

Sonic Ethnography in Theory and Practice

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Summary and Keywords

As its name suggests, sonic ethnography sits at the intersection of studies of sound and ethnographic methodologies. This methodological category can be applied to interpretive studies of sound, ethnographic studies that foreground sound theoretically and metaphorically, and studies that utilize sound practices similar to those found in forms of audio recording and sound art, for example. Just as using ocular metaphors or video practices does not make an ethnographic study any more truthful, the use of sonic metaphors or audio recording practices still requires the painstaking, ethical, reflexivity, time, thought, analysis, and care that are hallmarks for strong ethnographies across academic fields and disciplines. Similarly, the purpose of sonic ethnography is not to suggest that sound is any more real or important than other sensuous understandings but is instead to underscore the power and potential of the sonic for qualitative researchers within and outside of education. A move to the sonic is theoretically, methodologically, and practically significant for a variety of reasons, not least of which are (a) its ability to interrupt ocular pathways for conceptualizing and conducting qualitative research; (b) for providing a mode for more actively listening to local educational ecologies and the wide variety of things, processes, and understandings of which they are comprised; (c) ethical and more transparent means for expressing findings; and (d) a complex and deep tool for gathering, analyzing, and expressing ethnographic information. In sum, sonic ethnography opens a world of sound possibilities for educational researchers that at once deepen and provide alternate pathways for understanding everyday educational interactions and the sociocultural contexts that help render those ways of being, doing, and knowing sensible.

Keywords: qualitative research, ethnography, sound studies, sensory studies, curriculum studies, educational foundations

Introduction

James Clifford's (1986) introduction to one of the works that most announced the linguistic turn in ethnography, *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Clifford & Marcus, 1986), poses a question of deep significance to sonic methodologies: "But what

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of the ethnographic ear?" (p. 12). It is a question raised in passing, an articulation of complexity about the relationship between ethnography-as-text and ethnography-as-gaze, an example of the linearity of text delineating between layers of talk and idea. I quote it here at length:

From another angle we notice how much has been said, in criticism and praise, of the ethnographic gaze. But what of the ethnographic ear? This is what Nathaniel Tarn is getting at in an interview, speaking of his experience as a tricultural French/Englishman endlessly becoming American.

"It may be the ethnographer or the anthropologist again having his ears wider open to what he considers the exotic as opposed to the familiar, but I still feel I'm discovering something new in the use of language here almost every day. I'm getting new expressions almost every day, as if the language were growing from every conceivable shoot."

(Tarn, 1975, p. 9)

An interest in the discursive aspects of cultural representation draws attention not to the interpretation of cultural "texts" but to their relations of production. Different styles of writing are, with varying degrees of success, grappling with these new orders of complexity—different rules and possibilities within the horizon of a historical moment. . . . It is enough to mention here that the general trend is toward a specification of discourses in ethnography: Who speaks? Who writes? When and where? With or to whom? Under what institution and historical constraints? (pp. 12–13)

Acknowledging an anachronistic use of only male pronouns and an othering false dichotomy of exotic and familiar, what is striking about this passage is how sound is venerated and posed as an important ethnographic form of expression yet is immediately reduced to talk, talk that is again reduced to complex texts; sounds twice removed to gain ethnographic legitimacy and depth, incidental institutional and historical constraints that are ironic due only in part to the passing of time. For, as much as sound has been central to ethnographic practices, the sonic often remains relegated to a second-class positionality in ethnographic research (e.g., in Pink, 2009).

Yet, sound methods continue to grow in legitimacy and usage across qualitative research methodologies (Bauer, 2000; Feld & Brennis, 2004; Gershon, 2012; McCartney & Wasserman, 2005). This recent proliferation of sonic methodologies is as much due to a parallel evolution in availability and design of devices and applications for sound recording, manipulation, and expression as it is due to the blossoming of sister fields sound studies (e.g., Sterne, 2012), sensory studies (e.g., Howes & Classen, 2013), and affect theory (e.g., Gregg & Seigworth, 2010). That once disparate, disciplinary silos of attention to the sonic have now collapsed into readily named and articulated inter/trans/disciplinary fields of study is of no small methodological and practical importance. It has engendered possi-

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bilities in doing sound work, more readily creating cross-pollinated communities of those doing sound work across professions and approaches, and in the study of the sonic.

For example, what was previously a scramble to find associated scholarship and the always necessary pathways for methodological legitimacy in the academy—with accompanying ethical, theoretical, ontological, epistemological, and other associated aspects of qualitative research practices—has often become a rather straightforward positionality: I do sound studies. However, part of the attention to and interest in the sonic is the result of pressing at ongoing historical ocular barriers to qualitative research. The possibility and use of sound in qualitative research have been hard fought, negotiating tensions and roadblocks that, unfortunately, in many ways continue.

This article focuses on one such methodology, sonic ethnography, and its location in a particular academic area of study, education. As its name implies, sonic ethnography is the never-ending possibilities of what it may mean to do something that can be called “ethnography” in, through, and as sound. Although some attention is paid to questions of ethnography, as many of these understandings are addressed throughout this encyclopedia, attention to ethnography here primarily focuses on what makes the following kinds of sound practices ethnographic.

The majority of this article traces historically entangled roots of sound understandings and qualitative methodologies, discussions of sonic ethnography across fields, how those connections were manifest in education, and their uses as sonic ethnography to date (2019) across educational subdisciplines. While such a focus is necessarily inclusive of discussions about how a multiplicity of sound ideas, ideals, and practices inform anything that may be considered “sonic ethnography,” much of that talk has been intentionally filtered in order to more directly speak to the resonant vibrational affects (Gershon, 2013A, 2017, 2018) that are the rhythmical foundation for these sonic, qualitative understandings.

Ethnography, Marginalization, and Knowledges

It is irresponsible to speak of ethnography (Agar, 1985) without attending to two of its central and most problematic features: questions of interpretation and the reproduction of a construct called “culture,” two central pathways for marginalizing and colonializing through social science, practices that produce “others” as distanced “subjects” of study. In this post-next methodological moment at the turn of the 21st century, the notion that one may either get at what another means or that those meanings can be to some degree centrally organized (or that there is something that is meaning) can seem particularly anachronistic if not increasingly harmful in its maintenance of understandings that buttress key tools for marginalization and oppression (e.g., Visweswaran, 2010).¹ It is the construct of culture, born in the rising tide of social sciences at the turn of the 20th century, that was utilized to mark Western ways of being—knowing—doing (Gershon, 2017) as superior and against which all other possible organizations of individuals, groups, and their processes have been measured (e.g., Cooper, 1892; Andreotti, 2011). Conversely, as

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social sciences and humanities again turn to the sciences for models and metaphors, a method that deals with patterns of liminality as if they are concrete and focuses on the human at a time when the Anthropocene is clearly a cause for global concern, and amid ongoing work to flatten relations between things within ecologies that decenter the human, is equally problematic. From particular critical positionalities, ethnography is an ethical lose–lose proposition. Ethnographic research is processes that reify and normalize oppressive understandings about humans in relation that simultaneously maintain a false understanding of humans at the center of what are actually ever-emergent, entangled, ecologies that both precede and supersede human understandings and actions.

Yet, these very concerns can also be strengths. For example, the combination of contributions to the maintenance of colonialist histories and associated sociocultural constructs has, over time, led to foregrounding ethics in theory and practice—and an accompanying attention to questions of power in all its forms—in ways that uphold rather than appropriate or demean local norms and values (e.g., Ortner, 2006; Tsing, 2005). As but one other possible example, what may it mean for a study to focus on the significance of interrelations between local and less local sociocultural norms and values that render everyday interactions sensible? Such a focus has the potential to highlight not only relations between humans but also the multiplicity of ecologies in which humans are situated (e.g., Gottlieb & Graham, 2012; Holmes, 2013; Kohn, 2013; Stoller, 1989; Tsing, 2015).

Then there is another key feature of ethnographies, if not the single most central facet: they seek to understand what is sensible to local peoples, how those sensibilities play out in relation, and the relationships between those connections and increasingly less local norms and values. While this is salient for ethnographies in general, it is of particular importance in qualitative studies of education because how people make sense in knowledge interactions is in many ways the very definition of education. Consider, for example, the following central aspects of ethnography: involving information gathered from a wide variety of sources, the consideration of everyday interactions alongside interviews and documents, and the kinds of patterns that emerge as commonsensical to local actors. Provided that an ethnography attends to the concerns raised in this section, it would appear so, though fundamental parts of ethnography are also particularly well suited for the study of what education may mean, how it can function in practice, and what those and other such understandings can tell us about education's role in local and less local society. In short, ethnography is often a good fit for educational research because it is a systemic and systematic method for the study of knowledges.

In addition, because education is a multiplicity of simultaneous, interrelated but not necessarily causal processes about making sense and what is sensible, the senses are a strong location for ethnographic study in general (e.g., Feld, 1982; Geurts, 2002; Stoller, 1997) and education specifically (e.g., Gershon, 2013A; Morris, 2017; Powell, 2016; Wozolek, 2018). By this I mean not only that the sensorium, the many ways individuals and groups conceptualize the senses (e.g., Howes, 2003), is something to which qualitative researchers may attend as a focus of study but also that the senses can be the mode or the method through which such studies can be conducted. However, as detailed in the

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section “SONIC ETHNOGRAPHY IN EDUCATION,” changing the media and mode for conducting and expressing ethnographic research does not preclude one from either transparency of process or reflexive practices for the care and dignity of research collaborators.

Further, the sonic complicates the often linear, human-centric, outward direction of ethnographic practices. By this I don’t mean that people are somehow not intimately and immediately involved in processes of hearing and listening, whether those sounds are perceived aurally, haptically, or otherwise. Instead, the point here is that sounds emanate from things, collections of things as ecologies, move through things, and are comprised of things, including people. From a sonic perspective, people are always already plural, complex, amplifying, and dampening sonic ecologies regardless of that to which they attend, filter, or are aware. Sounds, then, complicate the ethnographic in ways that articulate its irreducibility, complexity, and complicity in ways that underscore the impossibility of linear, sequential singularity, which often serves as the backbone for processes of marginalization and oppression.

Sonic Practices: Ethnography, Understandings, and the Sonic

Sound studies and associated fields and subfields continue to articulate myriad trajectories of the sonic (e.g., Barrett, 2016; Erlmann, 2010; Kahn, 2001; Novak & Sakakeeny, 2015; Schwartz, 2011; Smith, 2015). Sonic studies also provide lenses for critical examinations of the potentiality and oppression of and through sound for continually marginalized peoples (e.g., people of African descent) (e.g., Chude-Sokei, 2016; Edwards, 2017; Moten, 2003; Steinskog, 2018; Stallings, 2015; Stoeber, 2016; Weheliye, 2005). In light of these continuing conversations and the scope of this article, rather than fully address such entangled histories, this section focuses on conversations about sound as it relates to discussions of ethnography.

Regardless of its form or media, the sonic has always been a central component of any set of processes that can be understood as ethno-methodological. Primarily conceptualized as talk and music, sounds are a cornerstone of the kinds of information to which ethnographers attend and are central facets of analysis. As has been recently noted in discussions of the relationship between ethnography and sound, these questions underscore an often taken for granted aspect of ethnography, the role and function of sound. In light of the ways in which ethnography seems to linger in visibility, whether written, linguistic, or, as I argue, multisensory, this is perhaps not surprising (e.g., Pink, 2009; Wolcott, 2008).

A central complication, however, is that ethnography as a methodology, as well as its representations in text, recordings, and media, is rife with sounds. For example, talk is one of the central sources of data in many kinds of ethnographic research (e.g., Atkinson, Coffey, Delamont, Loffland, & Loffland, 2007; Erickson, 2004). Similarly, ethnographically related methodologies such as ethnomusicology, ethnodrama, ethnopoetics, and performance ethnographies all in some way focus on sound as “data,” particularly as talk and music.

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Given this focus and use of sounds in ethnography and ethnomethodologies more generally, how is it that essential questions about sound and ethnography in many ways still remain? One answer to this question is precisely this epistemological tendency: Ethnomethodologies have tended to focus on music and talk rather than on talk and music as sounds (Erlmann, 2004, p. 2). Along these lines, although there are certainly field recordings of note, ethnomusicologists tend to render local sounds as books and films rather than as audio recordings (e.g., Barz & Cooley, 2008; Stone, 2016).

Another central reason can be conceptualized in terms of analysis or attention to emergent informational understandings. Regardless of how it is presented, when ethnomethodologists attend to the information gathered (e.g., an audio recording of an interview), we tend to do everything we can in order to weed out all unnecessary sounds in order that we may transcribe that talk. While such information is most certainly important in understanding how local actors work together to make meaning, it simultaneously ignores what may be equally vital information about how meaning is constructed in that context. What is considered “noise” does indeed carry sonic information that is meaningful to local actors and can be both recognized and utilized as data (e.g., Attali, 1985; Bauer, 2000).

Further complicating matters, recent scholarship addresses uses of sound in and as ethnography as well as theoretical explorations of how sound may be utilized in qualitative research outside of ethnography (e.g., Bauer, 2000; Bresler, 2005, 2009; Daza & Gershon, 2015; Drever, 2002; Feld, 2005; Feld & Brennis, 2004; Gershon, 2013C; Helmreich, 2007), a discussion of what Samuels, Meintjes, Ochoa, and Porcello (2010) refer to as “sounded anthropology” and continuing considerations of sociocultural and historical sound meanings within the field of sound.

Thus, sonic ethnography can be understood as simultaneously (a) inclusive of the ways in which sound is utilized in ethnographies, (b) reliant on ethnographies of sound, and (c) providing one answer to questions that regard how sound may be utilized methodologically to consider the complicated warp and weft of everyday complexities that form tapestries of ethnographic practices. Given this construction, I focus primarily here on scholarship that presents notions of what Feld (Feld & Brennis, 2004) calls “ethnographies of sound.”

This discussion of sound and ethnography therefore operates with an understanding that sound-as-talk is central to ethnography and with a similar appreciation for the role of sound-as-music within fields such as ethnomusicology and the anthropology of sound. In light of these understandings about the presence of sound in ethnography, rather than review the myriad ways in which talk and music are utilized by ethnographers to construct layers of understanding, the focus in this section is on more recent considerations of what it may mean to do ethnographies of and through sound. As noted, this is a difference between the use of sound in ethnography and what it may mean to more explicitly focus on the sonic aspects of current ethnographic practices.

Sound and Ethnography

Previous discussions regarding the relationship between sound and ethnography and similar scholarship on sound meanings from the social sciences in the now fomented field of sound studies (e.g., Bull & Back, 2015; Erlmann, 2004) have clearly demonstrated the importance of sound and its usefulness as a site for scholarship. Discussions of the possibilities and uses for sound ethnography tend to utilize Schafer's (1977) construction of soundscape. Examples include Helmreich's (2007) discussion of "soundscapes, submarine cyborgs, and transductive ethnography," Samuels et al.'s (2010) use of soundscapes in their call for a "sounded anthropology," and Feld's (Feld & Breinnis, 2004) talk about the possibilities in soundscapes as spaces for understanding sound meanings.

Though slightly less frequently discussed in terms of sound and ethnography, and often cited, is Feld's (1982, 2012, 2015) groundbreaking work in what he calls *acoustemology*. Where soundscapes focus on the meanings of environmental sounds (not machines or the sounds of other such human-made objects) to the humans that interact with those acoustic ecologies, acoustemology is an "acoustic epistemology" that is inclusive of people-made sounds, a move Feld made in response to the ways in which soundscapes artificially separate humans from the sounds that surround them.

It was also a response to the often implicit Western values embedded in Schafer's constructions of sound, meaning, and music, a concern that Howes (2010) echoes in his response to Pink's (2010) construction of sensory ethnography.

In terms of conceptualizing potential relations between sounded ethnography and ethnographic methodologies, Samuels et al. (2010) argue:

[i]n speaking of a sounded anthropology, we are not proposing a break from the discipline as it has been framed. We are attempting to incorporate into the current work and profile of the discipline an acknowledgement that anthropology's history of entwinement with histories of technology, aesthetics, and mediation has led it to a critique of representation in the visual field while largely neglecting issues of sound, recording, and listening. (p. 339)

However, scholars have long been attending to the sonic nature of ethnographic data (e.g., Erickson, 1982, 2004; Feld, 1982, 2012). This said, there still remains a paucity of sound-oriented ethnographic scholarship, particularly when compared to fields such as visual anthropology or ethnodrama. However, as Samuels et al. (2010) present in their work, the construct of soundscape is indeed confining, in no small part due to the kinds of limitations that led Feld to develop the construct of acoustemology—a rather Western orientation toward sound and composition that tends to include a false split between people and environment as well as "natural" from "person-made" ecologies.

Additionally, a particular irony persists. In spite of the proliferation of readily played sound media (i.e., mp3 files), the inclusion of microphones on many computers manufactured in the past decade, and an ever-increasing number of journals that are either online

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or have online versions that could readily support sound files, discussions of sound ethnography tend to be texted. Other than Howes' (2003) point that text is helpful in that it explicitly reminds readers of the translated, interpretive nature of ethnographic work, the complications about discussions of sound in texted fashion have been largely disregarded (inclusive of this article to this point).

In her work, *Doing Sensual Ethnography*, Pink (2009) expresses the following thoughts on the possibility of sound ethnography:

Indeed, direct substitutions across any media of ethnographic representation are difficult to achieve. To replace, to play the same role of, academic writing, a composition would have to explicitly contribute to scholarly theoretical and empirical discussions, which have been developed through sophisticated techniques of writing. It is more beneficial to probe the unique qualities of soundscape composition, and determine what these contribute to ethnographic representation that writing cannot. (p. 143)

The difficulty with Pink's point is not that it does not ring false in the face of sound studies in general and discussions of sound and ethnography specifically. As Howes (2010) notes in his response to her comments on sensory ethnography (Pink, 2010), Pink has a tendency to work within Western notions of "five senses" and a primacy of vision, two ideas that have been explicitly demonstrated to be problematic in understanding both non-Western (e.g., Geurts, 2002; Stoller, 1997) and Western (Erlmann, 2010; Schwartz, 2011) cultures.

Here, Pink (2009) also seems to conflate composition with representation while overlooking Feld's concern with the separation of person from environment addressed in acoustemology. She similarly appears to disregard important notions about the socially constructed nature and meaning-full-ness of noise (Attali, 1985; Bauer, 2000) in ethnography, a point to which I return momentarily.

However, what seems to be missing is a strong argument for sound-as-text, a similarly strong presence of ethnographies that are represented in and through sound, and a theoretical move to incorporate unnatural sound meaning and noise in discussions of sound ethnographies. This argument is of particular importance in light of the ways in which Western musical notation (as well as writing in general) has been utilized by Western scholars to marginalize non-Western ways of knowing, even when thinking favorably on a given musical tradition (e.g., Agawu, 1992; Lewis, 2008; Nooshin, 2003), and as a tool for the colonialization of Indigenous populations.

What recent discussions of the possibility of a sound ethnography do strongly share is an understanding that the next step in its evolution is methodological. To this end, Makagon and Neumann (2009) provide a "how to" appendix for recording audio data and suggest that teaching citizens to record their own stories and play them back for listeners may fulfill "a desire to critically engage detailed social and cultural processes to blend with

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the assets model of community building to make citizen story-telling an exciting form of critical ethnographic work” (p. 69).

Before continuing, I wish to note that this discussion could fall under a broader methodological category called sonic inquiry. The commonality between these sound methodologies is that they, like sonic ethnography, remain grounded in a given methodological practice (regardless of its iteration or incarnation), yet represent that data sonically (to some degree) and focus on sound (cochlear and non-cochlear alike). It is also important to note that there is anthropological scholarship that is specifically and explicitly sensuous (e.g., Geurts, 2002; Howes, 1991, 2003; Stoller, 1989, 1997). In addition, there is the burgeoning field of sound studies, scholarship in which sound is the shared point of interest and examination, yet is highly diverse in methodology, perspective, and field. It is nearly always the case that a contribution to sound studies is simultaneously a contribution to that scholar’s “home” field, such as architecture or history.

In light of these trends in scholarship about sound, both within and outside of ethnography, the methodology I call sonic ethnography can be conceptualized as being comprised of two central understandings. First, sound is an important, integral part of ethnographic processes. Specifically, talk and music continue to be strong and essential sources for understanding the complex interlocking layers of local and less local norms and values that are central to ethnography. Second, because most forms of ethnography rely on rendering ideas, interactions, and images as texts, they maintain often Western visually oriented conceptualizations of sense-making. Additionally, while there are forms of ethnographic representation that are expressly non-textual—film, pictures, and drama, for example—there is no ethnographic methodology that expressly focuses on sound or through which the data from ethnographic studies are rendered sonically. While soundscape and acoustemology focus on sound, they are often represented as text and music.

Thus, sonic ethnography is situated in a gap that resides in the middle of ethnographies in the early decades of the 21st century. It relies on understandings of talk and music as iterations of the ways in which people construct and reconstruct their sense-making that can be examined to better understand sociocultural tendencies, processes, and lines of power. This methodology also draws from the diverse conglomerate of scholarship that can be understood as sound studies—sound organization (e.g., Landy, 2007), sound art (e.g., Kahn, 2001; Kim-Cohen, 2009), recent developments in sound and culture (e.g., Bull & Back, 2015; Erlmann, 2004), sound-as-data (Bauer, 2000; Makagon & Neumann, 2009), acoustemology (Feld, 1982, 2015), and soundscapes (Schafer, 1977)—in order to illustrate the power and possibility of a sound methodology.

When brought into conversation, these sound ideas ascribe the boundaries of a sonic ethnography. They point to ways of understanding how people make sense of their worlds (Ellsworth, 2005; Howes, 2003; Stoller, 1997) through sound. As I argue, the consideration of how meaning is constructed from a sonic vantage point pushes past visual metaphors and concepts to make familiar notions of sense-making strange in order that

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they may be explored anew. What happens when the ethnographer's gaze is replaced with the ethnographic ear?

Finally, ethnographic research practices necessarily involve questions about voice, transparency, and interpretation. Technologically, we are now at a point in history in which recorded sound can be played and transferred with amazing ease. Provided that one remains expressly clear that audio recordings are necessarily interpretations of sound events, there is an opportunity to literally give voice to social actors. In light of scholarship across the social sciences on instances of voice and silencing, this possibility has strong implications for the ways in which ethnography can be used not only for representation generally but also for intentioned actions toward areas such as equity, access, and justice.

Senses in Educational Ethnography

Sensoria, the endless possible ways of conceptualizing a sensorium, how groups understand something that may be called "the senses," are education; not educational, but education itself. People gather information through the senses and interpret them through their perceptions (e.g., Howes, 1991, 2003; Stoller, 1989, 1997). Regardless of whether one ascribes to a somewhat limited Western five-senses model—a pathway for wonder in which debates still continue about notions like intuition being a sense, irrespective of the number of scientific discoveries that have been made through this exceedingly subjective event—humans are, in critical social theories, complex, interrelated multispecies that gain information from and through what we, in English, call the senses. It is through the senses, and directly because of them, that something can become sensible or we can believe them to make sense. And making sense, passing knowledges of any imaginable kind between ecologies and the things that constitute them, including animals, a category that includes people, is education. The point here is not to denigrate human-to-human educational interactions, for it is the humans who are doing the sense-making through their physiological systems and interpreting them through their sensoria, but instead to note that we gather information from endless sources, all of which flow through our senses and can be educational (Cooper, 1892; Ellsworth, 2005; Jackson, 1968; Springgay & Truman, 2018; Woodson, 1933).

While notions of interpretation and translation have in many ways fallen out of favor in many theoretical constructions, it is difficult to talk about senses and perception without their presence. What we hear, for example, is not what someone said, as the sound waves have traveled through media, including air and rocks, decayed and morphed as its reverberations bounced against myriad other reverberations, both those within and outside of human hearing, moved through the specific otological configurations of one's anatomy, including but not exclusive to the haptic, and bounced about in one's body before we hear it. Microseconds but essential microseconds. Then there are layers of local and less local sociocultural norms and values that serve as further filters for interpretation: That sound causes joy (babies laughing), this one causes concern (tone in your friend's voice).

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Where babies laughing could be considered a universally beloved sound, as a young parent who has spent a good deal of time in socioculturally quiet places like libraries and museums, I can assure you that this is not the case. Should this not do for an example, imagine taking a baby into a lunch place downtown in a city whose primary clientele are men in suits taking a variety of flavors of working lunches. I have done this. It didn't end well for any of us. What we hear, then, is an embodied interpretation of the sounds that surround us, murmurings, starlings of sound that we filter to say, in utter sincerity, standing in the middle of a crowded hall into a device that carries a comparatively narrow band of sound fidelity: Can you hear me? That we can both ask and respond to this question is much more about our ability to translate sounds physiologically than it is about the portable computers we call "phones."

Educational ethnography, a field with interpretivist roots that at once holds on to these traditions and simultaneously continues to imagine notions of interpretation with an infinitely wide scope, can therefore be doubly understood as having a vested interest in senses. This also means that the senses are an excellent site for studying everyday educational understandings, their connections to increasingly broader sociocultural norms and values, and relations to a variety of potential areas of significance, from national policies to local bus schedules.

Given this overwhelming attention to the senses and what is sensible, it is not surprising that a number of scholars continue to explore relations between education, ethnography, and the senses. For example, Kathy Mills' (e.g., Mills, Bellocchi, Patulny, & Dooley, 2017; Mills, Comber, & Kelly, 2013; Mills & Dramson, 2015) participant-oriented ethnographic studies with Indigenous children and youth highlight the depth of possibilities of sensory literacies, digital medias, and embodiment to provide for critically creative critiques toward more socially just educational practices. Similarly, Kimberley Powell's (2010, 2016) ongoing work with community, music, and mapping document how attention to interrelations between people, practices, and ecologies inform the everyday ways we make sense of what those understandings can teach us about communities and ourselves.

Sonic Ethnography In and Out of Education

A strong argument can be made that sonic ethnographies have a longstanding history in education. Consider, for example, Fredrick Erickson's life work: from writing about the improvisational nature of talk (Erickson, 1982) to discussions of "listening and speaking" (Erikson, 1986) and relations between "musicality and speech" as well as how they combine with related understandings to inform how we conceptualize the relationships between "talk and social theory" (Erickson, 2004). Then there is Gregory Dimitriadis' (2009) seminal work, *Performing Identity/Performing Culture: Hip Hop as Text, Pedagogy, and Lived Practice*, Liora Bresler's (e.g., 1995, 2004) body of work, including, "What Musicianship Can Teach Educational Research" (Bresler, 2005), and scholars such as Christopher Emdin (2010), Bettina Love (2012), and Awad Ibrahim (2014) whose qualitative research projects underscore the importance of sounds-as-music, culture, race, and justice, relations of hip hop, pedagogy, and youth. Then there is Peter Appelbaum's

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Children's Books for Grown Up Teachers: Reading and Writing Curriculum Theory (2007) and "The Stench of Perception and the Cacophony of Mediation" (1999), and Michael Gallagher's (e.g., 2011, 2016; Gallagher, Kanngieser, & Prior, 2016) body of work, including his talk about relationships between sound, geographies, and affect.

The relationship between Gallagher's work and my own (e.g., Gershon, 2006, 2011, 2013A, 2013C) also serves as a particularly salient example of the reasons for exercising more than a dollop of caution when encapsulating scholarship in any form, let alone an article such as this. Although writing about similar ideas, from slightly different vectors and trajectories, we were unaware of each other's work until recently, in no small part due to pressures to contribute to particular journals, weighted differently by our respective institutions, conceptualizations also informed by national predilections and boundaries. Such matters are of no small significance here as my intention with this discussion of sonic ethnography in education is at once to detail its presence and possibilities in educational research while opening the door to as many ways it may be interpreted and methodologically utilized.

Sonic Ethnography in Education

There are a good number of emerging qualitative research methods that, while not specifically claiming to be some form of sounded ethnography, nonetheless are rather similar in construction and function (e.g., *Journal of Sonic Studies*, vol. 4, issue 1). There are also a few different scholars and artists who explicitly claim sonic ethnography, including Ely Rosenblum (2018), Milena Droumeva (2016), and Ernst Karel (2017).

Following the possibilities set forth by scholars such as Steven Feld (1982, 2012; Feld & Brennis, 2004) and Michael Bauer (2000), my purpose here is to outline both what sonic ethnography is and why it is significant. As one of the few people who have claimed "sonic ethnography" and is perhaps most associated with the term in education (Gershon, 2012, 2013B, 2017, Gershon & the Listening to the Sounds of Science Project, 2012), this section tends toward more personal perspectives than the previous broader reviews. Therefore, it is important to again note that this is but one possible set of parameters based on a similar set of arguments that speaks neither to the entirety nor the complexity of what sonic ethnography is or can do.

From my perspective, sonic ethnography must adhere to both tenets of its namesake in that it must be both deeply related to sound and methodologically ethnographic. While this may seem self-explanatory at its surface, it is neither simplistic nor straightforward, due in part to how many claim ethnographic practices when in fact employing only portions of ethnographic research, interview practices, for example, or referring to any complex qualitative method as ethnographic. Yet, for me, ethnography should be recognizable as inherently ethnographic. Not that it need adhere to a more traditional educational ethnographic paradigm in alignment with, for example, George and Louise Spindler or Harry Wolcott, but it should, also be aware of its roots and traditions. For, it is important to remember that both one of Powell's pieces on Taiko and Erickson's talk about collabo-

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rative action ethnography were included in George Spindler's last edited collection with Spindler, & Hammond, (2006).

Along similar lines, what most remember about Wolcott's (1990) follow-up to his talk about the sneaky kid (1983) is his revelation that he was having a sexual, romantic, gay relationship with Brad, the sneaky kid in question, an unstable youth who then tried to murder Wolcott by burning down his house. What is often missed here is not only the bravery of publicly outing himself and his sexual practices at the height of the Reagan era in the United States, no friendly time for LGBTQ+ people and the beginning of the AIDS epidemic, but also the latter half of the piece in which he eviscerates the possibility of validity as a marker for qualitative research. The traditional ain't so traditional after all.

What, then, makes sonic ethnography ethnographic? In a non-exhaustive list it should at least include the following: attention to questions of power-in-relation (e.g., Agar, 1996; Ortner, 2006); study of understandings of a given ecology over time (e.g., Feld & Basso, 1996; Low & Lawrence-Zúñiga, 2003); relating to less local norms and values (e.g., Tsing, 2005, 2015); having rich, complex relations between people, ecologies, and things (e.g., Kohn, 2013; Simpson, 2014); seeking to explicate local understandings to those who were not present in ways that resonate with the humans in the study (e.g., Gottlieb & Graham, 1994, 2012); closely attending to questions of ethics in ways that cause as little harm as possible and checking in with co-participants about such potentialities (Fabian & Marcus, 2009; Madison, 2019); attending to a variety of pathways seeking to understand why local interactions are meaningful to local actors (e.g., Geertz, 1983; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995); working to provide discussions that encapsulate but do not resolve the complexities of a given context while working from a variety of resources that, although in some fashion align in explanation, also do not resolve into singular, essentializing, or otherwise closed, resolved explanations (e.g., Visweswaran, 1994, 2010); approaching the consideration of the information gathered in systemic and systematic ways that can be conveyed to potential co-participants so that they can decide if they would like to participate or withdraw their participation (e.g., Hetherington, 2012; Gershon, Lather & Smithies, 2009); and expressing the understandings of what one has come to understand to others who were not present in ways that are recognizable by both those who were along for the ride of the study and those who were not (Atkinson et al., 2007). These understandings are present not only in works that expressly attend to discussions about critical social theories and ethnographically related scholarship (e.g., Ortner, 2006) but are also present in the talk and practice of recent ethnographies (e.g., Gottlieb & Graham, 2012; Stoller, 2014; Tsing, 2015).

Sound in sonic ethnographies often comes down to two overarching approaches: metaphoric and literal. These are fluid, unfixed boundaries and by no means binary but are helpful in this article in examining the kinds of work that may be considered to be sonically ethnographic. Metaphorical uses suggest that sound ideals, ideas, affects, and effects impact ethnographic studies. For example, what may it mean to move from questions of framing gaze to transparent filtering as central metaphors for ethnographic practice (Gershon, 2017, 2018)? Where frames are ocular notions that understandings are

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bounded like vision by what one can see, filtering carries an understanding that possibilities for attention and awareness in ethnographic work function more like an omnidirectional microphone, from all sides simultaneously without borders or an off button. With sound metaphors, nothing can be “off camera” or “out of sight,” a change in perspective that means ethnographers must do what we claim to do in the first place: be transparent about what we have done, the things to which we have attended, and the processes through which we did so. With practical implications that press at the boundaries of what sonic ethnography may be are claims by scholars such as Seth Kim-Cohen (2009), who argues for what he calls a non-cochlear sound art—sounds expressed not as sound but vis-à-vis Derrida (1997), through words in text.

A literal use of the sonic is employing sound recordings in the gathering, consideration, and expression of research, often utilizing many of the same approaches to sound engineering and production used for music creation and sound art. On one hand, this work can be expressed as a kind of parallel to ethnographic film, an assemblage of sounds that requires no textual explication and stands on its own, whether formatted more as a radio program (e.g., Makagon & Neumann, 2009) or as sound art (Gershon & the Listening to the Sounds of Science Project, 2012). On the other hand, it can function as text with sounds (Gershon, 2013C) or sound-as-text (Gershon, 2018), all of which are in full effect and affectively articulated in Boni Fernandes Wozolek’s sonic ethnographies of school, queerness, and race (Wozolek, 2018, 2019).

In either case, it is important to note the following understandings: First, the application of a sound metaphor is not the same as employing it as a theoretical construct or as a means to consider sound information. Simply saying that one is attuned without following through on what that attunement may be, how it functions in some fashion, and using it in a way beyond ringing a particular bell is often simply an apt metaphor, not a sonic investigation. Calling teachers conductors, students instrumentalists, and then describing classrooms in non-orchestral ways at once lessens the potential power of a metaphor and the roles of classroom actors. Working in this fashion is also likely to miss significant aspects of those roles such as power differentials between orchestral members and high art aesthetic concerns. It is similarly likely to miss how a move from teacher to conductor in many ways reifies both roles and, in so doing, important problems with the distance between teachers and students as well as a parallel distance between conductors and orchestra members.

Second, recording something and playing it back doesn’t make that thing more real or better than text. Mistaking a recording for an event is as egregious as believing a text to capture talk. The researcher (or someone) intentionally recorded some ecology, made decisions about how that recording should be played back, and used or did not use various engineering tools such as reverb (Gershon, 2018). The quality of microphone matters, as does the quality of the tools used for recording and engineering, as does their placement, all things a researcher actively does. In short, a move from text to sound does not remove

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the need for transparency of process or clarity about the systemic ways in which the sonic was used over the course of a project.

Third, sound is qualitatively different from text or video and affords researchers different opportunities. Not better, different. In many ways, it is the primacy of the ocular that renders the sonic so much potential (e.g., Gershon, 2011; Daza & Gershon, 2015; Pinar & Irwin, 2005). When one can simply move to another sense and interrupt a history of metaphors and understandings—researcher's gaze, *ogenblik*, entanglements—it not only underscores the generally flimsy nature of the metaphor but also quickly finds a means to make the familiar strange, and the inverse (Spindler & Spindler, 1982). Having to slow down and listen to something for an extended period of time is also a different experience than watching video or skimming text, for skimming sound recordings often necessarily causes listeners to miss important content.

Fourth, sound is inherently messy and liminally significant. It is this messiness that is one of its greatest strengths for ethnographers, pressing at us not to miss the event for the recording or the complexity of polyvocality for the harmony we happen to hear, for it is never a singular sound and the sonic is as complex and interrelated as it is moving and momentary.

Fifth, sounds give literal voice to participants. In so doing, they remove at least two layers of interpretation, from sound-to-text and again from text-to-sound in a reader's aural imagination. While playing back a person's voice does not necessarily mean that what one hears is any truer than any other sound, for it can be manipulated in an infinite number of ways, it does mean that those layers of translation have been removed. It is an actual difference between receiving the affect of someone else and creating that affect for yourself.

Sixth, metaphorically and literally, sounds resound—they are resonant. As such, they reverberate between, off of, through, around, and across things, ecologies, time, and space. Practically, this means that every idea has already always been misheard and that any sound has the potential to rebound off of any other sound, not to mention questions of sympathetic tones (Gershon, 2013B, 2017, 2018). Metaphorically, as all ideals, ideas, processes, things, and ecologies all resonate, some are dampened and some are amplified, both intentionally and unintentionally, so that attention to resonances can also be a worthwhile site of study.

Finally, ecologies and the things that comprise them, including people, are constituted in part by sound and simultaneously emanate sounds. We are beings of sound that are sound beings. Such a perspective jives with understandings of educational ethnographies in that it is a strong reminder of the interconnectedness of educational processes in ways that are perceived and operate, like sounds, above and below our perceptions.

In sum, sonic ethnography is the use of sound-as-method, both literally and metaphorically, in ways that echo understandings about what ethnography is and how it should function in practice. What sounds bring to the table are understandings, modes of information

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gathering, consideration, and expression, as well as tools for disrupting assumptions about ethnographic and educational practices.

Links to Digital Materials

In addition to files associated with the publications named throughout this article, a rotating set of examples from a variety of sources can be found at the following URL: <http://www.waltersgershon.com/#!sonic-ethnography>

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Notes:

(1.) “Post-next” is an overarching term I have come to apply to this most recent round of post-post turns, including post-human and post-qualitative.

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