Julian Henriques

*Sonic Bodies: Reggae Sound Systems, Performance Techniques, and Ways of Knowing.*


In the preamble to *Sonic Bodies*, Julian Henriques explains that his “entire approach and orientation is one of thinking through sound.” He suggests that the recent advent of sound reproduction technology, in contrast to centuries of written language, confronts academia with the need to incorporate some “ways of knowing” that are associated with auditory communication more than with visual communication. This perspective has important implications for the way we think of “knowledge,” suggesting, for example, that knowledge resides in the body as well as in the mind, that knowledge includes relationships with people and things, not just ideas about people and things, and that knowledge resides in street culture as much as it resides in academic culture. Henriques’s ambition is to attempt “a mode of Cultural Studies that is itself auditory, as distinct to one that has audition as its object of investigation” (p. xxvi). This is an intriguing challenge for a book that is meant to be read, not heard. Although he raises important questions in the process, I am not convinced he has succeeded.

Henriques begins by describing a model of “auditory propagation” that considers instrument, medium, and techniques. As he describes the work of the Stone Love Movement, the sound system and crew with whom he worked most closely, he extends and transforms his propagation model into numerous other “three-fold relationships,” including material/corporeal/sociocultural, engineer/selector/MC, cut/mix/rewind, and more. The concept of “triangulation” is used throughout to analyze dynamic relationships, and to transcend the dichotomies of conventional academic thinking. Accordingly, the book is organized into three parts (each of which is in turn divided into three chapters): “The Audio Engineer and the Material Waveband,” “The Selector and the Corporeal Waveband,” and “The MC and the Sociocultural Waveband.”

Part I describes the work of the audio engineer, which is critical for the functioning and the distinctive sound of every sound system. I especially like this part of the book because it contains the most quotes from the research subjects, explaining in their own words what they are concerned with and what they do. Here Henriques also articulates the concept of “sounding” and its implications for research methodology. He compares “sounding” to “musicking,” a term coined by musicologist Christopher Small (1998) to explain music in terms of human behavior and relationships, instead of treating it as an objectifiable work or score. Given this emphasis on relationships, Henriques argues that an
analysis of “sounding” requires a research methodology of engagement, dialogue, and participation (pp. 99–116). Furthermore, if we conceive knowledge to be embodied and relational, it is important for “our own subjectivity ... to be recognised and appreciated” (p. xix). This principle remains largely theoretical in Sonic Bodies, though—a concern to which I will return below.

Part II describes the work of the selector, who monitors the energy of the crowd and “shapes the session” by choosing which records to play when. Henriques stresses that playing records in this way is more than the simple reproduction of sound, and that the selector’s role challenges “traditional distinctions between production and consumption” (p. 159). He refers to the three-fold audio propagation model as a more useful way to analyze the complex intertwinings of production, consumption, and the broader context in which they occur (p. 159). He cites scholars of hip hop culture, as well as a litany of European and Greek philosophers (especially in Chapter 6, “Cut, Mix ‘n’ Rewind”) to locate the arts of the selector—and the sound system in general—in relation to other aesthetic traditions.

Part III focuses on the work of the MC, and elaborates the concept of sonic logos to describe words that are embodied and sounded. Henriques notes some specific techniques of the MC (in particular DJ Squeeze), including riding the riddim, toasting and tracing, and conducting choir. His major concern in these final three chapters, however, is theoretical. Utilizing the Jamaican sound system as a springboard, he challenges the European paradigm of mind/body separation, arguing that the sounding and embodiment of words gives them meaning that they would not have in their abstract written form. He also challenges the separation of knowing from doing, and argues that the “practical” techniques of the sound system crew—the MC, selector, and audio engineer—should not be seen as lesser than the “formal epistemic systems of knowledge” favored by academics (p. 215). The concepts of triangulation and relationality are repeatedly emphasized here.

I agree with Henriques’s concern that academia should value the sonic logos alongside the written word, should make room for embodied knowledge, and should connect knowing with doing. But I’m less sure how well this book helps us take on those challenges. After proposing at the outset to think through sound, and advocating a research methodology of engagement, relationship, and reflexivity, Henriques spends more time than he needs to talking about European scholars and ideas. His main concern seems to be that DJ techniques should be taken seriously as art and culture, but he argues for this in very academic terms, and with less ethnographic detail than I expected. Sonic Bodies does not fulfill his promise to model a new approach to scholarship. It does not feel to me like thinking through sound, and it tells us little about Henriques’s
embodied engagement in the dance hall—a strange omission given his theoretical arguments about embodied and relational knowledge.

On balance this book seems more engaged with academic culture than with sound system culture. “It is an indication of how wide the chasm between thinking and doing has become,” Henriques writes in the epilogue, “that skilled techniques should be recognised as anything other than philosophy in practice. This is possibly the most important conclusion to be drawn from the research findings—the extent to which they emphasize the significance of evaluation in the crew’s skilled techniques and performance” (p. 275, emphases mine). I am left wondering how Sonic Bodies “sounds” to the philosophers of the Stone Love Movement, and how they would evaluate it.

Shannon Dudley
Department of Ethnomusicology, University of Washington
Seattle WA 98195, U.S.A.
dudley@u.washington.edu

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