

Julian Henriques. 2011. *Sonic Bodies: Reggae Sound Systems, Performance Techniques, and Ways of Knowing*. New York: Continuum.

Reviewed by Seth Mulliken

The evolution of sound studies over the past decade has been rapid. It would be wrong to say that sound studies is 'arriving': it has arrived. But this arrival has not brought with it even a tacit agreement about its place in the academy, and more specifically, within cultural studies. More than likely, this has to do with a lack of agreement about what precisely is being studied. While a comparison to visual studies for sound studies is specious at best, the field of visual studies has long ago ossified into cells of academic interest. Sound studies seems under no such threat of atrophy. As such, books that challenge the boundaries of sound studies continue to appear and examine the diverse roles sound plays in social life. The most cursory glance through the introduction of Julian Henriques' *Sonic Bodies: Reggae Sound Systems, Performance Techniques, and Ways of Knowing* reveals a list of scholarly names familiar to any reader of sound studies: Douglas Kahn, Jonathan Sterne, Les Bull, Michael Bull, Mark Katz. Despite the familiarity of these names, *Sonic Bodies* describes sound studies as a field that offers much variation and dispersion across many areas sites and methods of analysis.

But what is sound, exactly? Is sound what happens in the ears, in the brain, or at the surface of the door slamming shut? Sound is buried under a simultaneous denial and responsibility, and it carries information that is crucial to the social and political life of the subject in modernity. Some scholars, such as Jonathan Sterne in *The Audible Past*, (2003) are unconcerned with what precisely sound is (or, more accurately, where sound happens) than with the ways that sound interacts with political history of technological development. In contrast, Veit Erlman, in *Reason and Resonance* (2010) is concerned with the history of the ear. Like Sterne, Erlman goes to great lengths to question, and in some cases reverse, the image of the passive ear. However, he still depends an essential morphological functioning to the ear, distinct from dynamic processes of sound interpretation. These two examples represent a relatively small continuum of sound studies, but they do illustrate what flows beneath the field: a radical multiplicity as to what constitutes sound.

Henriques' book is, in part, an expansion of an article published in Bull and Back's *The Auditory Culture Reader* (2003). In "Sonic Dominance and

the Reggae Sound System,” Henriques explores events where he feels sound supplants vision as the dominant sensory modality; he cites the large-scale sporting event and the Reggae Sound System as examples. The earlier article is concerned primarily with the experience of sonic dominance, and how it can bring about a shared politics, in opposition to the visual dominance, which is often used to articulate a hierarchal politics. In *Sonic Bodies*, Henriques deepens his analysis, using the experience of being present at a live DJ event to create a theory of thinking through sound. While his site of analysis is the Reggae Sound System, he is concerned with establishing a theoretical basis for thinking *through* sound.

As a process, thinking through sound is distinct from thinking about sound. Henriques says that there is something distinct and unique about a sounding way of thinking, something that is dynamic in opposition to the static nature of the visual and the image. Sounding has a unique relationship to embodiment; sound is a full-bodied sensory experience, one that engulfs and envelopes. In his introduction, Henriques goes to great lengths to avoid the snare of sound as related to instinct and emotion, and proposes that the envelopment by sound is a different way of thinking.

Sonic Bodies reads like three different books weaving through, into, and out of one another. Rather than a precise threading process, the book can sometimes feel like the weaving of satin thread, linguini, and a garden hose into a fascinatingly odd scarf. The introduction positions the book firmly in a cultural studies tradition; Homi K. Bhabha and Stuart Hall, amongst others, are cited as sources for thinking about culture and identity. He says that the book is the result of four years of participation and observation of the Stone Love Movement—a group of DJs, MCs, and performers. The discussion of his observations creates one of the threads. While *Sonic Bodies* is not strictly an ethnography in the way that Louise Meintjes’ *Sound of Africa!* is, it does incorporate interviews and thick descriptions about the sound system at work. A reference to Geertz and a delicate empiricism in the middle of the text supports the ethnographic techniques at work. The ethnographic portion addresses what he refers to as the sociocultural and corporeal aspects of sound thinking; they form a triangle with the material aspect that will be crucial to the conclusion.

The second book at work inside *Sonic Bodies* is one that might be called a textual/historical analysis. This is what Henriques refers to as the material aspect of the sound thinking. Henriques provides fascinating descriptions of the construction of speakers and cabinets to best project the sound of the system into the street, into the public space. Throughout this section, his focus is on the skillfulness of the sound system creators, displaying the specific and sophisticated levels of creation at work in the sound system.

While race is not his focus, *Sonic Bodies* does contribute to the field of critical race theory. One of the more unsettling strains that runs through discourses of ethnographic musicology is the way in which non-Western, non-white, non-European musical creations are characterized as the result of “instinct” and “natural” ability. While this might reflect some of the complex ways non-Western music might relate to culture outside of the capitalist context, it also frames those musics as lacking in skill or intellect, as the product of a kind of savagery. This feeds and strengthens racism towards the non-White, non-Western world, a racism that has ceased to be erased over the past century. Henriques’ discussion of technological skill and knowing creation makes excellent strides against that too-common subtext. In highlighting the technological skill of the sound system selectors and MCs, Henriques challenges the notion that music made by people of color, particularly music that involves a crucial interaction with machines, such as hip-hop or modern R & B, is neither skilled or innovative. He describes the process of building the sound system from the construction of the wooden speaker cabinets to the choosing of a public space to perform. Framing the sound system as the result of skilled and precise creation processes allows Henriques to make a larger point, that is, that the sound system is a political act of creating a sound space within which a community might interact. For Henriques, the sonic dominant space, a space like that which the sound system creates, offers a chance to engage in the sharing of space, rather than controlling space. So, for the communities he is concerned with, the Jamaican designers and selectors of the sound system, as well as the audiences of young and older folks who attend the sound system, they become agents, and engagement with the sound system is an expression of identity. And this is a clear challenge to ethnomusicology that sees the “other,” here, the reggae musician and reggae music fans, as only unconscious vehicles of tradition. It is in this point that the book makes his clearest contribution to ethnomusicology. This is how he can make the claim that “(t)he sound system itself should be ranked as one of popular culture’s major achievements, anywhere in the world (2011; 3).”

Henriques willingly engages a perspective that troubles some inquiries in sound studies: the idea of sound as “radical” or subversive in itself. Scholars such as Erlmann are skeptical of such a claim, worried that it is a short journey away from replacing one dominant discourse, that of the visual, with another, the auditory, without questioning the politics of oppressive power at work. For Henriques, however, sound itself contains the possibility of a radical politics, a politics that can move beyond “habitual patterns of visual thought (2011; xx).” This is what makes Henriques’ theories most compelling; the idea that a politics based on sounding does still possess a power to “strike at the heart of Western metaphysics (2011; xxix).”

The final two chapters of the book, chapters 8 and 9, are the most curious; they create the third book contained in *Sonic Bodies*. Although mentions of classical rhetoric theory weave spectrally through the introduction, they don't necessarily figure in the body of the text. Similar to bass's resonance in the sound system, this final chapter strikes the reader by altering the theoretical landscape of the text. The ethnographic and explanatory examples almost completely disappear, replaced by explications of rhetorical theory. He differentiates the Shannon–Weaver model of communication from rhetorical theory; he says that it is only classical rhetorical theory that can account for the affective persuasion that occurs in the sensory impact of the MC's voice. (207)

It should be noted here that Henriques ignores the growing body of literature in cultural studies on affect by scholars such as Brian Massumi (2003), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2004), Sara Ahmed (2004), Lauren Berlant (2011), as well as ethnographic work that deals with the sensory, such as Sarah Pink (2009). Rhetoric, at least, the classical rhetoric that Henriques' is interested in, doesn't figure in the work of Massumi, Pink, or other scholars of communication, affect, and the sensible. Equally, these scholars attempt to employ models of communication and interaction far different from the Shannon–Weaver model. Classical rhetoric offers Henriques a theoretical bounding that doesn't threaten the exclusivity of the individual—the subject. Henriques' sonic body rests on the idea of a stable, autonomous subject, one capable of agency. For Massumi and scholars of a similar thought, the move toward a fragmented body, suggested by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in their text *A Thousand Plateaus*, is a crucial step away from Shannon and Weaver.

In the afterword, Henriques states that one of the criticisms of thinking through sound, as he defines it, “is that it makes vibrations inescapable (277).” This allows a move, he says, from a discursive question, that is, how does the sound system work, to what it produces. He says that *Sonic Bodies* has been more focused on the former, but that he hopes further research moves more toward the latter (277). Where the preceding chapters dealing with classical rhetoric might seem almost “creaky,” in the afterword he opens up the applicable possibilities for his theory. He is saying, to summarize, that his text has offered a foundation in a discursive method that sets the stage for a move beyond it. Rather than showing how bodies express waves, this next turn can explore how waves produce bodies (277).

Henriques' text is not easily summarized. It sits uncomfortably on the knife-edges of various contested disciplinary boundaries: rhetoric and cultural studies, ethnography and textual analysis, sound studies and musicology. It is a cultural studies text that concludes with an attempt to

link to classical rhetorical theory. It uses ethnographic techniques but never addresses questions of method. It is concerned with music, but doesn't address musicology. Henriques' book is, quite frankly, strange. But it is in this strangeness that it questions the usefulness of the various disciplines it scratches. *Sonic Bodies* might even be thought of as a quintessential sound studies text: it never quite touches down and ossifies its theoretical questions. On the last page, it is left rather ambiguous what a sonic body is exactly, or how it is constituted. Maybe it is in texts like these, those that implicitly invite further questions and analysis, where a quasi-field like sound studies can flourish. The incompleteness of Henriques' book is what, in the end, makes it compelling, leaving scholars of sound, music, and the culture of technology to explore where the analysis might go from where Henriques leaves off.

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