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# Listening and Recording In Situ: Entanglement in the sociopolitical context of place

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**This article considers the ways in which soundwalking and field recording entangle the listener in a sociopolitical relationship with place. The place is a physical site in which the listener encounters complex sonic sociopolitical factors, shaped not just by the interactions of people but also by involving living and material objects that voice themselves through sound and vibrations. Sets of expectations and personal identities inform listening experiences, in addition to the material-orientated tendencies in the field, deriving from soundscape composition and acousmatic music. Specific sociopolitical examples that inform sonic experiences in diverse listening situations across different geographic regions are used to uncover bias, and some of the preconceptions of listeners. The article argues for a greater reflexivity in regard to the motives that inform our listening, relationship with places and awareness of the widest spectrum of cultural, historic and sociopolitical contexts.**

## 1. SOCIOPOLITICAL CONTEXTS OF PLACE

Place, for sound artists who perform soundwalking and field recording, can be conceptualised as a site in which the environmental sound is experienced and recorded. The sociopolitical complexity of sites emerges from the fundamental precept that a place is constantly being produced, through interaction between people (Massey 2001) and non-human agents (Haraway 2016). As I will discuss in this article, listening plays a role in knowledge production about the place, and it is not free of personal judgement and bias. According to the sensory geographer Paul Rodaway, perception assumes 'mental insight, or a sense made of a range of sensory information, with memories and expectations' (Rodaway 1994: 10).

The decisions over the choice of places, the routes used to explore the place, and the sounds that capture our attention are just some among factors influenced by the bias of the listener. Hence the recognition of the sociopolitical complexity of sites and the preconceptions of a listener influencing knowledge production are two aspects of listening in situ that this article encourages researchers to commit to. Both factors will contribute to a greater reflexivity that Pierre Bourdieu emphasised in the following way:

Only the reflexivity synonymous with method, but a *reflex reflexivity* based on a craft, on a sociological 'feel' or 'eye,' allows one to perceive and monitor on the spot, as the interview is actually taking place, the effects of the social structure within which it is occurring. How can we claim to engage in the scientific investigation of presuppositions if we do not work to gain knowledge [science] of our own presuppositions? (Bourdieu 1999: 608)

An interdisciplinary approach to the problem of bias, as part of a wider discussion on colonial perspectives in research, argues for a greater reflexivity – an awareness of the ways in which personal identities and attitudes influence research.

What places are listened to, and how the listening is experienced, underpins the sociopolitical notions of place in this article. The interactions between social and political factors in the

context of class, race, gender, ethnic identities, and so on shapes material cultural forms such as architecture, public monuments and street names. Such factors can be voiced in different ways in neighbourhoods, or community spaces. In this context, silence is also an important signifier of sociopolitical inequalities in a place.

Field recording and soundwalking sensitise the listener to the sound of weather, rivers and the sea, as well as voices of non-human life forms. All can be included in a sonic sociopolity of a place through the active involvement of the listener. A field recordist can detect the invisible vibrations and electromagnetic fields of electronic devices, hearing the pulse of inanimate objects facilitating surveillance, among other things.<sup>1</sup> Further, the sounds of the earth, water and buildings capture vividly the ways in which resources are transported across the world, revealing economic dependency and migration. Consequently, human, non-human life and inanimate objects are important components in the construction of a sociopolitical understanding of place, as experienced by the sensitised listener.

These sociopolitical factors interact in a performative fashion, foregrounding the importance of the experiential, in the production of knowledge about place (Lukerman 1964; Tuan 1977; Massey 2001). By being in a place, a listener is already involved in the sociopolitical fabric of the site, and, as I will discuss in this paper, politically implicated. By listening to public spaces in which people of different backgrounds interact, or by picking up vibrations of machines and infrastructure, the listener is involved in knowledge production. Hence listening in situ, or in an actual place, involves the listener in diverse contexts, through which listening emerges as an activity of sociopolitical significance.

Owing to the sensory abundance of stimuli that immerse the listener on site (Rodaway 1994; Chion 2016), a selective process of perception is in play when listening in situ. According to Chion, 'in situ listening is characterized by a selection – be it reflexive or conscious – of relevant components and the repression of others, which remain unconsciously “heard”' (Chion 2016: 139). The selective aspect of perception in situ, uncovering sociopolitical layers of the site, and the decision-making process in prioritising some stimuli over others, based on personal motives and experience of the world, make a case for a discursive approach to soundscape research.

## **2. THE DISCIPLINARY BIAS OF LISTENING IN SITU**

The practices of attentive listening such as soundwalks and field recordings are common methods employed by composers and sound artists in listening to places. Often deployed as a means of gathering recordings, and subsequently displacing them, in the creation of pieces of sonic fiction, the field recordings are valued as sonic postcards of a place, artefacts of 'sonic tourism' (Drever 2002: 21) or for their aesthetic qualities by drawing from the traditions of

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<sup>1</sup> In an interview with the composer Cathy Lane, Christina Kubisch describes her work *Electrical Walks* that uses headphones sensitive to electromagnetic fields. She observes: 'you don't only get electrical sound but you also hear voices, the voices of people in places with hearing aids which function like induction loops' (Lane and Carlyle 2016: 67).

acousmatic music.<sup>2</sup> The methods of listening draw upon well-established conventions, and are greatly informed by work of the pioneer of acoustic ecology and soundscape composition R. Murray Schafer. While in contemporary discourse soundwalking practice incorporates both listening walks and soundwalks, Schafer makes a distinction between the two terms.

A listening walk, according to Schafer, is a walk 'with a concentration on listening' (Schafer 1994: 146), while a soundwalk implements a score as a guide. Importantly, Schafer suggests a number of 'ear training exercises' (ibid.: 212–13) to be practised while soundwalking. These include the comparison of 'the pitches of drainpipes on a city street', 'different harmonics of neon lights' and similar (ibid.). Training the ear in this way helps listeners to distil sound from the unmediated multisensory environment in which they are immersed. Listeners are encouraged to recognise different aesthetic properties of experienced sound such as hi-fi and lo-fi sounds, gestures and textures, figure and ground (Schafer 1994).

Such exercises aim to develop the appreciation for a range of sonic experiences that soundscape can offer in the context of acoustic ecology and the reduction of the level of noise in our cities, which is central to Schafer's work (ibid.). However, while these ear-training exercises allow the listener to develop an awareness of the immersive quality of soundscape, they also promote otherness. The soundwalker often moves slowly through space, conscious of their sonic footprint as they become aware of their whole body. They generally do not engage with people around them, such as the stream of pedestrians walking ordinarily on a busy street. A soundwalker is immersed in sound, in ways in which others around them are not, and this othering is further amplified when they listen to sounds through a microphone, as recordists. In this case, a listener is in 'their own sound bubble and hears the place completely differently from everyone else in the same place' (Westerkamp 1998: 59). Westerkamp states that there is

re-learning to hear and decipher the soundscape like a new language ... aware that as recordists we remain outsiders; always attempting to create a type of naked, open ear. (Westerkamp 1998).

It is because of this othering that the recordist overlooks the political implications of their actions in the ways in which spaces are negotiated. Sounds are experienced as aesthetic phenomena and ultimately recorded as such. The sound of a pedestrian crossing, for example, is an anxiously anticipated 'sound event' (Schafer 1994: 149) and recognised as another aesthetic contributor to the overall soundscape. Whereas this documentation is valuable to acoustic ecology, it discourages the recordist from a contextualisation of place that involves a history of the location or other sociopolitical factors.

The tethering of contextualisation to the circumstances of the situation in which the sound was experienced draws from amalgamated tropes of the discipline, for instance Schafer's example of sound event: 'the sound of an alarm bell wouldn't encourage the listener to "drop everything and run" if the listener knows that the alarm has just been tested' (Schafer 1994: 149). Schafer links contextuality and the 'event' in which the sound is experienced by stating that context is implied

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<sup>2</sup> Acousmatic refers to a sound source whose cause is not visible. By drawing on the work of Pierre Schaeffer, Michel Chion defines an acousmatic situation as: 'a listening situation in which one hears a sound without seeing its cause. It also specifies the sound heard under these conditions' (Chion 2016: 265). This notion extends to acousmatic music.

in the definition of the event that stands for 'something that occurs in a certain place during a particular interval of time' (ibid.: 131).

This approach to contextuality makes the recordist's sound bubble less opaque; however, the bracketing of context around the circumstances of any given situation does not necessarily make a recordist aware of their involvement in the sociopolitical fabric of a place. For example, recording the sound of a fire alarm in the premises of Glasgow School of Art would involve the recordist in a charged sonic event, due to the unfortunate fires that destroyed the Mackintosh Building in 2014 and 2018. The sound of an alarm bell carries very different connotations not just in relation to what 'occurs in a certain place during a particular interval of time' (ibid.: 131) but also to personal histories and histories of that place. Therefore, sociopolitical discussion of a sound event works with particular locations in time and involves the listeners and the recordist.

Hypothetical examples of great intensity in very different contexts are the recording of sniper fire in a conflict zone and the sounds of pots and pans in a large kitchen. An expanded contextuality takes into account that the first recording has been created by a recordist wearing a bulletproof PRESS vest in the middle of Sarajevo, surrounded by civilians who had no protection during the siege of the city during 1992–95. In the second example, the sounds have been recorded in community kitchens, where those who had fallen below the poverty line in contemporary Britain are fed. In both cases, the recordist is actively involved in the production of knowledge from a position of power. The wider sociopolitical contexts of armed conflict and economic hardships caused by the pandemic are central contributing factors in these recordings.

Bracketing the context of a sound event, referring just to the circumstances of the event, leads Schafer towards an overly generalised and dangerously simplified position on the listening habits of communities around the globe, encountered during the World Soundscape Project's missions of archiving sounds internationally. For example, Schafer states that machine sounds were not liked in Canada, Switzerland and New Zealand. Consequently, he concluded, 'technological sounds are strongly disliked in technologically advanced countries, while they may indeed be liked in parts of the world where they are more novel' (Schafer 1994: 147).

Schafer's outsider's perspective is revealed in description of Naples:

Cries, screams, whipcracks deafen you, the light blinds you, your brain begins to feel dizzy and you gulp air. You feel drawn into becoming part of enthusiastic demonstration, to applaud, to cry 'Evvive' – but for what? What is there before your eyes is nothing exceptional or extraordinary. All is perfectly calm; no deep political passion is stirring in these people. They all mind their business and talk about normal things; it is just a day like any other. (Ibid.: 64)

Next, he states:

Why do the voices of South Europeans always seem louder than their northern neighbours? Is it because they spend more time outdoors where the ambient noise level is higher? We recall that the Berbers learned to shout because they had to shout over the cataracts of the Nile. (Ibid.: 64)

Schafer's concern regarding the noise pollution underpins these statements. His definition of acoustic ecology as 'the effects of the acoustic environment or soundscape on the physical response or behavioural characteristics of creatures living within it' (ibid.: 271) reflects his interest in the questions of why groups of people behave in certain way when exposed to environmental noise.

However, he makes assumptions in the process.

In the first quotation, Schafer shares his experiences of Naples urban soundscape as an example of differences between residential and visitor's perspectives.

The second quotation, on the other hand, establishes a hypothesis regarding the behaviour of large groups of people, South Europeans and Berbers. The hypothesis is based on observation of the ambient noise and the loudness of voices of these groups. In the second quotation, Schafer withheld his subjectivity. The assumption is made that the voices of southern Europeans always seem louder, and while that might be true for Schafer's ear (which comes unsaid), it is unclear what either northern European, or indeed Neapolitan, ears may perceive.

The question is posed on why the voices are louder, and Schafer offers the following possible reason, 'they spent more time outdoors where the ambient noise is higher' (ibid.: 64). The following sentence, however, offers another example from northeastern Africa. Schafer uses the term with a very loaded colonial history, 'Berbers' who in his view had learned to shout to communicate across the river Nile (ibid.).

The crucial issue emerging from this analysis is the issue of bias. The assumption about the voices of people appearing louder in certain parts of the world appears as an objective, measurable feature of soundscape. However, the decision to foreground loudness over rhythm, or dynamics, for example, is a cultural one. This could be based on Schafer's personal background, or his education. As a listener researcher, Schafer is in position of power and his studies could encourage other researchers to favour loudness over other aspects of soundscapes in similar situations.

The immense sociopolitical complexity of places call for caution when it comes to reaching observations regarding the behaviour of communities around the world. Who is listening in relation to the researcher's personal and professional identity, including class, age, educational background and race, assume importance as the listener adopts a reflexive attitude in research.

The discussion on the entanglement of the recordist in the sociopolitical fabric of place is in conflict with 'old fashioned materialism' (Cobussen, Meelberg and Truax 2017: 2) and 'perceptual essentialism' (Kim-Cohen 2009: 94). These notions reference the tradition of acousmatic music rooted in work of composer Pierre Schaeffer who advocated a complete divorce of recorded sound from the original contexts of recording achieved by the practice of reduced listening.

Michel Chion concisely describes the reduced listening mode devised by Schaeffer:

[a] mode of listening that deliberately and artificially abstracts from causes – and I would add from effects – and from meaning in order to attend to sound considered for itself and not only with regard to its sensible aspects of pitch and rhythm but also of grain, matter, shape, mass, and volume. (Chion 2016: 267)

When tackling the listening of the musically untrained, Schaeffer states that by 'natural listening we mean the primary and primitive tendency to use sound for information about the event' (Schaeffer 2017: 87). This type of listening he calls natural, because it is applicable across different geographies and can be applied to humans as well as animals. For instance, he describes that individuals who lack specialised training have a 'subjective' mode of listening, not because they hear 'anything and everything', referring to the accuracy of the note a violinist is playing for example, but because 'aural perception (ouïe)' and the ear are not refined (ibid.).

This tendency to move away from the contextual, even when it comes acknowledging the source of the sound, is deeply problematic, if applied to any degree to field recording and soundwalking in situ or in actual place. If natural listening in the context is primitive and available to humans

and animals, then reduced listening is specialised, refined and reserved only for an educated and privileged minority. This attitude undermines first-hand experiential knowledge production about place acquired over a longer period of time by an untrained listener as pointed out by the geographer Lukerman; the experience of place is 'apparent part of the reality, not a sophisticated thesis; knowledge of place is a simple fact of experience' (Lukerman 1964: 168).

Moreover, reduced listening promotes not just a separation between the recordist and the world: the separation is made between the sonic phenomena and the world in the domain of knowledge production. Chion points out that Schaeffer 'would clearly refute the illusion of a supposedly natural narrativity of sounds'. He quotes Schaeffer: 'Does sound inform us about the universe? Hardly' (Chion 2016: 110).

This aesthetic essentialism therefore is rooted in the traditions of the discipline and it is critiqued as such. Additionally, Katherine Norman highlights the colonial tendency in the field by referring to the recordist as an 'intrepid explorer' who

'goes out 'into the wild', employing the language of the hunter – 'on safari', 'capturing sound' ... The hunter brings back the prized game, unusual and from foreign parts, and transplants it from the wild and untamed 'jungle' to the domestic interior, where it can be displayed on the wall (via loudspeakers). And, quite understandably, field-recordings are often made away from home, when on a visit to a strange and compelling environment where strange new sounds accost the listener from every corner. Then the traveller returns, goes online and tells stories. (Norman 2004: 61)

For Norman, the colonial ear of a researcher focuses on the aesthetic aspects of sound in a place that is deemed exotic. Furthermore, Norman problematises what happens next with more imagination as she describes the sounds displayed on the wall. By using this visual metaphor, Norman equates not just sound and the hunted animal but also sonic and visual colonial histories.

By doing so, she is problematising field recording as a method practised currently in the field. By claiming a place of superiority and detachment while recording, the recordist's actions are even more political. Such situations can be studied in places of conflict, protests and places where the migrant crisis is unfolding, where the recordist might follow private agendas despite the desperation around them. Such poignant examples, however, should not be sidelined as 'special' and 'extreme' because all places are results of sociopolitical relationships and power.

### **3. TOWARDS REFLEXIVE LISTENING**

Raising awareness of the ways in which the listener is implicated in the sociopolitical fabric of place calls for a greater reflexivity, as John Drever demonstrates in his drawing upon post-colonial ethnographic approaches (Drever 2002: 21). This assumes an awareness of one's motives, expectations, preconceptions and their relationship with the place of listening among the other factors. In the context of field recording practice, Drever questions 'what, why and for whom am I recording?' (Drever 2017: 72). The recordists can often predict what sounds they will be able to record on the site that makes prior reflection on motives important. The following section of the article will outline some aspects of listening practice in situ that would benefit from a reflexive approach.

First, reflexivity vis-à-vis duration of one's relationship with place informs listening experience greatly. The level of familiarity informs the ways in which the recordist moves through space and what attracts their attention. This can be captured in their listening experience during the first visit to a place and mapped against subsequent regular visits. If resident in a place, the duration of that residency shapes the relationship and level of familiarity as memories are

formed and re-shaped by sound. This can be applied to neighbourhoods and micro-locations of spaces where communities and subcultures gather or even events.

For example, Cusack in *Berlin Sonic Places* discusses a wide array of sites, from parks to specific locations such as Teufelsberg in Berlin:

Perception is multi-sensory, so information from all our senses is important. What is seen, the temperature, humidity, the atmosphere of the moment and many other factors, including memories from previous visits and any prior expectations all potentially affect our experience of sonic places. (Cusack 2017: 5)

Field recordings are the result of a negotiation between the recordist and the place where memories and previous experiences play an important role. These processes are in play even if listening occurs in the countryside. In a conversation between Norman and Westerkamp while soundwalking at Lighthouse Park near Vancouver, Westerkamp points out 'I notice that in Europe, for example, you have rain ... but don't have the kind of continuous rain that you have here' (Norman 2004: 78). Norman reflects on their work by saying:

We are foreign bodies in this landscape. Two intrigued non-natives exploring a different place (although she has been here quite a while) and finding it somehow essentially different from the paths we knew before. And yet, it's hard to put your ear to the difference – the wind, the overhead hum of the seaplanes, and high treetops occupied by small birds of an unknown breed. We make comparisons between a place we remember and a new place. (Ibid.: 79)

While listening to a waterfall, they step into the water to capture the sound from close range, a technique that Westerkamp calls 'searching microphone' (ibid.: 82). In these moments, listeners uncover the potential of sonic experience to uncover hidden aspects of the place. However, throughout the walk, there is a sense of continuous negotiation between past and present, they get lost and back on track several times. The intense listening amplifies the sense that the listener is 'at the centre of the soundscape' (Rodaway 1994: 86).

However, this intense experience of centrality and being surrounded by sound on all sides is an evidence of activity and interactions of actors around the listener, and a step forward in acknowledging that diversity in artistic work is aware of the relationship of a listener with the site. The duration of one's relationship with the place can be informed by reading and research, learning language, residency and visits. The listener recordist could ask themselves about the ways in which their listening experience of a site changed over time for instance, or how their understanding of local history informs the experience of listening.

Another aspect in need of more suppleness is the awareness of the ways in which one's migration status informs listening experience. As large populations around the world are on the move,<sup>3</sup> our awareness of an individuals' capacity to control their own circumstance and agency over movement come to the fore. The geographer Doreen Massey points out that the degree of movement and communication, and the degrees of control are key factors in developing a sense of place (Massey 2001: 4):

Different social groups have distinct relationships to this anyway differentiated mobility: some people are more in charge of it than others; some initiate flows and movement, others

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<sup>3</sup> According to estimates of the UN, the number of international migrants reached 272 million people in 2019 (United Nations 2019).



don't; some are more on the receiving-end of it than others; some are effectively imprisoned by it. (Ibid.: 149)

Following from this, Doreen Massey discusses the position of a migrant from whom agency is often taken away, and who is not 'in charge' of their movement in the same way as for example, a travelling academic (ibid.). The listener might ask themselves about the ways in which their migration status informs their listening experience, such as their reaction to sounds of authority, such as police cars, airports, harbours and similar.

The reflexive approach vis-à-vis local cultural customs and etiquettes need to be adopted as an example of good practice. Are there sites where recording, or even just a presence of a microphone could disturb or be deemed inappropriate? Questions that the listener might ask themselves. The countries with totalitarian regimes exerting surveillance, places of conflict and post-conflict transitions are examples of such sites in which eavesdropping can have consequences for a listener researcher, and also for local people. From personal experience of research as a member of the Bosnian diaspora, my microphone provoked questions in Sarajevo: Am I carrying a gun or a bomb? Why am I 'aimlessly' walking about? What and why am I recording? As a female recordist, I was asked questions, but these are likely to have been asked much more aggressively of a male colleague. Gender and cultural differences do influence not just what is experienced while listening in situ, but also the ways others react when witness a listener researcher walking slowly, or interacting with field recording equipment.

One of the most vivid examples where gender conditions access to the event of significant cultural value is Muslim funeral rituals in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Muslim funerals are traditionally followed by rituals in public – attended mostly by men (Hadžiabdić 1985), and in private – attended 'traditionally by women' (Sorabji 2008: 103). The public ritual, *dženaza*, is often documented by a videographer as the gathering of hundreds of members of wider community, neighbours, co-workers and acquaintances. Recording of sound at these rituals would not attract attention or be ethically insensitive as long as the recordist is informed about local etiquette. However, female-led funeral rituals<sup>4</sup> are performed in the privacy of the family home, and all details of the recording should be discussed with family members, including the ways in which the recording will be used in the future. The recordist should be familiar with local culture and, preferably, be a member of community. For instance, the framing and treatment of sound in *Tevhid*, a four-channel video piece by Koštana Banović (2014), reflects the intimacy of this private, domestic, female ritual. She described the experience of a commemoration of the mother of a friend, under the ritual guidance of a *bula*, as follows:

*Bula* is a woman who is in charge of this ritual.

Being familiar with the Quran and the rich literature that praises the Prophet in the original languages, *bulas* have the knowledge and authority to compose the framework of a gathering. This ritual gathering is in the home of my friend Amra, for her mom who recently passed away. (Banović 2014)

Following on this, the ethnic, racial, gender and educational identity inform the listening experience. A white field recordist with a large boom microphone is implicated differently in the sociopolitical context of a Black Lives Matter gathering than a person of colour. A reflexive

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<sup>4</sup> The rituals of *tevhid* are a significant cultural trait of Islam in Bosnia (Kulanić 2020), but their practices are based on oral traditions and differ greatly across the country.

attitude can inform a recording technique, the recordist might use smaller, binaural microphones, or record conversations with individuals, instead of primarily recording the noise of the crowd.

These suggestions are based on a number of case studies and interviewing practices, as well as listening and field recording in Bosnia-Herzegovina and in Scotland (Zećo 2019).<sup>5</sup> The author has recorded in places of residence, and in places that were unfamiliar before, as a migrant and a member of a diaspora. Listening in context evokes memories and increases awareness of the ways in which different sociopolitical factors are interlinked. Hearing the Muslim call for prayer voiced simultaneously alongside church bells is heard by a resident of Sarajevo as a sonic marker of the diverse religious groups that reside in the city. It voices a diversity that persists in spite of the events of the war, and further, it is a marker of territory. These sounds sonically permeate the public spaces as 'sonic religious iconography' (Zećo 2019: 133).

#### 4. CONCLUSION

A common critique of soundscape composition, in relation to field recording and soundwalking, is that it represents 'sonic tourism, where the concert performance is akin to a public showing of personal holiday sites' (Drever 2002: 21), or on other hand, 'sonic fetishism where the artist is seen to attach an irrational reverence over recorded and reproduced sound, or its organisation' (ibid.), which leads some authors to argue that it relies too heavily on environmental contexts. However, as soundscape composition emerges in a place while the artist is attentively listening, the work gains artistically by working with tensions derived from the site. An example of good practice can be found in Peter Cusack's work in Chernobyl as part of the project *Sounds from Dangerous Places*. In this case, the residents are key contributors to the sound project. The project *Sounds from Dangerous Places* is presented as a book with two CDs in which field recordings, Cusack's notes, contextual research and stories from residents are interweaved (Cusack 2012). There is a sense of reflexive, self-conscious engagement with the places through listening.

The collage of references and examples presented in this article encourage listeners to reflect on their sociopolitical involvement in the places where they listen. The aim is to raise awareness from the ground up, from fieldwork to artwork. Field recordists bring a great deal of bias and preconception into the creative processes of listening and recording that are contributions to the creation of new knowledge. The raising of awareness of sociopolitical interaction between listeners' preconceptions and the contextualities of sites can inform creative decision making, and subsequently, the ways in which the artwork emerges and lives in the world.

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<sup>5</sup> As part of her PhD research, the author conducted a study of personal experiences of soundscape in Sarajevo and Maglaj in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Aberdeen and Banchory in Scotland. The research methodology combined soundwalking, field recording with sound-informed performance art practice, and semi-structured interviews with residents.

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