Sounding Conflict: From Resistance to Reconciliation

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Sounding Conflict: From Resistance to Reconciliation, a research project exploring the contribution of sound-based creative arts to peace building using case studies from the across three continents is brought together by five authors from the fields of anthropology, politics, literature, and sonic arts, led by Fiona Magowan from Queens University Belfast. The work aims to analyse conflict-based case studies from the perspective of all forms of sound, including storytelling, music making, and the non-verbal. The resulting collection of mixed methods research and expert critique highlight the wealth of possibilities within the sound-based arts and peacebuilding sphere, driven by an awareness of the complexities of considering arts-based approaches as a cohesive field of study.

Arts based processes, often complex and relational, are challenging to define and the significance of this work within peacebuilding is "yet to be fully realised" (Hunter and Page, 2014: 117). Within the context of sound studies, a framework for the study of conflict transformation is also not yet fully embedded, however "Sounding Conflict" provides a workable context by bringing together a number of case studies for analysis from across conflict situations in the Middle East, Northern Ireland and Brazil and centralising ideas of trust within a framework of resistance, resilience and reconciliation. The book begins with a thorough theoretical grounding, attempting to contextualise the work within the myriad scope of sound studies and arguing for the importance of sound in finding new meanings by providing analytical backdrop for the use of listening as a tool for transformation,

spotlighting theorists such as Steven Connor's ideas on the formation of the "auditory self" as way of understanding the world. This critique on listening feels particularly inspired, drawing together diverse existing literature from Cage and Schaeffer's ideas on the "active" and nuanced nature of listening, including Chris McRae's ideas of "performative listening", to Oliveros and Nhat Hanh's work on deep and contemplative listening and the meaning of sound in the context of community as explored in the work of theorists such as Brandon La Belle. These ideas are posited alongside references to contemporary sound art to create an inspiring narrative backdrop on how, through listening, we might "develop more complex understandings of each other in appreciating each other's humanity and presence in the world" (174).

Following the outline of the mixed methodology approach (including observation, narrative interviews, and creative methods) the case studies follow as five separately authored chapters each focusing on one of the core initial themes. The first Lebanese case study looks at many forms of resistance, most notably nuanced meanings around "everyday" resistance, including exposing some of the important related discourse on vulnerability. This section is primarily narrative and storytelling driven with a short passage on the impact of music. Resilience is further explored within the work of Musicians Without Borders, including evaluation of its development with useful emphasis on the experience of the facilitators (is healing not a two-way process?) including the importance of playfulness and non-verbal sound as a mechanism for creating trust and opening the creative space. Further chapters include collaborative storytelling through the lens of remediation as part of a closer look at the work of Mary Kouyoumdjian, and investigation of themes of reconciliation within Northern Irish Theatre. These examples emphasise shared experiences through use of music, verbal contributions, and sound design, created by both professionals and amateurs within art-based contexts.

Examples move quickly across theatre and group improvisation to composer—led case studies, sometimes bringing a sense that the study is too broad as all five authors often return to forefronting the complexity of identifying how and where transformation occurs in these "indeterminate and liminal" (95) processes. The nature of "participation" within participatory art is closely questioned at various points within the book, and many forms of positive experiences around working with sound (beyond performance) are outlined. Tired metaphors of bringing "harmony" to conflict situations are critiqued, especially within the final chapter which brings further focus to the fragmented narratives and contradictions inherent within the field. This multifaceted and reflexive approach highlights the breadth, depth, and variety of impact alongside the inherent adaptability within these approaches; these varying processes (e.g., composer led, theatrical, storytelling based) are adept at moving with and beyond the needs of a community at a given time in typically unpredictable circumstances.

The final chapter describes and reflects on a performance made as a creative response to the key themes of the book, by Pedro Rebelo in collaboration with Matilde Meireles and Patrick O'Reily (Director of Tinderbox Theatre Company). This abstract and imaginative filmed work (available on YouTube) also draws in creative insights from a project run by Rebelo in Rio de Janeiro that uses sonic art to explore ideas of identity, territory, and community. This creative output feels like a fitting way to highlight the core ideas of the research alongside the written

conclusion, emphasising the sometimes abstracted nature of creative response and therefore inherently demonstrating the problematic nature of a streamlined approach or set of solutions, whilst still underlining the magnitude and depth of substance possible through engagement with artistic work within conflict contexts.

I would consider whether future comparative studies regarding participatory approaches might highlight the direct effectiveness of such work when placed alongside more fixed political and socio-economic models e.g., how exactly does group improvisation inform group empathy and connection? Is there a preferred method by which resistant and resonant responses to generated sounds might be worked through individually or collectively? There is potential for further exploration of ideas around embodied response (particularly with regards to listening) and work that places further emphasis on the impact of environmental sound on transformative processes, as seen in the work of Leah Barclay. There is also potential to grow understanding within the growing realm of aural diversity (see work of Andrew Hughill) especially in relation to sound and trauma, to bring even further detail and clarity to the affective power of the soundscape.

The lack of consensus around use of lexicon can sometimes add to the challenge of providing more distinctive outlines and descriptions of arts-based work and its outcomes. In the book's introduction, critique of the term "soundscape" is highlighted, as not fully encompassing ideas of the musical and performative. Later the conclusion returns to it as a mechanism for exploring interconnectedness, autonomy, and re-imagining but also proposes the concept of "sonic re-imagining" as a potentially much more useful term in summarising the potential ways in which "listening, engagement, storytelling and sound making" (187) can help to imagine alternative futures and draw together changing perspectives on the past. It may be wrong to try to fix terminology and situate the practices as a cohesive field, in the understanding that "the reworking and listening through sounds and stories of conflict does not produce a coherent hegemonic narrative" and "Why should it?" (171). As Rebelo goes on to suggest in his final chapter, perhaps this is a book less about sounding conflict and more about listening to it. While, inevitably, the study of arts-based processes within the context of peacebuilding has miles yet to travel, this work brings (much needed) weight to the arguments of how and why working with the arts can "enable conflict-affected communities to become alive to the idea of possibility" (Hunter and Page, 2014: 132) through contextualising and platforming the vital and compelling transformative potential of sonic reimagining.

References

Hunter, M. A. and Page, L. (2014) 'What is "the good" of arts-based peacebuilding? Questions of value and evaluation in current practice.' *Peace and Conflict Studies*, 21(2): 117–134.