

Review

J. Martin Daughtry, *Listening to War: Sound, Music and Survival in Wartime Iraq* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 360pp, £17.99.

Listening to War is an original if deeply idiosyncratic book. It is in some ways a breakthrough achievement in sound studies, providing among other things a model for how ethnographic interrogations of contemporary political events might be carried out. Its focus is on 'wartime Iraq', a term that the author takes to mean Iraqi cities during a period from the US-led invasion on 20 March 2003 until roughly December 2011, when the last foreign combat troops left the country. Before considering the book in detail, it may be worth pausing briefly over these spatial and temporal coordinates, which define the arena of violent sounds under consideration. Some readers might, for example, take issue with the unqualified use of 'war' in this context. Such a term can be misleading when applied to the time after the fall of Tikrit (Saddam Hussein's hometown) and the capitulation of the Iraqi Army on 30 April 2003: that is, to a prolonged period of foreign military occupation, often characterised by violent resistance from radical elements, notably from so-called Islamic State. Given *Listening to War*'s overwhelming focus on events that occurred after the brief struggle between national armies, the book might rather have been called 'Listening to Occupation'. Such rebranding would have clarified two things. First, the book's interest in two kinds of listener: occupying soldiers who saw active service in Iraq (almost exclusively American ones; coalition allies are largely exempted from inspection) on the one hand; Iraqi civilians on the other. For reasons that are easy to imagine, but that are not discussed, insurgent militants do not receive much attention in this book (an exception is on pp. 263-267). Second, 'occupation' would have made clear the type of 'war' at issue: namely, that endured by a largely peaceful population and its cohabitation with the world's most powerful military force. While Daughtry does acknowledge that the American presence in Iraq was a military 'occupation' (p. 45), the word itself fades into the background when it comes to theorizing sound in wartime more generally. The muting of one word in favour of a rough synonym may seem a minor concern. Yet, 'war' is made to bear a heavy load as it reappears throughout the book: it provides the crux that enables Daughtry's ethnographic

methods to commute with his sonic theorizing—often allowing for a frictionless transition between discussion of particular experiences of (extremely varied) sounds and a concerted effort to understand ‘wartime sound’. In what follows, I will largely abide by Daughtry’s war-based nomenclature, although the occasional substitution of ‘occupation’ can be revealing: perhaps especially so where seemingly remote theoretical issues are at stake.

Indeed, the reader becomes quickly aware that theoretical concerns predominate in *Listening to War*, whose impulse towards generality is tenaciously pursued as the book develops. At the outset, we proceed from the concrete to the abstract: from, that is, an investigation of everyday sounds in wartime Iraq, to sound in wartime, to sound, listening and violence in general. This three-step progression is replayed several times during the book, and echoes across its architecture. A first large section meticulously excavates the sounds of wartime Iraq before moving to broader conclusions about the ‘belliphonic’—Daughtry’s neologism for the sounds of war. A second section then reverses this flow. It posits a tripartite model of sound and listening, one involving auditory regimes (power structures), sonic campaigns (forms of agency) and acoustic territories (environmental and bodily spaces); it then considers sound in wartime, and specifically sound in wartime Iraq, according to these interlocking concerns. This second section is the most technical of the book, and doubtless the one that will be of most interest to sound scholars. By contrast, a third and final section stakes its ground firmly within the discipline of ethnomusicology, largely abandoning the effort to create theories about wartime sound, and bringing the book to a close with two provocative chapters: one on the wartime iPod; another on the targeting of Iraqi musicians since the US invasion. This last chapter may be particularly horrifying for a musicological readership, prompting as it does urgent questions about why musicians were and continue to be singled out for attack by some sectarian fighters. More research on this topic, in the same vein as Daughtry’s chapter, clearly needs to be carried out: for one thing, we need to establish to what extent, and for what reasons, musicians are targeted specifically, and to what extent they are attacked as part of a larger artistic and intellectual class also including scholars, writers and artists.

Interspersed through the book are seven ethnographic ‘fragments’, sometimes comprising only a few pages: these are mainly interviews—or, more often, descriptions of interviews—with US soldiers and Iraqi civilians, who discuss their experiences of sound during the occupation. These fragments are often both poignant and artfully constructed. They also point towards the bedrock of stories within which the sounds that Daughtry analyses are enmeshed, and on which the book builds its theoretical edifice. They derive from the hundreds of interviews that Daughtry conducted, together with blogs written by American soldiers, news articles and many other sources. Some are more actively constructed, for example those produced through Daughtry’s use of videos posted online by soldiers, which look like movie scripts, with the spoken dialogue accompanied by descriptions of sonic and other details. (One particularly vivid example recounts a nocturnal raid in which the screams of an Iraqi woman persist as heavily armed soldiers storm a family home.) Another source of sonic evidence comes from WikiLeaks: Daughtry reads between the lines of a censored army report to recover the story of an Iraqi lorry driver shot dead when a nervous soldier mistook his burst tire for an IED. Daughtry’s reliance on stories about Iraqi sounds was largely a product of necessity: the US army permitted him to visit the International Zone in Baghdad only for a limited period, and prevented him from travelling elsewhere. What’s more, Daughtry reasons that even if he had been granted permission to travel, such journeys would have placed him—and others—in terrible danger: Americans were, and continue to be, far from welcome on the streets of Iraq, while Iraqis who are seen to cooperate with Americans run a mortal risk. Yet Daughtry manages to make a virtue of necessity, putting to original use unfamiliar narrative resources for sound. In the process he suggests innovative methods for the imaginative recombination of stories with other cultural scripts—army training manuals, medical discourses on trauma, descriptions of weapons—in the service of characterizing the sonic DNA of wartime Iraq, and so defining a broader condition of wartime sound.

Daughtry’s larger claim is straightforward: that sound and violence are inextricably interwoven; and that, during wartime, sound’s propensity towards violence becomes more marked. This idea has been in the musicological air for some time—it has been forcefully articulated by Suzanne Cusick in her various articles

about the use of music in torture in Guantánamo Bay—although Daughtry’s is the first book-length treatment of the topic.¹ A fundamental observation here has been that sound, when approached as a physical force, can be weaponized. Daughtry argues that acoustic territories of the body, especially the ear, are particularly vulnerable to attack: as he startlingly puts it, ‘the fleshly territories of the body are instantly conquered’ (p. 208) by sounds. Here as elsewhere in the book, sound scholars may wish to learn more about those ‘fleshly territories’ beyond the ear; but his idea that the aural conquest of bodies can be irresistible is certainly worth exploring further. What is at issue is not so much the agency of listeners besieged by the sounds of war, but the bodily negotiation of affective phenomena that may precede cognition. Under what conditions can sounds territorialize, conquer or cause lasting psychological damage? More pertinently in this context (and it’s a question Daughtry does not address): To what extent is the notion that the ear is ‘instantly conquered’ a contestable assertion about how we experience sound, and to what extent is it a fantasy of political domination—one that chimes readily, for example, with the rhetoric of ‘Shock and Awe’? As historian Sophia Rosenfeld has argued—drawing on Rancière’s notion of the political distribution of the sensible—claims about listening are rarely only technical or only political; more often they are both at once.² In the present era of neoliberal interventionism, Daughtry’s theory of listening, with its emphasis on sound’s overwhelming territorialisation of spaces of the body and the environment, can be read as a diagnosis of the soundscape of the early twenty-first century; but it can also be read as a fantasy about the projection of American power in the world.

There are larger implications to this close interweaving of sonic theory and political events. First, that the nested levels—those three progressively broader concerns outlined above—according to which *Listening to War* is constructed are impossible to keep apart. In other words, epistemologies of sound and violence do not pre-exist particular wars, but are enacted through them. In this sense, we might cite an important precedent in the discourses of trauma that accompanied the First World

¹ Suzanne Cusick, ‘Music as Torture/Music as Weapon’, *Trans: Revista Transcultural de Música* 10 (2006), <<http://www.sibetrans.com>>, accessed 11 June 2016; Suzanne Cusick, ‘Musicology, Torture, Repair’, *Radical Musicology* 3 (2008), <<http://www.radical-musicology.org.uk>>, accessed 11 June 2016.

² Sophia Rosenfeld, ‘On Being Heard: A Case for Paying Attention to the Historical Ear’, *The American Historical Review* 116/2 (2011), 316–334.

War: as Freud wrote in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1922), his theorization of the concept was stimulated by, among other things, the ‘terrible war that has only just ended’.³ This is not to say that theoretical insights do not apply beyond the wars from which they arose—indeed, the idea of trauma is alive and well in twenty-first century conflicts, as it is in Daughtry’s book—but that particular wars may also suggest their own distinctive ideas about violence. Second, if, as Daughtry states, both sound and violence are to be understood in terms of ‘disturbance events introducing forced change in a system’ (p. 169)—here the political analogy of occupation is ready to hand—then both sound and violence can be read only after the fact, as though the ‘force’ that brought about ‘change’ were entirely external, and so initially inscrutable within a broader political ecology of listening. In Daughtry’s book, listeners are routinely alarmed, deafened, knocked over by sonic acts of violence; only with time do they learn to make sense of their often extreme experiences. As they gradually become more expert within the ‘violent timespaces’ they inhabit, they begin to parse sounds according to dominant paradigms—Daughtry proposes the intriguing category of the ‘audible inaudible’, a space within which one slowly and painfully learns how not to hear certain sounds, but also suggests more predictable hermeneutic frameworks for wartime listening such as displacement (sounds heard out of place) and transplacement (sounds continually endowed with new meanings).

Here we encounter the political thrust of Daughtry’s project, which seeks to draw attention to the terrible yet not immediately obvious consequences of war: beyond the lives lost and the horrible injuries sustained, there is the ‘removal of resonant spaces’ resulting in an ‘inexorable process of sensory impoverishment’ (p. 205). Yet, in addition to detailing these human and environmental costs, Daughtry also attempts a stronger claim: about Iraq during this period being a sensory battleground (what he elsewhere terms a ‘shadow war’ of the senses, p. 211), in which the ability to make use of one’s senses becomes crucial. He contrasts, for example, the imperative for ‘situational awareness’—to maintain as full a picture as possible of dangerous environments—on the part of US soldiers with the sensory deprivation imposed on Iraqi detainees:

³ Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. James Strachey (London: Norton, 1961), 10.

Situational awareness was precisely the affordance that the US military and intelligence services wanted to deny the large population of Iraqi men who were detained for questioning over the course of the war. The standard technology for achieving this purpose, the hood, was the [Advance Combat Helmet's] affective opposite: it was designed to close off the sensory world rather than open it up, disorient the wearer rather than orient him within his environment, and create an embodied state not of security but of vulnerability. (p. 206)

This combination of perspectives—ears exposed and enhanced by the ACH on the one hand, covered and muffled by the black hoods of Abu Ghraib on the other—may jolt readers more used to thinking about the experiences of aggressors and victims as incommensurable. In moments such as these, Daughtry manages to bring together sonic experiences that are elsewhere cordoned off by the book's alternation between soldiers and civilians.

And yet... The sonic picture of wartime Iraq that emerges in this book inevitably remains partial, provisional, incomplete. This is true of all soundscapes, of course; but the incompleteness here is unavoidably aggravated. As Daughtry admits, there are countless witnesses to the occupation's sounds who might have been marshalled (convalescents in military hospitals, those suffering from PTSD), not to mention the dead veterans and innocent bystanders whose experiences are irrecoverable. Yet, the idea of wartime also disrupts the geographical and temporal stability on which the interrogation of belliphonic sounds depends. While wartime has always implied an 'epistemology of mediation'—as Mary Favret asserts in her recent book on the topic—in the twenty-first century the word must also signify the interpenetration of times and places facilitated by instant video feeds to the 'folks back home', and, more to the point, billion-dollar technologies such as drone warfare.⁴ Under these conditions of violence-at-a-distance, can it make sense to limit attention to the situation on the ground? In the case of wartime Iraq, other distant spaces also require interrogation. After all, the sounds of the occupation began not in downtown Baghdad, but amid the noisy, war-mongering whirl of political elites in Westminster

⁴ Mary A. Favret, *War at a Distance: Romanticism and the Making of Modern Wartime* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 12.

and Capitol Hill. We could not, of course, expect Daughtry to chart the sounds of the all war's many violent spaces. However, his book encourages us to think hard about leaving centres of institutional politics out of account, as well as what may be more broadly at stake in navigating between virtual and ambient acoustic environments.

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