

EAR | WAVE | EVENT

Issue Two
Spring 2015
earwaveevent.org

Auditory (Con)texts: Writing on Sound

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Introduction

In this article I reflect on sound's relationship to the written word that is attempting to describe, explain, and articulate sonic phenomena. The article's interdisciplinary nature seeks to shed light on the inherent problems of writing on sound, particularly in the field of sound studies. Through the exploration of a number of sound-based writing projects and their methodologies, I argue that sonic phenomena often activate thought processes that, when expressed in writing, can transcend current epistemological constraints on sound and involve the listener's poetic or contemplative mood, a process outlining the listener's auditory situation.

1. Unsettling Sounds

It often happens that I become absent-minded or fall into a reverie when listening to certain sounds. These sounds can be as mundane as the everyday sonic occurrences we don't usually attend to in our daily activities. Some of these sounds might be the blaring of car horns outside the office window, the click-clacking sound of the mechanical curtain against the glass pane in my office, a flush in the toilet, or the not-so-distant hissing of the electrical boiling mug for making coffee. These sonic phenomena are nothing special; they erupt and evaporate in my immediate environment during a work day without leaving any trace. However, some of these sounds do occasionally and randomly stand out, and induce an elevation of myself to some other perceptual *plane* perhaps not directly related to the source or place of occurrence of the sonic phenomena. These sounds open doors into

another world beyond their intended immediate meaning or object-hood. I try to understand why they manage to unsettle me in such a way that I enter into this elevated state of contemplation. It seems that these sounds are not the specific causes for my becoming absent-minded and/or reaching a contemplative state; rather, somehow, a fertile auditory situation unfolds around me as these sonic phenomena occur. These auditory situations are what I am currently interested in in my research and artistic practices, and my curiosity lies in exploring the thoughts or the mode of contemplation such sounds trigger. More often than not, these thoughts, when registered or written down as scribbles, appear as poetic and expressive, touching upon certain reflective, abstract, and introspective states of the mind.

The Situationists, whose ideas have attracted the deep interest of urban theorists and artists, employed the concept of “psychogeography” to describe a certain experimental practice of subjective and mindful exploration of (urban) place (Sadler 1999; Coverley 2010; Self 2007). Bringing their ideas into sound studies, we can examine how acoustic geography engages mental construction of space through listening and perceiving sonic situations (Chattopadhyay 2014a). It is no surprise that Jean-Luc Nancy (2007) has also thought about listening in similar ways. In his writings, Nancy underscored how some sonic phenomena outline certain situations or contexts:

[T]o hear a siren, a bird, or a drum is already each time to understand at least the rough outline of a situation, a context if not a text. (Nancy 2007: 6)

I would argue that such situations unfold around a sonic phenomenon (or a number of sounds occurring together in a certain place), but, for the listener, the sound may seem to cease signaling its origins as it moves further away from its locative source into the yet-formless “auditory situation” brought on by a contemplative state of mind. In my recent writings, I have discussed the ways in which such situations might unfold spatiotemporally, resonating toward a stream of thoughts and poetic contemplation, and creating ripples in consciousness when a nomadic listener mindfully navigates from one place to another in a psychogeographic, rather than physical fashion. What I emphasize here is a shift in attention away from everyday numbed inattention to a careful and concentrated attention to sounds and their resonating, affecting qualities—in short, a listening to the process of “how”

rather than the immediate “what-is” of sounds. This special attention can be achieved by being mindful of sound’s fluid movements from one state to the other, which produce an elevated experience involving the listener’s contemplative state rather than an immediate meaning. In this article, I will elaborate on these ideas but will focus specifically on the methodological question of expressing such sonic states in words to address the problems of writing on sound. This will help us to examine and reconsider the predominantly logical-scientific language used in contemporary writings in sound studies. The methodology of such a project will provide us with a context for exploring sound’s transcendental potential.

But first, let us meditate on the notion of the “auditory situation”—a concept that I have been developing through my own artistic work with sound and listening methodology, as well as in my writing. I find resonances of such enquiries in the writings of sound artist and thinker Achim Wollscheid:

Situation means first of all everything that is given at a given moment in time and space. Now everybody experiences situations quite differently. Something that is a situation to me does not necessarily have to be a situation to you. Nevertheless, we all have a certain idea of what a situation is. How would each of us describe a situation? Maybe it is something that, for some reason, persists longer in our memory than other impressions. A special stimulus is needed which unifies differing events. How does this happen? (Achim Wollscheid 1996: 7)

Here, Wollscheid is questioning the basic development of a situation around a listener in time and space in an attempt to understand its association with memory and other perceptual impressions. Wollscheid goes on to discuss this “special stimulus” by shedding light on the “network of relations between different systems” of perception that envelop a situation:

Perhaps this stimulus is overwhelming, an accident or something outrageous. We will keep such situations in our mind like snapshots taken with a camera. (...) Several systematic units will occupy our perception at the same time. Size and order of the surrounding architecture will be as important as direction and speed of the moving crowd. The sounds and smells we receive quite unconsciously will add to the situation as well as the nearness of

other bodies around us. Many impressions mingle, without possessing an identifiable center or attraction point. Nevertheless, we identify a situation. Perhaps we do this because a network of relations between different systems becomes present. (Achim Wollscheid 1996: 7-8)

If we think about these situations in terms of sonic phenomena as points of departure, every such “auditory situation” thus draws on memory and a system of relations as Achim Wollscheid points out, be they spatial, temporal, or involving both in an intermingling of impressions that a listener acquires through perception. As I have shown elsewhere, the unfolding of such a situation operates in uncertain and open-ended fashion, perhaps the way sound-scholar Christoph Cox discusses sound's flux and fluid processes: “Sound, then, affirms an ontology of flux in which objects are merely temporary concretions of fluid processes. This flux ontology replaces objects with events” (Cox 2013: 4).

My absent-minded listening states are not rooted in the immediate sonic reality provided by sound phenomena, rather, they transcend mere recognition and knowledge of the source or object of sound. They move toward a realm of fluid thinking processes that unsettle the epistemic and ontological structures of sound. This problem of ambivalence prompts Cox to investigate sound's unsettling behavior outside of the object through the work of thinkers who also offered thoughts on sound: “For Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, music and sound are philosophically important because they present us with an ontology that unsettles our ordinary conception of things” (Cox 2013: 2).

Nancy has aptly described such transcendental behaviors of sounds as “listening strain[ing] toward a present sense beyond sound” (Nancy 2007: 6). And, perhaps resonating with Cox, who maintains his perspective on the mobile and virtual world of sound: “[A] strange world in which bodies are dissolved into flows, objects are the residues of events, and effects are unmoored from their causes to float independently as virtual powers and capacities” (Cox 2013: 6).

This mobile and contingent world of sound, as both Cox and Nancy envisage, seems at first rather disorienting for me: sonic events originate from physical places and locations and have been evolving spatially and temporally,

becoming illusory and disorienting auditory situations—they do not allow me the context to analyze logically. Deleuze and Guattari refer to nomads and nomadology (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986) to think through a state of being that resists the hierarchy of centralization and control outside the present sense of place. Auditory situations unfolding around nomadic listeners thus make it problematic to write on sound from a purely controlled and logical epistemological perspective of knowing the locative “what” of sound, forcing us to reflect on mental “how” of sound, emphasizing its contemplative capacities.

2. The Problems of Writing on Sound

When it comes to theorizing sound, being ephemeral and ineffable, situational sonic phenomena tend to transcend epistemic knowledge-structures, as we have seen above. If we explore a sonic phenomenon, we may find that a specific sound induces a flux of listening states in listeners who may indulge in taking the phenomenon as a premise or entryway into a fluid world unknown to them—it is this unknowing that works against the theorization of sounds. In every occasion of so-called “scientific” writing on sound, I come across the problem of the slippage of meaning while trying to theorize sonic phenomenon. As described above, many of the sounds otherwise direct listeners to an elevated state of mind, irrespective of their sources and the objective meanings to which particular epistemic theorizations of sound adhere. The problem perhaps lies in sound's resonant nature, as articulated by Jean Luc Nancy: “Why, in the case of the ear, is there withdrawal and turning inward, a making *resonant*?” (Nancy 2007: 3).

By “resonant,” Nancy means the evocative capacity of sound to transcend its mere locative source or objective meaning towards memory, remembrance and similar perceptual meanderings around and beyond sounds' epistemological groundings. Sound can indeed instigate a series of interconnected meditative states that hinder the concrete theorization required for scientific writing, primarily because of the nonsensical attributes of sonic phenomena and their suggestive resonances left in the human mind. In her introduction in “Sound State,” Adalaide Morris discusses sound's destabilizing potential: “[F]or the most part theories of aurality are deployed to mark the point at which lucidity disintegrates. When the ear is evoked primarily to signal moments of destabilization, slippage, or even psychosis, it

becomes the one sense through which nothing much can make sense” (Morris 1998: 5).

To the ever-evolving ears of a nomadic listener (most of us are likely to become one at a certain point in our travels), sounds essentially juxtapose multiple memories from places experienced, previously traversed, psychogeographically navigated, or convolutedly imagined. This myriad of places, and their multitude of sound environments, can be intermingling in nature but different in tone and textures, which envelope different sets of auditory situations. Every engine of a truck or every horn of a car *here* reminds one of another engine and horn from *there*, and these mingle and juxtapose over each other *somewhere*. This is the situation of a nomadic listener for whom sounds engender psychosis, destabilization, and unsettledness. Any effort to objectify sounds in theorization and normative structures of scientifically approved epistemic nature would not therefore succeed in thoroughly understanding the sonic phenomena. There will always be a “further,” a flux of meanings outside of the epistemic knowledge scientifically available from a given sonic phenomenon.

Following this problem, I intend to find an alternative methodology for writing on sound which, “strands the text in a private, timeless, hermetic isolation” (Morris 1998: 5). The writing can be as free flowing as the poetic scribbles made following a contemplative state of mind prompted by listening, with the listener being in an uncertain and evolving auditory situation. An emphasis on an organic or essentially anthropocentric, participatory, and interventionist methodology that I deliberately take up in this article conceptually relates to the personal or private, or more specifically, the *first-person experience* basis of a phenomenology of sound and listening (Don Ihde et al.).

In defense of this approach, I draw attention to the fact that some of the recent writings on sound studies are indeed increasingly concerned with the first-person and personal experience of sound, involving subjective issues in listening. In relation to this claim, I quote from a recent interview with artist and writer Brandon LaBelle, published in *Ear Room*:

Ear Room: There seems to be an acceptance of the “I” growing into academic discourse, particularly within sound studies.... David Toop’s (*Sinister Resonance*) and Salomé Voegelin’s (*Listening to*

Noise and Silence) publications on sound and listening, both have a strong, subjective voice. Do you have an opinion on why this trend or acceptance of the subjective is merging into sound arts discourse?

Brandon LaBelle: What I pick up from Salomé’s book is an intense interest in phenomenology and the experiential, so the subjective seems to be coming from this interest. (*Ear Room* 2012)

In this conversation, the emphasis on the personal-subjective experience of sound relates to what is thought of as typical phenomenological investigation in sound, considered in simple, lucid, and straightforward language so long as the account remains autobiographical (Don Ihde, 2007: xix). This autobiographical positioning certainly helps to explain the inward contemplation associated with sounds while listening—and subsequently reflecting and writing.

In his work “Listening,” Jean-Luc Nancy argues that the philosopher is one who hears, but cannot listen, “or who, more precisely, neutralizes listening within himself, so that he can philosophize” (Nancy 2007: 1). This frame of argumentation challenges the currents of epistemic discourse in sound studies that equate “listening” with “understanding,” “audibility” with “intelligibility,” or the “sonic” with the “logical.” From the outset, the equation seems linear by keeping the epistemological paradigm as the only framework possible for studying sound. However, rather than remaining within this limited frame, I am asserting that it would be worthwhile to explore the contemplative, thoughtful, and poetic potential of sonic phenomenon in the listener’s mind. Sound studies have been overly concerned with sound in epistemological-scientific knowledge production. However, some prominent scholars like Jonathan Sterne have tried to acknowledge definitive principles of sound studies while keeping room for inclusion of other viewpoints, perspectives, and interpretations:

Sound studies’ challenge is to think across sounds, to consider sonic phenomena in relationship to one another—as types of sonic phenomena rather than as things-in-themselves—whether they be music, voices, listening, media, buildings, performances, or another other path into sonic life. (Sterne 2012: 3)

Sterne defines the area of sound studies inviting an anthropocentric approach, and mentions the role of the human in the sonic universe. I would like to draw from this approach to enrich my argument for an autobiographical approach to sound and listening, or more specifically, mindful sonic perception of the individual and de-territorialized “nomadic listener,” constantly navigating and negotiating various auditory situations. Furthermore, Sterne also stresses the human-centric contribution to the sound studies:

Sound studies is a name for the interdisciplinary ferment in the human sciences that takes sound as its analytical point of departure or arrival. By analyzing both sonic practices and the discourses and institutions that describe them, it redescribes what sound does in the human world, and what humans do in the sonic world. (Sterne 2012: 2)

This contribution of the human to the sonic world can be understood in the ways in which listening can be a more fluid, contingent, and interactive process by involving the listener’s mind at the heart of the situation. This fluid process is reflected in the articulation of listening in words, not by the mere recognition of a sound (through relating to its meaning by apparently locating its source or object), but by apprehending the resonances and ripples they trigger in the contemplative mind of the listener. The listener I am considering here could be understood as a “nomadic listener,” who is not bound to a certain place or locale. The constant mobility produced through this kind of listening results in intermingling of mental topographies—and sound’s multiplicity of meanings and renderings become possible through spatiotemporal juxtapositions.

Such a nomadic listener traversing constantly emerging auditory situations may indulge in particular kinds of thought processes. These processes are generated by means of cognitive association, immersion, and presence in the context of an inter-subjective interaction with sonic phenomena involving memory, imagination, and experience of other places. Essentially subject-oriented and contemplative, the itinerant sonic interaction between listeners and constantly emerging situations (as cognitive processes of what I have elsewhere called “hyper-listening”) transcend the ontological and epistemological constraints of sound. This transcendence moves toward the inclusion of the contemplative states of the listener with a sense of poetic

abstraction and a mindful, elevated, or ecstatic experience of sound where the listening is expanded inwardly. The process of articulating these sonic interactions needs to address the subjective and inward perception of sound within the ‘mindfulness’ of the listener that is not bound to a critical-analytical framework, but more attuned to the *dhyāna* or ‘musing’ state of the mind, as thought in Indian philosophy, allowing the “contemplation of the characteristic of transiency” (Malalasekera, 1967: 82).

Following this alternative approach, inward contemplation in listening may lead to writing on sound more open-endedly and inclusively, and, I contend, through this method perhaps we can also examine the way memory, imagination, and the personal experience of the listener can be employed to interpret the character of sound. The assumption of the “self-induced” subjectivity of contemplative listening is the main proposal of this project. Through the praxis of writing, I explore a methodology of interpreting sonic phenomena into written textual formations as an intervention in order to substantiate my argument. The central point here is that sonic ephemera can sometimes generate an elevated and contemplative mood within the mind of the listener, and when this mood is framed in writing, it can then be contextualized as a poetic expression. This expression can be completed in a far more comprehensive way when compared to theorizing the sound from a perspective of “knowing” it as a perceptual accomplishment operating beyond objective sensation. Compare to the way Michael Butera explains this in his article “Sound for Thought”: “Such a pursuit frames listening as an incorporative process rather than a simple perceptual accomplishment. While recognizing the limitations of analogical argument, I propose that it offers a creative and productive reimagining of audition beyond objective sensation. (Butera 2011: 53)”

When writing on listening experience, merely theorizing about or analyzing sound will be unable to reflect on the situation that has triggered the listener’s complex emotive context, imagination, memory associations and mood. The sound of the car horns from the office window, the fleeting shout of a boy on the street, the flush in the toilet, or the nearby sounds of the coffee machine do not seem to be mere sonic objects. They offer an entryway into a poetic contemplative mood in which a constant traveller of the phenomenal world may indulge. Instead of articulating corporeal “things” in the physical space of the world, the traveller prefers to remain detached as an onlooker, engaging with thoughts triggered by the infinite sonic events

emanating from the phenomenal world into the domain of a metaphysical state that is embedded in listening. This, of course, unsettles the sound's location-specificity, objective source, and immediate meaning-based knowledge structure, and directs one toward an explosion of memories, imaginings, fantasies, enigmatic and unreal thoughts. Such assumptions may resonate with Steven Connor when he states that, "all unlocated sounds are enigmatic" (Connor 2004: 61), or with Don Ihde, who assumes that (in listening), "Usually this capacity of imagination is centrally located in fantasy, but the unreal presentifications in each of the forms of imaginative activity may occur either spontaneously or at will" (Ihde 2007: 119).

With an unsettled, imaginative, unreal, and enigmatic state of language that is far removed from being controlled, concrete, logical, and scientifically understandable, how can we approach describing, explaining and articulating sonic phenomena? Perhaps we need to investigate experiential accounts of sound themselves.

3. Describing Acoustic Experience

What is an acoustic experience? Can it be described with any real accuracy? And if so, how? Let us try to describe the sound of rain falling on the windowpane. We can certainly describe the phenomenon with the text, "sound of rain falling on the windowpane." This description is straightforward in its approach, but does not give any hint of the specific auditory situation created by rain falling on the windowpane in a specific locale to a specific listener who happens to be in that location at that time; further, it does not share any of the situational context, feeling, or mood. Although linguistically and "scientifically" correct, this description does not include any of the spatio-temporal development that the situation may be going through. We can then expand the description including a few more words: "sound of incessant rain falling on the dark windowpane in the depth of the night." This description tries to accommodate the situation in a more comprehensive way. The reader can still say that the description is not giving the fullest or most inclusive picture of the situation, and the limitation imposed by language over sound seemingly cannot be bridged with words that intend merely to apprehend and "know" the phenomenon. How, then, can these auditory situations be described?

For many sound scholars, the emphasis on producing "knowledge" about sonic experience has preceded an exploration of experience that would move toward describing it in its entirety. In this context, we may consult Steven Feld and his notion of "acoustemology": "By Acoustemology, I wish to suggest a union of acoustics and epistemology, and to investigate the primacy of sound as a modality of knowing and being in the world" (Feld 2003: 226). Feld further elaborates this idea in more personal, as well as lucid language:

These days I am exploring acoustic knowing as a centrepiece of Kaluli experience; how sounding and the sensual, bodily, experiencing of sound is a special kind of knowing, or put differently, how sonic sensibility is basic to experiential truth in the Bosavi forests. Sounds emerge from and are perceptually centred in place, not to mention sung with, to, and about places. Just as "life takes place" so does sound; thus more and more my experiential accounts of the Kaluli sound world have become acoustic studies of how senses make place and places make sense. (Feld 2001: 3)

In the sense of the hybrid and apparently tongue-in-cheek term of "acoustemology," the world is known and made sense of through acoustic experience. Writing on such experience still needs to draw on idioms and scientific codes of anthropology and epistemology—a corpus of existing knowledge and hypotheses that intends to theorize the acoustic experience in written passages such as the above. We don't hear the Kaluli sound world in this passage, nor do we have a glimpse of the tone and texture of the situation. All we have is scientific jargon and words that try to make sense of sounds but remain at a distance from sound and its unfolding situation

It is no surprise that sound is found to be difficult to be described in words. Take the example of writing practitioner Randy Murray's comments in the chapter "Describing Sound" in his book *Writing Assignments*:

Sound is one of the more difficult senses to relate in writing. Sound envelops us, even when we limit our other senses. Close your eyes and you still hear. Immerse yourself in uniformly warm water and you still hear. We can't close our ears—we have to stop them up, cover them over. Even while sleeping, sounds penetrate and influence our dreams. Even in the most silent environment, we can

hear our own breathing, our movements, even our own heart beat. (...) It is very difficult for many writers to stop and ask, "What do I hear?" (Murray, 2010: 56)

The participants of Murray's assignment are asked to write a short piece describing what they can currently hear. The instruction is to describe the sounds simply and if possible, directly without resorting to metaphor. Some examples from these assignments will help us to grasp the way listeners find it difficult to describe the acoustic experience in straight-forward words¹:

It is spring and a joy to open my office window while I work. The birds have been busy at the feeder all winter, but now I can hear them happily chirping and singing. There are few leaves, mostly buds; the soft regular breeze rustles my curtains. But the continual rumble of the distant highway is a distraction. That low, constant hum of trucks and the higher whines of passing cars makes me wish my office were far away, removed from the unending roar of that great loop around the city. When the wind picks up, it muffles the unwelcome noise. It's enough to keep me from closing the window and hiding in the silence of my room. (Participant I, 2010)

It's the dead of night and I silently read blog posts. The cold dark shifts a breeze every now and then, which I hear whistling through the heater vents. All is quiet, or not at all, for I would not be writing a piece about sound if it were. You just have to pay attention. Everyone is asleep, but I type, feeling my way to each letter on my delightful Mac keyboard. It feels good to write and hear the soft-clicking after each press. A clock ticks away the seconds, minutes, and before I know it, hours. (Participant II, 2010)

The flat, ever going tick of the clock in the dead night sounds off its insistent tell of passed time. My own soft breathing and the rustle of the blanket I lay in create a melodramatic drone to be heard. (...) I hear the winds rustling softly against the spring buds and leaves, as well as the highways sound of passing cars. (Participant III, 2010)

It is striking how the participants describe sound in such imprecise words—more often than not, their language touches upon the poetic and the transcendental. Going into further exploration of other writing projects involving students of listening with similar methodology, in their article "Sound Design for Media," Karen Collins and Bill Kapralos have described the varied expressions the students used in their course on listening as they tried to capture the fleeting experience and meaning of sound with inadequate words:

What becomes clear, as the sounds are listed, is that the language for describing sound is much less concrete than for describing images. Most students describe sounds in terms of causality (e.g. "dog barking"), but for sounds where causality was obscured, they may use perceptual descriptors (e.g. "loud," "rough," or onomatopoeic descriptions such as "beep"), while several students (with a musical background) may use musical terms ("a staccato beeping C major"). Although rare, students may have some acoustic knowledge and use this prior knowledge to describe sounds (e.g. "quick attack, rapid fade at 400 Hz"). This imprecise categorization of sounds leads to a discussion of the ways that we can listen to—and attend to—sound. (Collins and Kapralos, 2014)

The imprecise description of sounds sheds light on the correlation between listening and other sensory modalities like writing—taken as a cognitive paradigm in the practice of understanding—isolated or removed from actual vibration of sound and the scientific language that would otherwise be employed to faintly capture an analytical account if not an essence, to provide a context for discussing sound beyond causality. The students are tasked with returning to their original location outside of the classroom, to choose a single sound, and to describe that sound without referring to its cause. This exercise, as Collins and Kapralos mention, involves affect—an area I would also like to investigate in light of the listening subject particular to my project. Collins and Kapralos pose the question of affect beyond sound's causality:

Although it is uncommon that students are able to guess what sound is being described, the exercise is very useful in assisting students to think about sounds beyond causality. This thinking is important because sounds can be, and often are, used in media not for their causality, but rather for their semiotic connotations, affect,

¹ See the assignments in Murray, R. 2010. *Writing Assignments*.

timbre, colour, etc. In other words, providing students with another way to listen to and describe sound expands their thinking about sound beyond causality. (Collins and Kapralos 2014)

With this question of affect and subjectivity beyond causality, I would now like to turn to what might be thought of as a kind of implicitly oriental thinking dealing with mood, subjectivity and inwardness associated with sound and listening. In Indian aesthetic theory, subjective resonances embedded in sonic phenomena have been a highly discussed area. We find elaboration of this question in S. S. Barlingay's writings where he underlines the sonic subject: "We not only utter sounds, we can imagine sounds. A man can sing a song silently, i.e. he can make a mental division of time without it being perceived by any other person." (Barlingay, 2007: 29)

Ancient Indian philosophers divided the sonic subject in terms of *dhvani* (sound heard by the ear) and *sphāta* (sound grasped by the intellect), recognizing sound's multiple possible interpretations upon listening. This multiplicity of sonic interpretation helps me to believe in the basic tenets of this writing project on sound, in considering the stream of thoughtful, contemplative states potentially generated inside the itinerant mind of the listener. Indian rhetoricians have made meticulous studies of both the meaning and emotive context of words describing sounds. Words have at least two meanings, one literal meaning, which is described as *dhvani*, and the other suggested meaning, echoing the literal meaning of sound but going beyond it to accommodate the emotive context of the listener as *sphāta* or 'bursting out' of the energy when a multitude of associations within sound are released upon its occurrence in immediate reality, and further in the listener's mind grasping it in subjective contemplation.

Emphasizing the sonic subject's essentially withdrawn, inward-looking and contemplative realm of thoughts, I have made experiments in my own works as well as with my students. In these experiments, the students have undertaken listening walks around the city of Copenhagen, and, following their walks, I asked them to write their experiences on a piece of paper. As many of them were international students coming from different countries with listening cultural different backgrounds, they experienced the sound of Copenhagen more like "nomadic listeners" – having heard similar sounds before, and yet still encountering their novelty in a different site, juxtaposing

memory and immediate experience, navigation and contemplation. They came up with passages like the following²:

Upon listening a second time, taking sound out of its natural, ideologically ingrained state was an incredibly visceral experience for it transcends my predisposed vocabulary of recognition. (Student I, 2013)

I also remember walking by a 7-eleven shop and the door was open. The sound was noisy and ugly and reminded me of huge refrigerators, it made me think of hospitals and slaughter houses. (Student II, 2013)

After this exercise, the walking back to the university was easier for me. I was surrounded by the sound of the wind, but I was also paying attention to my environment, like the sound of the bicycles for instance. To conclude, it was an interesting experience. It made me aware of the fact that we are not used to listening to our environment. As we said in class, we only focus on the sounds linked to the view. I do think that we lose a lot of our emotions and perceptions in thinking like this. (Student III, 2013)

On the way back we were passing by a square with a basketball field, and I was noticing a deep tone, which I was trying to locate, but didn't succeed. That was the first sound I heard, which I wasn't able to associate with some specific source. Therefore, it made an impression on me. (Student IV, 2013)

Most of these writings deal with the world of sound from the perspective of knowing the "what-is" of sound—more precisely, from a navigational point of audition. In the instances of failing to recognize the specific sources of the sound, the observers fell into an impressionistic understanding, coupled with suggestive remarks. These writings illustrate the general approach with which travelling listeners approach the understanding of sound in indefinite language relying heavily on the autobiographical accounts of the sonic experience.

² Collection of texts practiced in my course at University of Copenhagen.

In this connection, I would like to mention and refer to Salomé Voegelin and Daniela Cascella's writing projects. SoundWords³ is a blog about sound and words. In this blog made up of diary-like personal texts, Salomé Voegelin keeps chronicles of different places, sounds, and situations that she encounters. These writings demonstrate the immense potential sound may create when a poetic-contemplative mood overwhelms the analytical mind looking for immediate meaning in every listening experience. This methodology of writing is extended into Daniela Cascella's (2012) work "En abîme: Listening, Reading, Writing," which crosses into the semi-fictional realm of auditory chronicling where the autobiographical element of the listening experience is informed by free-flowing thinking while encountering sounds.

These projects show that sound's potential for triggering poetic contemplation and an elevated meditative state cannot be understood as supported by scientific language and fixed in a system that can be perceived outside the particular situation with the help of academic jargon. Likewise, traditional writing in sound studies, in which sound is studied as a physical phenomenon, has aimed at objectifying sound, while the "new" method I propose is characterized by sound being investigated in situations in which listening subjects and their psychic meanderings are always already celebrated — the method I have playfully termed as "hyper-listening." With this project, I wish to emphasize the psychic abilities sound manifests by accentuating a pragmatic conception of sound. From this perspective, sound always unfolds itself to an experiencing subject. This ability to assimilate, express and reflect upon sound is a basic human tool, not only for navigational orientation in the world, but also for finding ways to escape the sometimes too-dense materiality of the world by going inward into the mind and uplifting the spirit through indulging in the elevated and ecstatic experiences that everyday sounds may generate.

4. Listening/Writing

A confluence of literary concepts and sonic practices may occur when writing on sound allows room for navigating in and around the conventions of scholarly discourse. Particularly when it comes to theorizing and/or practicing

sound — being ephemeral and ineffable — situational sonic phenomena, as I have shown above, tend to transcend the epistemic knowledge-structure and ontological question of sound's immediate meaning, and therein lies the potential poetic take on sound and listening. In my own sound works, I attempt to shed light on sound's relationship to different moods, particularly the poetic, arguing that sonic phenomena often activate thought processes that, when rendered into text as random scribbles, can transcend epistemic constraints and involve poetic-contemplative states of the listener. In the ongoing experimental project involving sound and text, "Doors of Nothingness," I write down in random scribbles the fleeting thoughts that emerge from certain immersive but evanescent auditory situations. Essentially contemplative and personal in nature, this project explores the pervasive interaction between constantly migrating humans and their contextual sonic environments involving the perceptual and cognitive processes of the listening subject.

Working on this set of assumptions, the methodology of the project incorporates the everyday of the nomadic listener/artist to locate such situations in sporadic urban spaces—such as a toilet, an empty room, a train compartment, a staircase, or in a busy office corridor. Fieldwork includes ubiquitous sound recording and simultaneous writing, developing an archive of sound and text in close relationship with each other. This collection of automatic writing as scribbled thoughts and corresponding audio recordings constitute the body of the archive, which becomes the definitive repository in which the process and production of artworks (and other forms of outcome that the project envisions) take place. This specific method of writing can examine the way the memory, imagination, and personal experience of an itinerant listener elaborates the character of sound in words; a logical and controlled analytical language would not be able to achieve this particular vivid articulation. The works rely on intuitive listening rather than the reasoning involved in deciphering the immediate meaning of sound. The strong belief in inward contemplation, subjectivity, and an enhanced "mindfulness" available to freely wandering, deterritorialized or nomadic listeners (because of their ability to free their ears from the location-specific objects), enables the project to explore the personal or private nature of listening on the one hand; and on the other, to engage with the investigation of sonic experience in a free-flowing style of writing.

³ See "SoundWords." <http://soundwords.tumblr.com>

5. A Few Writing Excerpts from the Project⁴

Text I, (Month/Year: March 2012, Time: Afternoon, Place: London)

The moment falls on the floor, and starts to roll down the hallway, towards darker corners of this room; time is elongated to embrace the pace of retreated body of sound. If the sound of this room is stretched to the farthest point of the wall, what remains? The grain of each syllable spoken and microcosm of every breathing and buzz have a shape, but, like an exhausted phone-card, they don't have any meaning anymore, the phone is not being waited on, the switch-board is not being pressed, the coffee-cup is severely unattended, the pencil is not grazing on paper, and their respective silences don't bother anyone. The moment stops rolling down and hits the bottom; as it stops, all the light goes out; it's easier now to listen to the grains of words that have been spent for so long. Now, the silence of the microphone awaits an eager tap, to say "hello!" to the audience.

Text II, (Month/Year: March 2012, Time: Morning, Place: Calcutta)

I look for freedom inside the close confines of a room; the walls slowly move toward me, and the geometry of my habitat stays constantly in flux. The intruding wind and its muffled diffusion of sound take over the silences and enhance them; they are the bits and pieces of silences that were leftover from yesterday. I have nothing to say to the objects lying within moving territory of my belongingness while the dispersing train-horn leaves the location; it provides for the essential sense of place and its nature of juxtaposition with other places already experienced and remembered. The train horn disappears into the construction sounds of the newly built houses, and I understand that my thoughts are becoming overtly descriptive by an extensive exposure to the world around me. So I look for freedom inside the close confines of this room to let the thoughts regain their innocence. The walls become merged with my skin, and the confines of this room closely surround my body. As I search for the exit, a train-horn appears and diminishes within construction sounds of a newly built house. The moving and the static, and the distance between them grow beyond a known arithmetic. They merge into another and replace my search for freedom, as

⁴ These texts will appear in an upcoming artists' book publication 'A Nomad's Guide to Listening' (London: Touch, 2015)

the confinement appears to be free of any preconceived notion of a closed space, and thus, I embrace the forthcoming walls, the enhanced silences, and the wind.

Text III, (Month/Year: March 2012, Time: Evening, Place: Calcutta)

I search for connections in dispersing air; the eagerness to navigate news from outside the window comes to a standstill by the edge of travel; the location does not offer any thread of narrative where I can put myself in; rather, dislocated within the sound of television from each of the arrays of apartments, I consider myself detached from an intangible collectiveness that only such an unknown and foreign place can produce. But why do I see myself foreign in this landscape? This is land of my forefathers, of numerous other faces that intermittently appear in dreams. The spoken words are sounds that have been absorbed since my early days of hearing. I step in the land, and the earth vibrates in a known chord progression; I put my ears to the expanded spaces of my footsteps, and visibility is informed by appearance of objects that I have been exposed to since the day I learnt to touch and feel textures of different surfaces. Why do I then struggle to connect to the nature of things in the locative here, as if in deep dementia I try to capture air in my grip, and that liquid wish flows away into perpetual oblivion. If I don't belong here, then where do I find myself as an insider? The place I left behind, and the place that is forthcoming, equation of these questionings join them both into a labyrinthine corridor of no-end where I constantly stay fervent to find a connection.

6. Commentaries and Notes

In this writing project, I have employed the notion of hyper-listening as *praxis*, employing such concepts and methodologies of listening where seemingly mundane auditory situations are explored and studied by means of their spatio-temporal development, and (con)textualized by chronicling the myriad thoughts triggered within the psychogeographic evocation of the respective places in the listener's drifting mind. This series of writings works as a set of exercises and experiments involving the methodology of "hyper-listening" that intends to explore mindful aspects of audition. In this constellation, I consider the thoughts of philosopher Gemma Corradi Fiumara who speaks of "listening patiently" in her book, *The Other Side of Language: A Philosophy of Listening*:

Philosophically, however, we should perhaps remark that it is the capacity of paying heed to a story that allows the unfolding of its meaning; the narrative does “exist” because it is listened to and thus its sense may come across and develop into further myths. A listening propensity thus appears as the condition for all accounts. An account of connected events in order of happening depends on the maturation of a dialogic disposition. (Fiumara 1990: 73)

The listening propensity presented by Fiumara is reflected in the proposed method of writing that I frame here—to substantiate my argument, the method is also exercised in a series of workshops where participants are asked to locate certain locations that trigger a multitude of associative thoughts, imaginings, and/or memories, and are then guided to scribble down these thoughts to establish the context of their listening process in the form of “inner speech as the hidden monologue of thinking” (Ihde 2007: 118). Such experiments show that a given auditory situation appears to a drifting individual listener as liquid and amorphous; newly heard sounds are juxtaposed with sonic memories triggering the aural imagination's drift toward an explosion of sonic states and the ephemera of listening. The listener loses contact with the physical site and knowledge about the sounds occurring within the situation become disfigured, suggesting a disconnection between sound and its source. The inward perception of situational sonic phenomena thus resonate with an *elevated* state of the mind.

7. A Nomad's Guide to Listening

The title of Achim Wollscheid's 1995 talk⁵ at Kawasaki City Museum as part of *Sonic Perception II* is, “Once the Sounds Start to Disintegrate, the Words Will Form Differing Patterns.” This title not only makes me contemplate its poetic connotations, but it affectively stimulates me to rethink the relationship between sound and words, listening and writing, given the current status of writing projects on sound, particularly in the academic setting. In academic writing, broadly in the area of sound studies, an analytical style with keen emphasis on scientific knowledge production is embraced (Pinch and Bijsterveld 2012: 11). However, even Pinch and Bijsterveld express their doubts as to whether sound and listening do in fact have the potential to produce such objective means of inquiry: “The final and

most crucial question is why listening has nonetheless remained contested and still lacks the same legitimization given to other means of knowing. In other words, under which conditions have sonic skills been accepted as an ‘objective’ means of inquiry alongside visual ones in science, engineering, and medicine?” (Pinch and Bijsterveld 2012: 12).

There is a fluctuation in academic and scientific writing on sound at the moment. On the other side of the spectrum from this scientific quest for listening and epistemological inquiry into sound such as Pinch and Bijsterveld's, we find other voices deeply sympathetic to writings that come out of fleeting sonic experiences and non-linear modes of engaging with listening selves. Daniela Cascella is such a voice representing this autobiographical/subjective turn in writing on sound:

Maybe because there is an abundance of wordy books on listening and sound, some of them overwhelming to my ears and eyes, my aim at the moment is to write in a way that is less wordy and less linear, with loose and frayed threads, embedding spaces of quietude. I see my recent writing as an eerily murmuring marginalia around the edges of the current ponderous discourse on sound. (Cascella 2014)

At this juncture, I would like to intervene and suggest embracing an inclusive approach and methodology in writing on sound so that we may enrich words by allowing more free-flowing styles and expressions embracing the autobiographical and subjective propensities embedded in the hidden monologues of thinking inherent in sonic experiences. I emphasize that writing and discussing our contemporary, nomadic mode of listening need not only look to scientific objectivity as the dominant mode for understanding sound, but should also engage with the processual, phenomenological aspects of the listening subject's encounter, experience, and interaction with the ineffable nature of sound.

⁵ See Wollscheid, A., *The Terrorized Term* (Frankfurt: SELEKTION, 1996).

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