

Acoustic Commons Study Group response
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Response 1) Portals and Portals

First – Ella's text – and specifically the idea of living in radio. A quote:

'Between us two there is an airy nowhere, inhabited by voices and nothing else – Helloland I should call it'

I was struck by the parallels between this and Rudolf Arnheim's treatise on radio from 1933, in which he writes of 'the great miracle of wireless': 'The omnipresence of what people are singing or saying anywhere, the overleaping of frontiers, the conquest of spatial isolation, the importation of culture on the waves of the ether, the same fare for all, sound in silence' (14).

The early history of radio abounds with visions of a world without borders, united through sound. Radio contained the promise of listening in to intended sounds across geopolitical boundaries. But it also contained the promise of listening out towards an unknown world.

Today we were doing exactly this: listening to multiple places, multiple streams, collapsing distances, picking up old conversations, bringing places into being through various signals.

Listening, then, is a kind of portal, and so too is the pandemic.

Second text: Arundhati Roy – The Pandemic is a Portal

Roy describes how the pandemic has played out in India, and concludes that:

Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next.

She continues:

We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.

Portals of listening. Portals of possibility. Portals nested inside other portals.

And I wanted to put these ideas into conversation with Shannon Mattern's piece on Urban Auscultation and listening to cities (that Helen also mentioned in the chat).

Mattern writes that COVID has reshaped the soundscape: as we adjust to new spatial confines, to an altered sense of time, we also retune our hearing. And this fits into a much longer history of constantly revising the way we listen to the city.

She makes the point that listening machines have racial and gender biases built in, and serve to further inequities in care, in medicine, and in the provision of urban services like housing and policing.

The same holds true for the pandemic, which of course is not a great leveller, as some have argued, but is an amplifier of inequalities, playing out along lines of race, gender, class, wealth and so on.

Response 2) Sound and Solidarity

One soundmark of the current moment is that of sounding out appreciation for healthcare workers: clapping or banging pots for health services that often barely exist.

These are sonic rituals of citizenship – dutifully performing our thanks and loyalty to systems that have been left to fail (kind of like the security guard at the shopping centre, standing over and protecting empty space).

Elsewhere, people are subverting these ideas: those who choose not to applaud, but to speak directly to the government: 'give them PPE'. Or at the Mayday demonstration in Athens yesterday – people gathered to protest, keeping the required 2 metres apart, to make the point that covered mouths still have voices.

As Mattern writes elsewhere, 'our cities have continued to provide spaces where a demos, a community and its individual subjects, constitute themselves (or divide themselves) through sound' (2017). Cities are sounding boards of solidarity – and one question now is of how to extend those solidarities (including to other species?).

Response 3) Commoning the Commons

There was a moment today when we realised how Anglocentric the chorus stream was. And another one when it became apparent that some people's stream was behind because of slow internet connections. The acoustic commons is limited, still full of silences.

The acoustic commons depends on infrastructures of listening and sharing – which, like all infrastructures, are subject to differential provisioning and access.

So I'm thinking about expanding the commons – commoning the commons – finding ways of listening to what Mattern calls the 'polyphonic city, which contains many distinct ways of sensing and knowing'. Which in turn opens up questions of diversity and belonging – and ideas of noise that have long been indexed to race, class, and foreignness.

Sounds migrate, are always moving – and can help us rethink society itself through movement.

And while this opens up a longing (as PA was saying), it also opens a space for hope. For while sounds are enrolled in constituting and controlling populations, they are also dream worlds of promise, crafted, voiced and made audible by marginalised groups.

References

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Mattern, Shannon. 2020. 'Urban Auscultation; or, Perceiving the Action of the Heart'. *Places Journal*. April. <https://placesjournal.org/article/urban-auscultation-or-perceiving-the-action-of-the-heart/>

Mattern, Shannon. 2017. *Code and Clay, Data and Dirt: Five Thousand Years of Urban Media*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Roy, Arundhati. 2020. 'The Pandemic is a Portal'. *Financial Times*. April 3. <https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca>