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### [Review] Re-view of Sonic Ethnography

Maria Fernandez Pello

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# [Review] Re-view of Sonic Ethnography

Maria Fernandez Pello

Ferrarini, L., & Scaldaferrri, N. (2020). *Sonic ethnography: Identity, heritage and creative research practice in Basilicata, southern Italy*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7765/9781526151988>

*Sonic Ethnography* is about sound in relation. Drawing from years of research in the southern Italian region of Basilicata, Ferrarini and Scaldaferrri present a series of sound-making and listening practices that result from complex social and historical networks and decades of shared aesthetic experiences. The events and practices explored by the authors put into perspective the ramified relations between people and sound, as well as the impossibility of attending to the sonic experience without attending to other types of relations, such as those between people and places, history, institutions, technology, and a myriad of other material and immaterial forces. Within this context, sound becomes an embodied, vibrational force, that brings communities together and participates in their continuous compositions and decompositions. Sound-making and listening practices are presented as deeply entangled and layered ways of being in and configuring the world.

In the continuous relationality of these events, sound emerges as a medium through which unexpected things happen, a force located in-between human and nonhuman agents, simultaneously responding to and changing them. In the book, the sonic is not a fully defined phenomenon but rather a shared sense of emergence, marking a change of mood, generating intuitions, demarcating space and bodies, charging the mind with images from the past, guiding movement and sentiment. The sonic draws attention to the continuous making and unmaking of cultural events that emanate from bodies while at the same time surpassing them. Individual lungs singing, praying, playing, dancing, and breathing together into a collective body. In the shared process of sounding in and out to the world, the social is continuously remade.

Ferrarini and Scaldaferrri make their intentions clear from the beginning: they intend to do research "in and through" the sonic medium (p. 22), always attentive to its embeddedness in a realm of relations. Listening, in this sense, becomes also a way of relating, something that places the individual within historical and aesthetic networks through the act of perception. And in *Sonic Ethnography*, everyone listens: the researchers, the musicians, the festival participants, the streets, priests and devotees, emigrants and their families, and of course, the reader.

Sound is undeniably a central theme in the book, which affords the discovery of many unexpected and generative ways of thinking about what sound does and what it allows people to do. Throughout the chapters, the authors explore concepts such as "sound mask", "sound souvenir", "sonic identity and disintegration", or "sonic devotion", among others. By looking at different instances within cultural sonic performances, Ferrarini and

Scaldaferri explore ways in which the production of sound becomes a means to achieve something, such as controlling how people listen or performing identity in the darkness. At the same time, they reflect on how sound-making can be used to “wash” the streets and purify the public space of negative influences, protecting those who are listening from the violence of past memories. Dancing to certain sounds can connect one to an imagined community, while recording voices and transporting them across the ocean can produce mediated memories and rituals of listening. In its capacity to mediate, sound also becomes a tool for fruitful provocation capable of calling forth extraordinary voices and fostering unexpected collaborations.

In *Sonic Ethnography*, sound mediates the relation of people to other people, to places, to their memories, to absence, to animals and the landscape, to divinities and the sacred, to photographs and machines, to wheat. Sound also mediates the relation of tradition to invention, of power to control, of individuals to communities. Through these mediated relations, manifestations of material culture reveal intrinsic connections to sensed phenomena, devotion becomes entangled with the pursuit of benefit, and struggle is transformed into shared meaningful emotion.

Authorship and representation are purposely blended in an attempt to present the ethnographic, too, as a set of relations. Drawing on their work as photographer and musician respectively, Ferrarini and Scaldaferri build upon their artistic practice to present and reflect on their ethnographic experiences, and to engage in multiple collaborations with others. Aesthetically attuned and working with a dialogic ethic, the authors make use of their artistic practice not only to expand their arguments but also to suggest new ways of making them. They ask us to follow the rhythm of a photographic series or to listen to the arguments conveyed in an edited soundtrack. In doing so, they also draw attention to the deep relation that exists between artistic endeavor, academic inquiry, and shared sensory experience.

In fact, through its mix of sound-chapters, photo-ethnography, and ethnographic text, *Sonic Ethnography* is in itself an enactment of relationality and an invitation to relate. The book transforms its readers into relation-seekers, inviting them to engage with different media in “synaesthetic montage” (p. 184), and encouraging them to become aware of the relations that they produce in the experience of texts, sounds, and photographs. It is through a personal transformation from a simple reader into a reader-listener-viewer that one starts to grasp the “fragmentary and multisensory nature of experience” (p. 18) that the authors convey in their research as well as in their own role as ethnographers, artists, and sensory-attuned bodies. And in so doing, one is invited to engage in what Steven Feld identifies as one of the book’s most radical potentials: its capacity to “work cumulatively” at the “conjunctions, disjunctions, overlaps, and interplays” of sound in relation (p. 188).

**Maria Fernandez-Pello** is a Ph.D. student of anthropology at the University of Texas at Austin. Her work often involves experiments with film, photography, and mixed media. Maria's research interests include soil-human relationships, affect, speculative nonfiction, and the uncanny. Prior to attending UT, she received her MA in Visual Anthropology from the University of Manchester. **Web:** <https://cargocollective.com/mariafdezpello>