

## Book Review: Digital Sound Studies (2018)

Tracey El Hajj <tmelhajj\_at\_uvic\_dot\_ca>, University of Victoria

### Abstract

The edited volume *Digital Sound Studies* brings together various voices addressing the potential of digital approaches to sound, practically and theoretically [Lingold et al. 2018]. Contributors explore methodologies, platforms, and initiatives that demonstrate interdisciplinary and inclusive work that centers sound and listening while demonstrating how such work can advance humanities scholarship. The contributions provide a balanced critique of DH as a norm and culture alongside detailing digital sound studies' contributions to DH, the humanities, and the public. The volume is an excellent resource for those interested in digital sound studies.

*Digital Sound Studies*, edited by Mary Caton Lingold, Darren Mueller, and Whitney Trettien and published by Duke University Press (2018), brings together a variety of voices addressing the potential of digital approaches to sound, practically and theoretically. While most contributors acknowledge the field's novelty, they all agree on its timely interventions and the value of the interdisciplinary work this domain can provide. The field of digital sound studies not only investigates new methodologies but also contributes to — if not provokes — the field of digital humanities (DH). In their introduction, the editors note that "[w]hile digital media [...] create a space of possibility for the study of sound, critical, interpretive labor fulfills this potential, not the technology itself" [Lingold et al. 2018, 3]. This early statement in the book echoes throughout the collection, particularly as authors discuss their processes in the making and success of a particular project or sonic investigation. The projects emphasize the labour that scholars invest and the initiative they take to advance sound studies and experiment with material, using a multitude of technologies that do not require advanced technical skills or expensive devices. In the afterward, Whitney Trettien asks Jonathan Sterne about "the primary engine of change in the academy" [Lingold et al. 2018, 269]. It is not technology. Sterne argues that institutions, money, and academic fashion drive academic change, as is the case for DH. In this edited volume, scholars demonstrate how individual initiative and labour play a big part in pushing scholarship in innovative directions. Intellectual and experimental labour are predominant in the chapters as the authors question DH's bias for text, all the while exploring pedagogical methods and research techniques that invite scholars — as well as the broader public — to invest in sound and listening as cultural approaches to the humanities. *Digital Sound Studies* demonstrates how sound and listening can advance humanities scholarship, detailing pedagogical methodologies that are often critical of DH while addressing its gaps and proposing ways for sound studies and DH to be complementary.

Contributors to *Digital Sound Studies* mostly come from an academic setting, and pedagogy emerges as a focus. Although not every chapter clearly defines a pedagogical intervention or approach, most do gesture at the importance of digital sound studies in humanities classrooms. The three chapters in "Theories and Genealogies" — by contributors Richard Cullen Rath, Myron M. Beasley, and Jonathan W. Stone — investigate sound and listening as performance, and highlight the importance of interdisciplinarity in their works. Richard Cullen Rath explores the importance of introducing computers with sound cards to classrooms, and emphasizes how it "mak[es] more accessible the experiences of people who are not well represented in traditional documentary sources" [Lingold et al. 2018, 37]. In "The Pleasure (Is) Principle," Aaron Trammell, Jennifer Lynn Stoeber, and Liana Silva share their experience as editors of the *Sounding Out!* blog. Aside from their focus on the processes and maintenance that go into the site, the authors explain how *Sounding Out!* aims beyond academia. The team's work toward the accessibility of sound studies is partly a pedagogical gesture. *Sounding Out!*'s interdisciplinary content and multimodal format allow its audience to access and

hear multiple voices instead of a limited corpus of scholars whose work is already being broadly disseminated. Such an approach makes *Sounding Out!* a go-to platform for academics who share an investment in social justice and interdisciplinary conversations. Disseminating knowledge to the broader public, beyond institutional boundaries and inequities, is another timely issue that *Digital Sound Studies* addresses.

W. F. Umi Hsu also focuses on pedagogy in "Reprogramming Sounds of Learning," where the readers journey with the author's students as they work on their projects. The author successfully "propose[s] a series of experimental approaches that attempt to reprogram sounds back into learning and teaching" [Lingold et al. 2018, 131]. The chapter argues for the strong impact of sound on engaged learning, centralizing the learning experience on "the experience of sounding and listening" [Lingold et al. 2018, 134]. In that respect, Hsu explores three principles: "remediation, reflexivity, and resonance" [Lingold et al. 2018, 134]. These principles align well with media studies and bring forth key aspects of multimodality in pedagogy. Hsu further highlights the role of reflexivity in bringing pedagogy outside the classroom: "Deconstructing the recipe of how digital sound media are made via an act of remaking can afford students [...] to gain an access to personal and reflexive meanings of technology in their everyday lives" [Lingold et al. 2018, 139]. Hsu's methodology entails having college students work with elementary school students to fulfill their project requirements. This approach bridges academic work and everyday life through sound and listening, and fosters sonic curiosity and appreciation among elementary students along with their college partners. As Michael J. Kramer argues, "[t]he digital 'remediation' of the image [...] provides an opportunity to open ears as well as eyes more fully to the echoes of the past" [Lingold et al. 2018, 180]. Bringing together the visual and sonic study of artifacts is another example of active sensorial encounters with the material, proving as an effective means to engage a broad audience with diverse interests.

Beyond its contributions to pedagogy, *Digital Sound Studies* is an excellent resource for scholars looking to explore venues of accessible sound projects and the technological turn in the humanities. In "Rhetorical Folkness: Reanimating Walter J. Ong in the Pursuit of Digital Humanity," Jonathan W. Stone urges that "[a]s we look toward the future of digital sound studies, [...] frameworks, from secondary orality to digital humanity, usefully conceptualize the various ways contemporary vernacular culture is embedded within, performed through, and transformed by digital technology" [Lingold et al. 2018, 76]. In that sense, technological accessibility promotes a broad reach for investigating humanities subjects through sound, beyond the limits of academic institutions. In "Becoming OutKasted," Bradley discusses her initiative "OutKasted Conversations," a webcast series published on YouTube. This series managed to "creat[e] a digital site for teasing out how hip-hop can serve as a catalyst of change in the post-civil rights American South" [Lingold et al. 2018, 120]. The author highlights the work of the group, OutKast, as it addresses a variety of issues, "including race, gender, education, economics, spirituality vs. organized religion, sexuality, and identity" [Lingold et al. 2018, 122]. The series consists of interviews that engage with the music in question, as it offers a critical framework to exploring issues — listed above — to "speak to a wider audience than exists inside the classroom or between the pages of an academic journal" [Lingold et al. 2018, 127]. Similarly, the HiPSTAS institute is concerned with how new, accessible methods of sound studies and their infrastructure affect scholarship. The project's principal investigator, Tanya Clement, explores modes of tagging sound clips and the politics and histories that standard classifications entail, examining the TEI Transcription for Speech guidelines. Similarly, Joanna Swafford describes the process of creating *Augmented Notes* and how the platform intends to "build greater support for MEI (Music Encoding Initiative)" because "this additional functionality would increase the tool's interoperability and usefulness" [Lingold et al. 2018, 222]. The platforms and initiatives discussed in *Digital Sound Studies* aim to increase accessibility and provide more functionalities to sound studies scholars, all the while addressing the politics, histories, and cultures inherent to the field. In that sense, contributors raise important questions about DH in an attempt to provide ways for it and sound studies to work together, or at least in parallel.

Another common theme throughout *Digital Sound Studies* is DH and how — or whether — it can encompass sound studies. The main premise for such an inclusion is the use of technology. While DH and digital sound studies involve the use of technology, platforms and initiatives in this book seem to be asking for inclusion and acknowledgment within DH. For instance, Trammell, Stoeber, and Silva explain that "[b]ecause many bloggers like [them] use a digital platform created by someone else, the question of whether blogging really constitutes 'making' — a key but contested tenet of digital humanities — is a roiling debate. Of course, as this essay argues, [they] definitely think it does" [Lingold et al.

2018, 84]. Although I agree that making in DH has been the subject of various debates, projects like *Sounding Out!* — which is well established in sound studies — do not need to be acclaimed as DH projects to be scholarly interventions. Nevertheless, in calling for acknowledgment by DH, contributors to *Digital Sound Studies* extend an invitation for DH to be more inclusive. For example, Steph Ceraso "proposes several 'sound practices' that are intended to help scholars account for full embodied kinds of sensory engagement; these practices amplify the ecological relationship between sound, bodies, and environments" [Lingold et al. 2018, 251]. Such approaches promise a well-rounded undertaking of subject matter, beyond previously established intellectual biases. Further, in their introduction, Lingold, Mueller, and Trettien explain that scholars "worry that the [DH] field has a far too comfortable relationship with systems of power that cultural criticism has long sought to challenge," adding that "the text-centricity of the field [is] a bias that is baked into its institutional history" [Lingold et al. 2018, 9]. As discussed in this review, contributors to the book communicate the efforts needed for sound and listening to be more appreciated as methodologies in the humanities. For instance, the platforms and initiatives described in the book place great weight on having sound clips be part of scholarship.

*Digital Sound Studies* invites conversation around sound studies and its relationships with neighboring fields, mostly DH. Contributors explore methodologies, platforms, and initiatives that demonstrate interdisciplinary and inclusive work that centers sound and listening. The chapters also provide examples of how sound scholarship can reach a wider public than is accessible through academic journals. Rebecca Dowd Geoffroy-Schwinden argues that "[a] turn to diverse media in the presentation of audible history will encourage a vital rethinking of the performance of archival research as well as scholarly production and reception" [Lingold et al. 2018, 232]. This statement is yet another invitation for scholars to invest in the affordances of sound as a methodology towards advanced understandings of the humanities. As Sterne asserts in his interview, "what we need are deep and multidimensional infrastructures" [Lingold et al. 2018, 282]. *Digital Sound Studies* provides models of how to create such infrastructures. While I believe that this collection places more emphasis on DH than is necessary, the contributions provide a balanced critique of DH as a norm and culture while detailing digital sound studies' contributions to the humanities and the public. This edited volume is an excellent resource for people interested in non-conventional experiences that defy standard and mainstream methods of learning and teaching within the humanities. It invites critical thought from cultural, social, and artistic frameworks, with a sustained and sustainable focus on the potential of sound and listening.

## Works Cited

**Lingold et al. 2018** Lingold, Mary Caton, Darren Muller, and Whitney Trettien, eds. (2018). *Digital Sound Studies*. London: Duke University Press.