

book review

## Aural Understanding

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John Paul Lederach and Angela Jill Lederach

*When Blood and Bones Cry Out: Journeys through the Soundscape of Healing  
and Reconciliation*

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At the core of *When Blood and Bones Cry Out* is the question, ‘How do people with collective experiences of violence reconcile and heal from experiences that penetrate below and beyond words?’ (2) In seeking a means to speak the unspeakable, the authors propose a radical shift away from the usual pragmatic framework used by (on the whole Western) governments and agencies, one that attempts to bring about peace and social accord but which mostly fails. Instead, Lederach and Lederach suggest a focus on sound, and more specifically voice, as this directs our attention to the individual and his or her network of relationships within the community. They argue that the frameworks currently deployed fail to understand the lived experiences of individuals and communities in these violent situations, experiences that are very often confusing, ambiguous and contradictory in their ongoing effects. Following a foreword by Judy Atkinson, who tells of her own

work with traumatised communities and the need they have to give voice to their experiences, the introduction looks carefully at what reconciliation asks of those who have lived through such violence. The authors' underlying argument is that while analysts may recognise the complex and cyclical path of reconciliation, forgiveness and healing, the accepted processes for bringing these about emphasise a progressive movement forward as the sign of a community's return to health and wholeness. Yet, as Lederach and Lederach capture throughout this book, the actual experiences of those who have lived in circumstances of collective violence are multifaceted and much more ambiguous.

Drawing on a series of stories told by those from Liberia, Somalia, Sierra Leone, Colombia and Australia, the authors explore the ongoing effects of human rights violations, and demonstrate how issues of justice and reconciliation raise difficult questions within these communities. As they explain, the direct violence of open warfare may cease but its effects remain, taken up into other forms of conflict and brutal repression, in situations where individuals may simultaneously occupy positions of victim and perpetrator, of vulnerability and of leadership. In order to understand these complex subject positions and how these impact on the reconciliation process, they introduce the concept of *social healing*, which they define as 'an intermediary phenomenon located between micro-individual healing and wider collective reconciliation'. (6) What is critical to their understanding of how to move towards reconciliation is thinking about social healing as 'an *aural* understanding of change and movement' (7, emphasis added), an approach in which sound offers both embedded and emergent ways of thinking about the individual and the community.

The book is divided into four sections. The first, Narrative Reflections, begins with four short chapters that tell the stories of particular individuals or communities who attempt to achieve some form of resolution in the face of traumatic events—a child soldier's desire to return to his community while living with the deep guilt of his participation in violence; Somali elders who travelled repeatedly to meet with warring subclan elders as a means to maintain dialogue and end war; the members of the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace Campaign who, dressed in their white t-shirts, gathered *en masse* and demanded peace; the persistence of a

Colombian woman in her bid to have the bones of her lost husband officially recognised and named.

Chapter Five reads across these stories, focusing on what can be expressed in these situations, as a means to contextualise a theoretical grounding for social healing. Although these affects and emotional responses are beyond words, the structures of language—specifically metaphor—remain important, for, as Lederach and Lederach point out, ‘Depending on how we use metaphor we shift meaning and, through comparison, the framing of reality’. (43) Their examination of these stories reveals the use of metaphors based on notions of circularity, simultaneity and multidirectionality, as those affected by violence attempt to explain what has now become their everyday experience. But rather than interpret these circling movements as unproductive or deleterious, Lederach and Lederach demonstrate how these are actually about (re)locating one’s sense of place and belonging in situations of displacement, insecurity and profound loss. Home in this reading is a meaningful location, ‘a relational metaphor of feeling *surrounded* by love’ (63, italics in original). This spatial image of safety and containment is used to introduce another important set of ideas, that of voice, silence and meaningful conversation. Voicelessness and regaining one’s voice are powerful metaphors, and the linking of these to the spatial imagery of home helps to examine the complex relationships between self, community and social healing. As the authors write, ‘Voice signals that people are within hearing range, the shared space of a conversation ... to have a voice suggests that people, and significant processes affecting their lives, are proximate: they are physically close enough that the vibrations of sounds touch each other, create an echo that bounces, reverberate and resonate between them’. (65) Here, then, is the crux of how we might reconceptualise reconciliation—it is that shared space where ‘people feel reciprocity, acknowledgement and meaningful exchange’, (67) and resilient individuals and communities encourage and sustain these meaningful yet arduous conversations.

Section Two, *The Sonics of Healing*, turns specifically to music and explores the ways in which certain pieces of music become significant to an individual’s life narrative, particularly in life and death instances. In Chapter Six, John Paul Lederach tells of two such moments in his own life, and the music and musicians that helped him survive. Returning to the metaphor of ‘healing is aural’ raised in Chapter Six,

Chapter Seven provides a theoretical context that brings together more clearly the relationship between the experience of sound, reiteration and circling movements with that of reconciliation. Here the authors draw on the work of people such as Lewis, Amini and Lannon (2001), Levitin (2006) and Boyce-Tillman (2000) to support the significance of emotional responses to music in creating social connection. Even as the melody or song is essential to our listening, it is, as the authors note, the vibrations of sound felt in the body that is significant—of being touched by and feeling the sound in ways that enable us to experience something not easily expressed in words.

Chapter Eight presents a discussion of music's role in human experience, particularly as a meditative practice when we may be open to the connection between the mundane and the divine, and again John Paul Lederach uses his own personal experiences of life-threatening situations and how this pain and fear was alleviated through listening to the music of Van Morrison to demonstrate these ideas. The authors focus on what they call his meditative songs, as these express more clearly the 'inarticulate speech of the heart' (228) and the power music has to deepen lived—and shared—experiences. In contemplating what it means to experience music, that in listening 'we have moments when the past, present and future merge, when we are capable of holding at the same time a sensation of being in more than one spatial and temporal sphere', (135) the authors suggest that the significance of music, and song in particular, is that it enables us to re-conceive our lived social landscape, that we can find our way home. They link this idea of song creating meaningful location and place to the Australian Indigenous concept of songlines, but draw on Bruce Chatwin's *The Songlines* (1987) to explain this—a troubling choice given the controversy around this publication. As his biographer Nicholas Shakespeare discovered, Chatwin spent very little time actually speaking with Aboriginal people during the short time he was in Central Australia, yet *The Songlines* is presented as an authoritative cultural text on Aboriginal people and culture. With regards to scholarly discussion of Australian Indigenous conceptual frameworks of place and performance practices, there is available the work of numerous Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, including Eric Michaels, Hetti Perkins, Marcia Langton, Deborah Bird Rose, Howard Morphy, Linda Barwick, and Stephen Muecke. Cross-cultural work is always fraught with potential

misunderstanding, and while the authors do not claim to be musicologists, the close discussion of Western popular music as a means to explore music's role in expressing 'the inarticulate speech of the heart' (112) does point to some discrepancy in the overall approach of the authors. We never hear the actual music and songs of those discussed, only that *jembe* drums are pounded or that women sang and danced. In contrast, the poetry created in these communities is included. Missing, too, from this section's discussion is a fuller account of listening, a mode of being that has been marginalised in Western thinking and more importantly points to assumptions about who has the right to speak.

Section Three, *The Womb of Change*, consists of two chapters that return the reader to specific stories of trauma, this time set in Sierra Leone. The first, Chapter Nine, tells of the courage of women when faced with psychological trauma following the end of war. We are told the stories of young soldiers returning uncertainly to the villages they had destroyed; of young children forced into the invasion of Freetown in Operation No Living Thing; the systematic use of rape to terrorise and dehumanise; and the resistance of child rebels to listen and talk with religious elders until one woman appealed to them in her role as a mother. These narratives are used to introduce the metaphor of mothering in the process of reconciliation, defined by the authors as a 'willingness to embrace the messy stubbornness of violence with persistent love'. (168) For me, this chapter raises important but very difficult questions. As Lederach and Lederach note, for women, violence does not end with the cessation of war, and peace more often brings with it increased sexual exploitation and a much lessened role for women in society. The metaphor of mothering is a powerful tool for reconciliation, but are we asking these women to bear the psychological cost of social healing for their communities? As both authors reflect throughout the book, what is the role of those external to these communities in facilitating reconciliation?

Chapter Ten returns to language and how we may speak of the unspeakable through the employment of poetry. In the example of the Falui Poets Society in Sierra Leone, we hear of those who used poetry to speak out and document the suffering of war, as well as to express hope and resistance. As Lederbach and Lederbach note, poetic language offers expression and insight as 'People begin to take notice of things that have been there all along and then rise from the noticing

towards something that takes shape'. (174) Moreover, this expression has important healing functions—the silent may find their voice, and in a form 'both at once deeply personal and deeply collective'. (188) The authors tell of how this approach proved so liberating for young women of Sierra Leone tightly bound inside themselves by violence. When interviewed about their experiences of war, these women responded mechanically, lifelessly. Yet, when encouraged to create poems, these same women 'discovered a new way to release the suffering that lived inside, that [were] felt in [the] bones'. (183) Returning to the ideas presented in Section Two, the authors explore the threads of sound, healing and individual experiences of trauma and demonstrate how these varied processes reconnect individuals and recreate what has been lost in the meaning of community.

The final section, Theory, Implications and Conclusions, brings together the ideas developed over the course of the book, and reiterates the need to reconceptualise the processes of reconciliation if social healing is to be successful. At the beginning of the book, the reader is invited to go on a journey that weaves together thought, proposal and insight, (14) and here the reader arrives at this emotional and intellectual resting point, but it is one that continues to ask the reader, as Judy Atkinson observed in the foreword, to think, reflect and reconnect where one has been. We can now understand such healing as something that 'represents the capacity of communities and their respective individuals to survive, locate voice and resiliently innovate spaces of interaction that nurture meaningful conversation and purposeful action in the midst and aftermath of escalated and structural violence'. (208)

This is an important book. The images and metaphors we are introduced to—a Tibetan singing bowl, the songs of Van Morrison, a mother's tears, the bones of the disappeared—are moments that depict individuals working through and within collective experiences of violence. As the authors convincingly argue, how these contribute to our understanding of reconciliation is more fully revealed when heard through a framework of sound and what this means in terms of being human; that both the effects of violence and the affects brought into being ripple out and connect us in intimate ways.

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