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A sonic ethnography

Listening to and with climate change

ABSTRACT We propose a sonic ethnography that focuses on listening, departing from an investigation of a soundscape to one that attends to how people listen. This, we suggest, is crucial for an anthropological approach that understands sound as processual and relational. Rather than describing what the ethnographer hears, we outline a project of listening *with* others. Listening is ordinary, something at which everyone is expert, even as it expands beyond the ear and beyond the human. In this way, listening is central to an anthropogenic sensorium that shifts away from human exceptionalism. Always emergent, listening—like climate change—is fundamentally uncertain. And while recording technology has long been central to an anthropology of sound, we invite new ways of engaging audio technology that take seriously its presence in everyday listening as well as its expressive capacities. **KEYWORDS** Sound, Listening, Climate Change, Field Recordings

Listening is a way of being in and knowing about the world. It requires neither specialized training nor a heightened awareness of sound. In this reflection we outline our proposal for a sonic ethnography that starts with and dwells in the moment of listening. We ask, first, how do people listen to and with a changing climate? This question reverberates in a broader framework of what it means to listen in the Anthropocene. While acknowledging the limits to the term, we find it useful as a way of orienting toward nonhuman subjects and processes. The Anthropocene, as Jerome Whittington has suggested, “does not mark a moment when geology passed into human time, but rather the inverse: when anthropos became inherently and pervasively geological.”¹ Thus, while defined as an epoch in which human intervention has shaped the geologic, the Anthropocene offers a possibility of moving away from an anthropocentric perspective.

Here we offer five perspectives on a new sonic ethnography that informs a project of listening to climate change. The methodology is intrinsically ethical, both in terms of its orientation toward human and more-than-human others and its investment in sensory and affective relationships to and with the geologic. We have been developing this approach to sonic ethnography through our respective research and pedagogy, and are working on a larger collaborative research project in Los Angeles and Lagos.

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LISTENING IS PROCESS

Asking how people listen to climate change emphasizes sound as process. Much of the existing work on sound and climate change focuses on the indexical work of natural sound: birdsong lost to extinction or the inaudibility of insects—or conversely their loudness—as they are overwhelmed by, or compete with, human sounds. Rather than asking, What is the soundscape of a place? we begin with the question, How do people listen? As coined by R. Murray Schafer, the notion of “soundscape” is prescriptive, evaluative, and transformative. Defined as “the sonic environment,” it is both material for composition and the musical work itself.² While a notion of soundscape might assist an ethnographer in describing a sonic environment, the term tends to objectify sound and make it external to perception.

An account of a soundscape is often from the ethnographer’s perspective. Shifting the emphasis to listening builds the ethnographic into an investigation of sound. Thus, rather than providing a description of what the ethnographer hears, a sonic ethnography that starts with listening focuses on how sound matters for other people, emphasizing acoustemology over soundscape.³ Sound immediately becomes process, foregrounding perception and relationality. Sound is not “out there” but immanent and emergent.

LISTENING IS RELATIONAL

Listening is fundamentally and necessarily relational, orienting a person toward frog, blender, rock, traffic, radio, child, or wind. In this way, listening in general opens to more-than-human relationships. Listening is always listening with: with other people; with ghosts, deities, or other spirits; with animals, trees, and plants; with everyday objects; and with acoustic spaces. In asking how other people listen as part of ethnographic research, we necessarily listen with others, moving away from a solitary, agentive human listener as sound resonates across bodies and buildings.

Listening is also relational to other senses, with hearing coterminous with sight, thermoception, taste, touch, and more. Listening moves beyond the ear, as a body experiencing sound also senses vibration.⁴ Thermoception, or the sense of temperature, is especially significant in the context of listening to climate change. Steven Feld describes how the sound cicadas make is that of their exoskeleton expanding in the heat; thus, when we listen to the evening’s chorus of insects, we are sensing heat as much as sound.⁵ Experienced differently around the world, listening, like other senses, is also inextricably bound to history and memory; a “technique of the body,” it is cultivated and learned in relation to others and over time.⁶

Listening *with* as a methodological stance emphasizes the relational position of the ethnographer. As ethnographers, we don’t observe from a distance; rather, we listen with others, amplifying our own situatedness as well as the perspectival quality of experience.

LISTENING IS ORDINARY

Starting with and dwelling in the moment of listening affords an investigation of that which emerges through perception. While this might be modalities of mediation or

systems of signification, it is also immediate sociabilities and ways of being in the world. We are especially interested in the latter: the banal, unnoticed ways of attuning toward sound in everyday life or the means by which we orient toward one another in interpersonal communication.

Listening, thus, brings us back to the everyday, to ordinary sonic expertise that is generally unexamined and not acknowledged as such. Sound is not a specialized and isolatable domain but is in fact general, normal, and entirely taken for granted. One of the ways people are expert listeners is in filtering sound, a cultivated mode of attention that allows us to register certain sounds as meaningful while others remain in the background. Tuning out the background hum of urban infrastructure is also a way of sensing anthropogenic climate change, in which health is unequally affected by industry and fossil fuels move from underground to atmosphere.

Climate is ordinarily so general that it goes unnoticed. In developing our research in Los Angeles and Lagos, we wonder how we can draw out ways of listening to something so broad and capacious that it touches nearly everything. When does climate change become something that moves into the foreground, such that changing weather patterns, or a shift in an ecosystem, are noticed and commented on? How do people listen to the rain, to rising sea levels that erode beaches, flood neighborhoods, and cause coastal highways to collapse? To lungs affected by dust that blows in from the desert with increasing frequency, from Mexico or Saudi Arabia? To air conditioners, running continuously all summer? Though there is no limit to what this might mean, part of our project entails tuning in to moments that obviously count while maintaining an openness toward that which remains unknown.

LISTENING IS UNCERTAIN

As a mode of attunement to that which is outside oneself, listening entails being radically open to the uncertainty of the world. This makes listening a crucial mode of perception through which we can apprehend climate change.

The uncertainty of climate change is often addressed through models and modes of prediction that diagnose and forecast. We attend to these as listening practices, while remaining open to uncertainty as such. A prophet who lives on a beach along the Atlantic coast in Lagos listens to the crash and pattern of the waves on the shore, waiting to hear God's will for his community in the already rising sea level. When a client whose child is sick comes to him for a diagnosis, he listens for the voice of God in the ocean waves, hoping to discern a biblical verse that he can use to interpret the malady and offer a prayer for a possible cure.

Listening to the uncertainty of climate change may also involve attuning and attending to atmospheric conditions, or to silence itself. For instance, recordings made during the COVID-19 pandemic convey an efflorescence of natural sounds. They seem to vindicate lockdown, idealized as mitigating human impact, limiting forms of pollution that includes "noise," or, more optimistically, rolling back the conditions constituting the Anthropocene. What they do not convey is how lockdown is itself fully of the Anthropocene, a response to a virus caused by human destruction of natural ecosystems. In this case, the silencing of human sounds is what constitutes anthropogenic sound.

Sonic ethnography requires collaborative practices that bring together different perspectives toward listening in and to the Anthropocene, listening with others who listen to the spaces of the city, who attune themselves to the atmosphere, and who take special notice of the climate and its change. This includes scientists studying birds, the ocean, the climate, the atmosphere; urban planners, traffic managers, city officials; fishermen, dock workers, street hawkers, managers of transportation hubs; commuters, church groups, mystics, artists, surfers, and joggers—among many others. Though what we hear may be strange or illegible, in attuning toward it, we allow ourselves to experience the uncertainty of a changing climate.

LISTENING WITH TECHNOLOGY

From musical recordings to telephone technology, the beeps of household appliances and the ever-present buzz of electricity, audio technology is ubiquitous in everyday listening. Such technologies are crucial for listening as a diagnostic tool, for sonic memories and for creating a record for an unknown future.⁷

Audio technology has also provided crucial ways of diagnosing climate change through sound. This includes field recordings of birdsong and melting glaciers, or the use of underwater sensors to help measure carbon in seagrass. However, much of this work relies on an understanding of recording as transparent, of having the capability of capturing sound as data. Here we move away from an investigation that collects sound in order to investigate listening as process. Rather than simply a way of extracting sounds, such recording practices can also be understood as ways of listening—in this case through a dynamic assemblage of ear, headphones, microphone, and recording device.

Field recordings are not a substitute for ethnographic listening. Microphones “hear” in their own ways, with their own histories of technique and technology. The sonic ethnography we are proposing does not require an audio recorder. In fact, it may be hindered by a recording device, and by field recordings, with their logic of fidelity and history of extraction. At the same time, we want to allow for the existence of field recordings, making and using them while critically interrogating their role in sonic ethnography.

Technologies of recording, writing, and creating are themselves creative, composing a world. To this end we also ask what kind of work field recording can do and what kind of work we can do with field recording, expanding its formal capacity beyond documentation to experimentation. Rather than treating field recordings as objects that present or represent a soundscape as something heard by the ethnographer, we consider how field recordings are caught up in their event, providing material that helps one hear that event along with those who are there, participating in it and with each other.

TOWARD A NEW SONIC ETHNOGRAPHY

The sonic ethnography we propose here entails a new method of studying both human and more than human interactions. Departing from an attention to soundscapes, we emphasize the emergent quality of listening. Listening is process. Relational, it helps us

attune toward other, less anthropocentric futures. Staying with listening is also a way of dwelling with uncertainty.

To this end, we call for a methodology of listening *with* others as they sense climate change unfolding. In doing so, we invite the emergence of new concepts, practices, and imaginaries that are adequate to climate futures. ■

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NOTES

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