

While both Kramer and Hsu address a sonic approach that, in my view, best illustrates the potentiality of digital sound studies, Tanya E. Clement convincingly outlines its challenges. In “Word. Spoken. Articulating the Voice for High Performance Sound Technologies for Access and Scholarship (HiPSTAS)” she discusses how the metadata conventions of information science create significant barriers for data-driven digital sound scholarship. Clement explains that classification systems are necessary when working in the digital domain, these systems are at the same time subjective and deeply political: “One person’s horror movie could be another’s comedy.” (156) Ultimately, Clement observes, “[...] classification systems reflect philosophies concerning the nature of sound as well as the practical politics involved in developing such standards that include what remains visible and invisible in the system” (161). She ends her contribution with a caution that I think should be heeded by all sound scholars: “Classification schemas for sound are language-based: they are themselves texts that attempt - sometimes with frugal and other times with rich results - to describe the world of sound that is always
beyond text, beyond a listener, beyond one single snippet of a recording played back at one point in time.” (171)

Despite the risks and limitations of using text to describe sounds, “Augmenting Musical Arguments: Interdisciplinary Publishing Platforms and Augmented Notes,” by Joanna Swafford, explains how a digital tool, Augmented Notes, may help nonmusicians in understanding musical scores. In order to accomplish this, Augmented Notes combines audio, score, and analytical commentary in order to overcome the limitations of verbal language and at the same time make “[...] the highly specialized language of music accessible to nonmusicians” (215).

The final part of the book, “Points Forward,” begins with Rebecca Dowd Geoffroy-Schwinden’s contribution, “Digital Approaches to Historical Acoustemologies: Replication and Reenactment.” Geoffroy-Schwinden argues that digital explorations of sonic history must do more than simply attempt to recreate the sounds of the past; these projects must also contextualize the listening perspectives of historical subjects. These exploration tends to fall within three overlapping categories, Geoffroy-Schwinden asserts: acoustics, soundscapes, and audition. Acoustics “[...] reconstruct the sound of historical spaces quite accurately with the help of acoustical and architectural modeling, while soundscapes push beyond acoustics to include the objects and beings that populate historical spaces” (235). Audition is the most challenging of the three, as it “[...] incorporates not only histories of listening but also histories of the corporeality of hearing and the cerebral processes by which humans attach meaning to sound” (235). It thus ultimately concerns the subjectivity of listening and hearing.

Geoffroy-Schwinden suggests that podcast would be an adequate medium to present historical arguments in an engaging, sonic, haptic form. Even though these podcasts might be critiqued as historical fiction, they do offer “[...] a solution to pulling historical acoustemologies from the textual marginalia and into modern sensory experience” (243). For Geoffroy-Schwinden, this is what digital audible history should do. Not only “[...] recover and reconstruct sounds, but, more importantly, it should also reanimate historical acoustemologies” (244).

Steph Ceraso proposes a similar strategy in her chapter, “Sound Practices for Digital Humanities,” but she adds that when reflecting on sonic experience its multisensory aspects should not be overlooked: “Indeed, the convergence of sight, sound, and touch (and sometimes smell and taste) is in part what makes sonic interactions so engrossing and compelling.” (251) Sound is not merely a semiotic resource, but instead an experience that engages all senses, an embodied experience. In most digital scholarship, however, “[t]he dissemination of meaningful sonic information in digital scholarship takes precedence over users’ embodied experiences - the ways in which users physically interact with and are affected by sound at the level of the senses” (251).

In order to account for fully embodied kinds of sensory engagements Ceraso proposes three so-called “sound practices.” The first practice suggests considering how different bodies with a range of sensory capacities and diverse needs might interact with sound-based digital projects. “[C]omposers of sonic scholarship need to acknowledge and plan for an audience that consists of a diverse range of bodies with various sensory capacities and learning needs” (253). This practice gives users multiple ways to engage with sound. The second practice proposes to take fuller advantage of the spatial and aesthetic features of digital sound projects to create more
immersive user experiences. This approach requires us to think about sonic scholarship as a holistic experience for users. The third practice calls for an exploration and experimentation with the physical effects of sound in digital contexts: “Digital sound projects that examine and play with the bodily locations of felt frequencies [...] might facilitate entirely new ways of interacting with digital sound scholarship for everyone” (260). In this way knowledge and insights regarding sound and sonic experience can be conveyed in ways mere words cannot.

The final chapter, “AFTERWORD. Demands of Duration: The Futures of Digital Sound Scholarship,” consists of a dialogue between the editors of the volume and Jonathan Sterne. According to Sterne, technical infrastructures are needed to support digital sound studies. Also, institutional infrastructures are needed to keep publications alive and running. I’d like to think that the Journal of Sonic Studies functions as such an infrastructure. At least that is what we, the editors of this journal, aim to achieve.

I found most contributions in this volume very inspiring. They engage with what other scholars might call sonic thinking, but in contrast to most of the texts that discuss sonic thinking this volume presents concrete examples of how thinking through sounds can be productively done. The book is not an abstract discussion of sound as a medium to produce new insights, but without explaining how this can actually be done. Instead, digital sound studies is practical in that it combines, as the editors of the volume assert, “[...] the creative use of sonic technologies with an informed critical inquiry of them, merging the lessons of digital humanities and the 'maker' movement with a thoughtful analysis of digital culture, new media, and the sonic possibilities of technologized learning spaces” (16). Digital sound studies fuses theory and critical thinking with creative sonic practices, a fusion that is both promising and very appealing.