Brandon LaBelle. 2010. *Acoustic Territories: Sound Culture and Everyday Life*. New York and London: Continuum.

Reviewed by Luke Fischbeck

Where do sounds come from, and where do they go? is the framing question of *Acoustic Territories*: *Sound Culture and Everyday Life*, Brandon LaBelle's wide-ranging investigation into the function of sound as a binding, relational medium. This core query is answered with a series of gestures: self-touching, gesturing to the air, touching others. Over the book's course, LaBelle amply demonstrates how much about the acoustic paradigm can be read into this simple (silent) interaction: how sound—and listening—attaches us to one another and to our environments, and the ways in which these attachments are woven into the shared condition of the everyday.

In a book *about* subtle and fleeting connections, any attempts at narrative continuity seem overwrought. Often *Acoustic Territories* reads more as a collection of standalone essays—three of the six chapters presented here have appeared on their own and carry perceptible shifts in attention and scope—that, when placed together, seem to shatter into myriad discrete points of departure, courtesy of the great wealth of examples. Each fragment begs further interest. In some ways it follows from where LaBelle began in his 2006 historical survey of sound art practices, *Background Noise*, now juxtaposing case studies and theoretical writing on sound with examples of artistic intervention, intentionally blurring the already vague boundaries between "sound culture" and "sound art," traveling from site to site without historical linearity. In another sense the text is a targeted contribution to the slippery and expanding field of sound studies that examines "the exchanges between environments and the people within them as registered through aural experience" and takes into account the "careful consideration of the performative relations inherent to urban spatiality," proposing "sound studies as a practice poised to creatively engage these relations" (LaBelle 2010, xviii).

Is there any way to speak precisely about sound studies? Constructed as scaffolding onto an open-ended array of established fields (including musicology, sociology, history of art, performance studies, and the study of science and technology), it eschews strict formal boundaries, taking the shape of correlative networks. The 2010 Society for Ethnomusicology annual meeting, held in Los Angeles shortly after the publication of *Acoustic Territories*, took the theme "Sound Ecologies," foregrounding music's link to discussions of human rights, social action, identity, and environmental

Current Musicology, No. 90 (Fall 2010)

issues. The question of how an ethnomusicologists' study of sound is shaped by certain of sound's fundamental characteristics—transitory, relational, subjective—resonates with many:

> The study of sound, hailed as an "emerging field" for the last hundred years, exhibits a strong tendency to remain that way, always emerging, never emerged . . . whispering unobtrusively in the background while the main action occurs elsewhere. This would echo the position that most writers on the topic attribute to sound itself—constantly subjugated to the primacy of the visual, associated with emotion and subjectivity as against the objectivity and rationality of vision, seen as somehow more "natural" and less constructed as a mode of communication. (Hilmes 2005:249)

LaBelle identifies the revolutionary immanence of that thing which is always emerging. In writing *Acoustic Territories*, he repositions sound studies as radically engaged—a *listening* science with the potential to reveal sound's social materiality as it draws transformative meaning out of the background noise of the everyday:

> [W]hat is at stake for me is to explicate a position that is also already unfixed—a position that is in tune with the material and paradigmatic energy found within sound, that weave of intensity and ephemerality, of animate flexibility and charged spatiality, and importantly, within listening as a central and organizational perspective. It is my sense that an auditory paradigm is tacitly embedded within the contemporary condition and offers a compelling structure for elaborating what is already in play. (LaBelle 2010:xviii)

The problem at hand is the dual nature sound acquires when examined as social material: it is both a thing that can be pointed to and described—an ecological balance, a stasis, a shape that informs—and a binding process, continually in flux, rending and repairing, seeking out, affecting, resounding, and decaying. Conjuring a description of this elusive materiality, LaBelle writes in the foreword to his earlier book that:

> Sound is intrinsically and unignorably relational: it emanates, propagates, communicates, vibrates, and agitates; it leaves a body and enters others; it binds and unhinges, harmonizes and traumatizes; it sends the body moving; the mind dreaming, the air oscillating. It seeminly eludes definition, while having profound effect. (LaBelle 2006:ix)

By choosing to elaborate on those relational networks that arise through the act of listening, LaBelle avoids direct overlap with other contemporary investigations into the materiality of sound per se, such as David Toop's *Sinister Resonance* (2010, also published by Continuum)—which constructs

a history of listening, unpacking the literary and artistic use of sound as a metaphor for the intangible and uncanny. Whereas Toop's writing, with its engaging flow, approaches the feel of a lyrical memoir, *Acoustic Territories* operates through a kind of disruptive pulsing—forcing links between associated threads, doubling back on itself to reiterate a point, spiraling outwards to avoid easy conclusions.

Acoustic Territories is part of LaBelle's wider set of occupations: sound artist, publisher of Errant Bodies Press, and part of the curatorial project "Surface Tension" —all practices that emphasize direct engagement, collaboration, and site-specific experimentation. There is little evidence that LaBelle is content to occupy any kind of objective distance from which to construct an analytical framework for his subject matter, opting instead to situate his writing within what he terms the "relational frame" of listening, ". . . whose focus, clarity, and directness are endlessly supplemented and displaced by the subtle pulses, mishearings, and fragmentary richness of relating. That is to say, listening may be so intensely relational by operating as a *weak* model of subjectivity, to ultimately nurture more horizontal or distracted forms of experience" (LaBelle 2010:182–3). LaBelle, as a writer, is occupying Steven Connor's "Modern Auditory I," wherein "the self, defined in terms of hearing rather than sight, is a self imaged not as a point, but as a membrane; not as a picture, but as a channel through which voices, noises and musics travel" (Connor 1997:207).

What is most interesting here is the confluence of LaBelle's choice of style—itinerant, associative, disjunctive, and yet forcefully intentional—and the subject matter at hand. How is it possible to write about sound culture and everyday life, to stay focused, to decide where to begin and where to end, what to include (and exclude)? LaBelle makes it clear that this problem of focus, inherent in the act of listening, is precisely what guides his investigation on its wild path:

> [T]he ear veers and slips, focuses and drifts; I follow your words, and at times, I grow distracted, by the sounds outside, by my own thinking. Rather than strictly occupy the clear channel, the center of language, to engage the primary spatial event, listening imparts meaningful experiences through a fluctuation of focus that brings one in and around the mass and verve of so much sonic materiality, of otherness. The audible spatiality of the near and the far endlessly shifts attention from what is in front to what is behind, bringing the abstract and the concrete, the said and the unsaid into fruitful contact. (LaBelle 2010:184)

In order to trace this contact with otherness that listening promises to open, LaBelle moves through a series of shifts in scale, with each chapter devoted to a particular type of site: underground, home, sidewalk, street, shopping mall, and sky. By approaching each site as a virtual and actual space, LaBelle engages cultural, philosophical, and environmental aspects of urban life, leaving ample room for both concrete examples and free association. "Underground," for instance, becomes a space for subway buskers, air-raid shelters, resistance fighters, and reverberating cisterns, but also for a construction of self by way of the "acousmatic" echo-making, as:

> ... Every sound [is] a voice that breaks from its source to become something greater, more powerful and suggestive, a sound no longer bound to earth. That is to say, the echo is a sound that comes back to haunt, returning as transformed through its diffusion and ultimate regrouping into an altogether different expression. *The echo delivers our own alter-ego.* (15)

Beginning here, and continuing throughout the book, LaBelle strategically employs "the particular effect of 'decentering' focus ... to bring forward an entire scene" (40) that he is identifying as a property of the acousmatic event, in which sound is experienced without reference to any identifiable source. From the underground, there is a disjunctive shift into the home or, more broadly, the psychic state of home. Following Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space* (1969), LaBelle describes home as "a syntax for commonality, placed in contrast to the verve of urban life and all its differentiating fragments" (49). In examining the ways in which sound creates territories—in particular the contrast between public and private space—LaBelle presents one of the book's most beautifully explicated arguments. Calling for a more nuanced understanding of the spectrum between silence and noise, he invites the reader to rethink the "simple formulation that 'noise is a form of acoustic violence,'" thereby "considering how silence might also perform violently" (80) when used "to separate, ward off, and contain" (66). In defense of sound's potential to produce fruitful connections, even as it creates conflict, LaBelle invokes Emmanuel Levinas's understanding of responsibility as beginning in face-to-face confrontation with one another, as well as Chantal Mouffe's "agonistic space," in which the unresolved tension of confrontation serves as a requisite platform for plurality, discourse, and democracy.

The third chapter, "Sidewalk: Steps, Gait, and Rhythmic Journey-Forms," introduces the aspect of scale and charts the relationships between bodies and their surroundings, from immediate physical contact to entrainment within global patterns. LaBelle does well to apply the acoustic paradigm to theoretical writing that does not explicitly refer to sound, from philosopher Michel de Certeau's view of walking as a means of re-writing that which

has been inscribed on the body by the built environment; through urban theorist Jane Jacobs's description of the sidewalk as a mediating space; to the "journey-form" where, as Nicholas Bourriaud writes in *The Radicant*, "the finding of forms takes place through the composition of a line of flight, or even a program of translation, more than the elaboration of a plane or volume" (Bourriaud 2009:114).

The extended metaphor of the car is the basis for chapter four, "Street: Auditory Latching, Cars, and the Dynamics of Vibration," in which the machine becomes a sensing and signifying extension of the skin (and the self) and, as a heavily constructed interior space, a stand-in for exterior soundscapes. LaBelle's term "auditory latching" expands on Tia DeNora's study of the ways in which music provides the listener with scaffolding for an embodied awareness, describing the tactile sensation of listening that connects us to the material world. By placing focus on the physicality of sound at the threshold of hearing, as vibrations felt across the body, LaBelle arrives at a definition of listening in terms of a total engagement between individual and environment, albeit an engagement which remains fluid, in motion.

Having established the various dynamics by which sound engenders contact between listeners—through confrontation or echo, through direct or mediated engagement with the environment—LaBelle enters into an in-depth discussion of distracted listening, or the way meaning is constructed out of a shared, ambiguous background. Chapter five, "Shopping Mall: Muzak, Mishearing, and the Productive Volatility of Feedback," returns to the foundational work of R. Murray Schafer and Barry Truax in the field of "acoustic ecology"—specifically, the characterization of our connection to the sounds that surround us as through a communicational feedback network—in order to better understand the poetics of sound, how it sustains complexity even in its instability:

> . . . As a communicative medium sound carries information that is inherently temporal and evanescent—it can only communicate by always already disappearing *into* the environment. It thus supplies communication with a vital medium—*to truly hear the world and each other*—while unsettling signification with instability—*to listen is to also confront the voluptuous richness of ambiguity.* (LaBelle 2010:200)

In its ambiguity, sound's elliptical and expansive qualities find productive interaction with the background material of "the everyday," a term which, in LaBelle's usage, draws implicitly from the work of Henri Lefebvre, who describes "the most universal and the most unique condition, the most social and the most individuated, the most obvious and the best hidden.

A condition stipulated for the legibility of forms, ordained by means of functions, inscribed within structures" (Lefebvre 1987:9). It is to LaBelle's credit that throughout *Acoustic Territories* he is able to convey the effect of this ever-present ambiguity by means of concrete examples—alarm bells, pedestrian sounds, the development of muzak (and its parallels with musique concrete)—and leaps from site to site without succumbing to the desire to neatly contain what he finds within a larger descriptive framework. As Paul Carter writes in *Ambiguous Traces, Mishearing and Auditory Space*, "Auditory space is durational, but it lacks music's (and writing's) commitment to linear development. Without a sense of ending, it is not located between silences" (Carter 2004;59).

The book's final chapter—an ethereal fantasy on radiophonic space, projected subjectivities, spirit recording, and utopian transmissions—leaves behind the physical aspects of acoustic space. By stripping sonic materiality of its connection to bodies and the built environment, LaBelle creates an inversion (acutely shown here in the example of the "unitary urbanism" advocated by Constant Nieuwenhuys and the Situationist International), in which the immanent forms and itinerant networks implied by sound frame the construction of a city in flux and always at play.

Without a clear conclusion or resolved tautology, *Acoustic Territories* functions best as a proposal for a mode of listening (and writing about listening) that "considers that sounds begin and end in noise" (Carter 2004:62). For "noise . . . may feature as a communicational link by supporting the passing of often difficult or challenging messages . . . heard to give form to the radically formless, creating space for the intensities of diversity, strangeness, and the unfamiliar" (LaBelle 2010:xxiii). By locating this space, LaBelle creates an echoing chamber for Henri Lefebvre's message in *Critique of Everyday Life*:

> It is then that consciousness of alienation—that strange awareness of the strange—liberates us, or begins to liberate us, from alienation. This is the truth. And at the moment of truth we are suddenly disorientated by others and by ourselves. To look at things from an alien standpoint—externally and from a reasonable distance—is to look at things truly. (Lefebvre 1991:20)

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