

## Descriptive Sounds

By Eli Neuman-Hammond

“The sound of a car door slamming was not a sound. It was the sound of a car door slamming, and once you accepted this, you had to ask: Whose car? What kind of car? Where is this car? What color is the car?”

- Jim O'Rourke, speaking of Luc Ferrari

### “Soundscapes” and Microphones

Often enough, we mystify recorded audio and attribute to it a quality of similitude with sound vibrations in the world; the very term “reproducible sound” betrays this tendency. Audio technology assumes values of high definition, immersion, and verisimilitude, which stubbornly inform listening habits. It's comfortable to rest in the clarity of a document, as though its fixed pattern confirms the lattice it imitates. The logic goes that since a recording is measurable, the situation it records is measurable too. Actually, the recording situation is irreducible to measurement, and a recording represents one partial, highly subjective description of an event, which *after* it becomes fixed during the recording process, also becomes measurable. Just as thirty people with a camera will come back with very different photographs from the same situation, so will thirty people given a microphone produce very different recordings.

This being the case, what do scholars mean when they use the term “soundscape”? When R. Murray Schafer introduced the term in 1969, it served the rhetorical function of “drawing attention to a sensory register that had been neglected relative to sight.” Recently, however, the concept has come under fire for over-determining the separation between environments, sound, and the perception of sound. As Tim Ingold notes, “sound is not *what* we hear, any more than light is what we see” (Ingold 2007: 1). In other words, sound is a medium of perception, not an abstract object of attention. The soundscape, if it is to be useful at all, should be understood as “both a world *and* a culture constructed to make sense of that world” (Thompson 2012: 117). There is no soundscape as such, only audible landscapes and listening cultures.<sup>1</sup>

One of the most useful terms for this shift in thinking around sound is acoustemology, which joins “acoustics” and “epistemology.” Anthropologist Steven Feld coined the term to better theorize sound as a way of knowing. In his words, “acoustemology engages acoustics at the plane of the audible—*akoustos*—to inquire into sounding as simultaneously social and material, an experiential nexus of sonic sensation” (Feld 2015: 12).

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<sup>1</sup> Stefan Helmreich usefully historicizes the soundscape, describing it as a “back-formation” from modern sound technologies: “While acoustemologies may range from the Cartesian to the Cagian the soundscape concept has been enabled by technologies of regarding sound at an aesthetic and conceptual remove. Telephony, phonography, architectural acoustics—what Emily Thompson calls ‘the soundscape of modernity’—permit sound to be apprehended as an abstraction.” (Helmreich 2010). In other words, the tendency to “slice up a landscape along the lines of sensory pathways” is a distinctly technological impulse (Ingold 2007).

I would argue that the paradigmatic soundscapes are the highly composed works of artists such as Hildegard Westerkamp, who often use voiceover, overdubbing, and filtering to *render* a soundscape. These works explicitly work to transport a listener into a particular space, the virtual space of the soundscape. (See “Kit’s Beach” as an example.)

Microphones, from this acoustemological perspective, do not reproduce the sonic dimension of the world, lifting sounds from their social-material substrate. Rather, they are creative tools, whose products index sonic events, fixing some waypoint during an otherwise ephemeral scene. The microphone-recorder contradicts sound's indeterminate, fickle nature by fixing a material transcription of crystallized possibilities. It has a *perspective*, which varies drastically depending on its coordinates, its movements, its pick-up pattern, and its operator. Yet, it creates a reproducible account of events, different from an animal's memory. A recordist may think and feel that they are recording something analogous to what they hear, only to discover something very different when they play it back later. The microphone-recorder has a *mechanical attention*, and so it remains totally "open to the arbitrariness, unpredictability, and inadvertence of what appears."

This basic paradox of recording technology has led me to think of the microphone-recorder as a descriptive apparatus, not an extractive one. Lyn Hejinian's phenomenal understanding of description is useful here:

By description I don't mean after-the-fact realism, with its emphasis on the world described (the objects of description), nor do I want to focus on an organizing subjectivity (that of the perceiver-describer); nor, finally, am I securing the term to a theory of language.

I propose description as a method of invention and of composition. Description, in my sense of the term, is phenomenal rather than epiphenomenal, original, with a marked tendency toward effecting isolation and displacement, that is toward objectifying all that's described and making it strange.

Description should not be confused with definition; it is not definitive but transformative. (Hejinian 2000: 138)

A microphone brings matter nearer to us at the same time as it abstracts it into artificial relations with our senses. It describes and it argues. Signals are headily *amplified* when they pass between kinetic and electric media, and yet an indexical relationship ties the recording to its original momentum. Waveforms are contoured by events happening "out there" in the world, even as they fly away from them. Microphones are promiscuously creative.

## Sonic Ethnography

Traditionally, field recordings are an almost scientific affair, concerned as they are with the false idol of objective representation. The most desirable recording setup involves a lot of very expensive, sophisticated technology, all of which is engineered to render the recording process invisible. A low noise floor and a high signal-to-noise ratio are important characteristics of professional pre-amps and microphones. Most field recordists are deeply concerned with clean, hi-fi sound. In many cases, this coincides with a desire to isolate their object of attention. Thus, multiple forms of noise are under scrutiny. A recording of a bird is ruined if a passing hiker enters the scene; a foghorn destroys an otherwise 'perfect' recording of waves lapping the shore. These are broad-stroke generalizations, but the point I would like to make is that field recording practice often proceeds from distinct values of nature, transparency, beauty, and clarity that result in highly artificial representations of their objects. I don't mean to disparage complex recording techniques or hi-fi technology, nor do I admonish the sharp focus and clear intentions that field recordists bring to their practice. Rather, I would like to underscore that a recording

methodology driven by different values is possible and valid, one which respects the both slippery and exacting connections between recordings and life.

Ernst Karel has coined the term sonic ethnography as a provisional category for some work composed using minimally processed and uncut recordings.

Listening to a work of sonic ethnography, giving over to the experience of letting sounds unfold in their own time, experiencing time as being constituted by sounds, allows for a sort of meditation on the subject or subjects at hand; one is not being shown something, but rather is presented with an opportunity to listen to something. (Karel 2013)

In a sonic ethnography, recorded audio is arranged as an opportunity to listen, during which listening practices may be interrogated and transformed relative to its subject. The *ethno-* in sonic ethnography indicates the subject is always a cultural field or, more precisely, a set of *human cultural practices* and, often, the infrastructural and/or nonhuman conditions of those practices. Sonic ethnography is concerned more with phenomenological transformation than information or logical argument. Non-textual media counterbalance the historical focus on highly argumentative textual ethnographies, where media gathered during fieldwork is used only towards the end of a rarified written argument. In media anthropology, arguments are enriched, not compromised, by aesthetic engagement and, often, appreciation.

Minimally processed field recordings are good candidates for sonic ethnographies because they present durations of time, rather than objects of sound. Consider in contrast *musique concrete*, in which recordings are chopped up and arranged in the abstract and empty space of magnetic tape. This is a negative time, filled up with sound. A microphone is privy to positively overflowing time-space, which *inundates* the sensitive capsule. An audio recording documents a continuous flow.<sup>2</sup> By presenting a continuous span of audio-time, a recording facilitates a listening experience in which connections can be made without crossing bridges placed by the composer at any point after the recording event (i.e. overdubbing audio from different times, extensive cuts and fades, schizophrenic sounds pasted from other segments of recorded audio). The listener instead sits with a recording in so far as it carries with it a piece of information parallel to the time and situation of the recording. The point is not necessarily to transport the listener to a different space (immersion), but it is always to rewire one's aesthetic response to a situation that is happening, or happened, somewhere else.

## Road Sounds

The recordings I'm presenting with this essay come from a larger body of work documenting transportation infrastructure in New England called *Road Sounds*. Transportation infrastructure produces the noise-floor of urban experience, and *Road Sounds* proceeds from this floor, elevating it so that what is muted and flat unfolds towards the center of attention. As a rule, the constant aesthetic impingements of transportation infrastructure are filtered out as noise, and this is one reason I directed sustained attention towards them. A quintessentially modern response to the racket of urban noise has been to expand the category of music, which has proven infinitely pliable. Preceding the Futurists' aggrandizement of war machinery and industrial sounds in the

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<sup>2</sup> I don't think that the control of the maker is necessarily attenuated when dealing with unprocessed recordings. I think that the toolset and domain of control is different, and that where control shrinks in one area (post-production editing and composition + signal processing tools), it expands proportionately in another (real-time composition + recording tools).

early twentieth century, Henry David Thoreau listened to humming telegraph wires, which sang in the wind like “aeolian harps.” Even in 1851, he expressed the now-common idea that “every sound is music now” (Bock 2006). Since then, the avant-garde has championed music of a vast vocabulary, and taken this idea in many directions. As such, I’m not invested in treading over this ground again, although the various sounds of bridges and motors often appeal to my musical taste. My bone to pick is rather with the notion that the sounds of the roads tell no interesting histories.

Car and traffic sounds play a major role in R. Murray Schafer’s morally charged account of the soundscape, which was largely mobilized to reclaim “hi-fi” sounds from the din of “lo-fi” sounds which proliferated after the industrial revolution. Even in his early work *The New Soundscape*, Schafer had strong opinions about the sounds of motor vehicles:

Motors are the dominant sounds of the world soundscape. All motors share one important feature: they are low-information, high redundancy sounds. That is to say, despite the intensity of their voices, the messages they speak are repetitive and ultimately boring. There is a hypnotic suggestibility about motors that makes one wonder whether, as they invade our lives totally, they may not mask out all other sounds, reducing us in the process to acquiescent and dopey bipeds indolently fumbling about in a mute hypnotic trance. (Schafer 1969: 58)

Schafer deduced from his research that noise pollution has now and only recently become a “world problem.” I would be hard-pressed to disagree. But I take issue with the claim that noises that are ultimately displeasing to most, and even harmful in some cases, are also ultimately boring. The question that guided my attention to transportation infrastructure is: *What listening positions and material histories do these sounds index?* To take a simple example, the whishing sound of a busy highway points towards the ultra-smooth asphalt beneath it and a three-hundred-year lineage of terraforming and material development in the service of speedy commerce. We can filter this sound out (and this may very well be desirable!), and we can listen to it as music, but we can also pay attention to what strange conditions of possibility precede it.

“Space 1, I-95 Median,” for example, was made on a damp day in February from a patch of the median of Interstate 95 in southern Massachusetts. The microphones were stationary, attached to the median, and so the audio runs adjacent to the median, and catches sound as refracted by this space. The sounds of passing cars are ordinary, but the microphone’s position is unexpected: its perspective places us in an industrial science fiction outpost, which is liminally occupied by construction and maintenance workers, the police, and broken down or crashed cars (all states of exception to the high speed commercial, commuter, and leisure-oriented mobility that animates the highway). In this way familiar sounds are made strange, and the blitz of cliché car sounds blossom into an unexpected world. All the materials of life speed by, transmogrified by velocity into almost gentle tonal streams; commuters, freight trucks loaded with commodities, anonymous travelers. This effect hinges on sustained aural engagement with the site, rather than “reduced listening” in which meaning is parsed as time breaks down into sound objects.

### Some further listening

Arseny Abraamov, *Symphony of Sirens* (1922)  
George Brecht, *Motor Vehicle Sundown* (1960)  
Ernst Karel, *Swiss Mountain Transport Systems* (2011)  
Luc Ferrari, *Presque Rien* (1970/2012)  
Luke Moldof, *Kiki and Kiki* (2017)  
Toshiya Tsunoda, *Extract from Field Recording Archive* (2019)

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