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Introduction: Sounds and Silence in the Pandemic City

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Abstract

The editors of Streetnotes 28: Sounds and Silence in the Pandemic City provide an introduction to the issue and its content.

Back in March 2020 when the levels of the virus contamination with Covid-19 became alarming, various governments, under the recommendations of the World Health Organization notably, attempted to contain the virus dissemination with emergency and sanitary measures for their populations – confinement, social distancing, and lockdown – while vaccine research against the virus was in its initial stage. As a consequence, the social, economic, and cultural lives of people were drastically put to a halt in various countries. Flights were cancelled and people were strongly recommended to basically stay at home and limit their circulation in public places to a minimum. A major slowdown held the world in suspended time, at levels hardly ever seen in recent human history. More than 18 months later, in September 2021, the whole world is still dramatically shaken by the pandemic. The mortality rates due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the variants that have spread in the meantime are still alarmingly high in many countries. The geopolitics of the pandemic has also revealed a profoundly unequal access to vaccination across countries and regions.

As a consequence of the ongoing pandemic, the social rhythms have been altered, and so have the noise levels. A significant decrease in noise levels has been registered in many cities across the world: the absence of standard street noises, foot traffic, night life, and public gatherings has been both profound and uncanny, making many aware that sounds, which we usually took for granted, had simply ceased to exist. This opened our ears to other sounds, which perhaps had existed prior to the pandemic, but had been silenced by the dominant, louder ones, which were now missing. This opened our ears also to unexpected moments of silence, for days and nights. And yet, a significant increase in noise on an individual level in private spaces was also taking place, as many activities such as work and fitness moved indoors: the clicking of keyboards, the Zoom hum, the inevitable “Can you hear me?” or the unwanted background noise from a participant who does not know how to use the mute button during online meetings, the jogging feet and fitness equipment sounds from small apartments turned makeshift gyms – all of these filled our old, familiar environments with new, unfamiliar sonic experiences.

Furthermore, various marches, protests, and social unrest invaded the emptied public sphere; staged events took place in streets, parks, on

bridges, and around landmarks. These gatherings relied on producing, amplifying, and conflating sounds: shouts, voices on megaphones, songs, repeated slogans, claps, whistles, in order to oppose police brutality and political betrayal. Black Lives Matter movement events shook the soundscapes of cities across the world. Bystanders joined the euphoria, offering supportive claps, whistles, water, snacks. But then looters set law enforcement cars on fire and broke designer store windows. Police in riot gear collided with protesters; helmets, shields, and batons were met with unprotected human flesh. Police helicopters circled too close above protesters, their persistent, deafening noise supposed to prevent trouble on the ground. It was one sound against another: protesters against choppers; people against the police. Whose sound would prevail over the space of the city? Is power measured in decibels?

Beyond or beneath pure noise, sound and silence are equally powerful – for different reasons. Sound helped create feelings of camaraderie and community despite the isolating measures of lockdowns. From the privacy of one's home, one could be collectively socially present through sonic participation: the banging of pots and pans against the government in Rio de Janeiro; the clapping of hands in support of front-line workers in New York City; the singing of songs in unison to lift people's spirits up in the streets of various French, Italian, Spanish, and other cities. The spontaneous or scheduled neighborhood concerts from balconies, fire escapes, porches, and stoops brought neighbors old and new together: to listen to, create, teach, and enjoy music together. All in all, both sound and silence have carried messages during the pandemic: they have revealed or suggested attitudes. They may have divided; they may have also united us – differently.

The Covid-19 pandemic opened new windows – did we also begin to hear sounds differently? We began to actually *listen,* to our rarefied sound environment – or did we? (And if so, then what did we hear?) The sounds themselves had changed: they were lower, forcing us to be better listeners, to be more sound-aware. While our public social life had slowed down, the world had also become mute. Social rhythms were different; parties, party sounds had almost stopped for good. We gained (in) silence (and perhaps in solitude too), what we had lost in public social life – the routine, the rituals. In at least some moments during the day (or at night), we were thinking; we were actually *listening to silence.* Silence is always relative. As we know since at least John Cage: ultimately, for better or worse depending on the perspective, we'd be hearing/listening to our heartbeat. So then eventually, we started listening to *the sounds of*

silence – at least some of them. We gained silent moments, almost robbed from the usual urban sound confusion. While the pandemic is still raging, there is an echo chamber, a chain reaction that goes from sanitary confinement to sound confinement. There have been moments of attentive, privileged listening; whomever went through them knows them, and so does whomever may have wanted to share them with others, as sound stories. Such listening moments speak to everyone. Muffled or lowered, they *resonate* with everyone's daily life in these pandemic times.

This *Streetnotes* issue on "Sounds and Silence in the Pandemic City" is an attempt to address this particular dimension of sound, when the usual public social life has been suspended for a prolonged period of time, and we have had to inhabit new, unfamiliar soundscapes. The Issue "looks," or rather "listens," to various cases in some cities in North America, South America, and Europe, and attempts to document the ways in which social life has been experienced sonically. How has the relative silence of social life been dealt with, in New York, Montreal, Johnstown, Rio de Janeiro, Recife, Belo Horizonte, London, Lyon, or Sofia? Has it translated into an increased awareness of the daily urban sound surround, or has it been, rather, an added source of stress and anxiety? The Issue takes the present context of Covid-19 to reflect and explore the sound environment in our daily life from a variety of perspectives – theory, ethnography, essay, poem, drawing, photography, report, diary. In one genre or another, all contributions collectively address the changes in how we hear, how we listen, how we speak, how we keep silent, how we break silence, how we make sound, how we remember sound...Some of them remind us that there are voices that we will never hear again…

The 27 soundscape explorations in this volume are organized in seven sections. Section One begins with two socio-anthropological contributions – Luciana Ferreira Moura Mendonça's "Sonorities and Cities (In Times of Crisis)," which links theory about soundscapes and *rhythmanalysis* with the practice of listening during lockdown in the city of Recife (Brazil); and Ismael Stevenson-Déchelette's "From Confinement to Sound Encapsulation: The Social References of Sound in Morro do Palácio, Niterói (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil)," which is based on an ethnography of "sound encapsulation" in a favela community in the city of Niterói. While Mendonça explores sonorities and cities theoretically, Stevenson-Déchelette reflects on the ways in which sound and soundscapes are and have been – during and before the Covid-19 health crisis – a consistent document of our relationship to privacy and intimacy.

Section Two draws our attention to sound practices, old and new, in the pandemic-struck city: be it New York, Sofia, Johnstown, or London. In "The Sound Seasons," Blagovesta Momchedjikova documents her different experiences of sound, noise, and music: indoor sounds, outdoor ice-skating rink music, helicopters and firecrackers, and summer concerts, among others, according to the different seasons in New York City (and once in Sofia) – both in poetry and prose. Khaly Durst offers, in "Dodging Partitions," a visual account through his photography of the separations of space and sound between customers and employees at an ice-skating rink in Brooklyn, New York. In "Swimming Sounds," Jo Noveli muses on the different music played at her local swimming pool in Johnstown, which seems to be the most extravagant event for her and the other pool goers during the pandemic. Claudia Brazzale then urges us to consider, in "Lockdowns," the disappearance and subsequent re-appearance of signature London city sounds during the several lockdowns that the city went through.

Section Three captures urban dissent, protest, and unrest, during the lockdown specifically in New York City. Traci Molloy, a multimedia artist, showcases her project "*Rest in Power Portraits*: Reverberations," during which she created chalk drawing memorializations of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Elijah McCain at Grand Army Plaza, a focal gathering point for protesters in Brooklyn, New York, creating a space for people to mourn and reflect in silence. In "Stories in Black," Keisha-Gaye Anderson presents us with three poems, where she deliberates the violence inflicted upon black bodies on a daily basis, and how that translates often into "bullets" and "blasts." Next, we see Rafaela Santos' paintings in "Silenced No More," where she suggests that the time of the pandemic became, paradoxically, an opportunity for black people to speak their truth despite being masked. Finally, Moussa Toni Cisse, in "Mixed Speak," relates the contradictions in trying to find his own voice as a young black man living in Brooklyn while being advised to remain "silent" for his own good, during the pandemic.

Section Four reveals the more pensive moods associated with making sounds and experiencing silence during the pandemic. In "Music, Pandemic, and Creative Idleness!" Alexandre Garnizé – a Brazilian, Rio-based percussionist and Candomblé practitioner – deliberates his African ancestry and identity through music and sound, as well as the wisdom and self-care practices learnt during lockdown. The loneliness of the pandemic is further explored by Michelle Dent in "a woman, alone,"

where she imagines what her dying mother might have been hearing in her last hours on this earth. Bruce Bromley further examines, in his piece "When the Fugitives Decide to Stay," how language operates during pandemic closures of various kinds, studying the intricate connections among silence, memory, and time. Jay Rodriguez then ponders the relationship between music and dreams and ancestry in his rumination "Dreams Are What Music Is Made of."

The authors in Section Five confront issues of noise and noise-making in the city. Jason Alley's "Louder" examines the current state of pandemic quietude, missing some noises and not others, as he relates his personal experiences to the artworks of others – painters, photographers, musicians, filmmakers, to name a few – who have created with various cities in mind. Timothy Youngs shares his observation of outside and inside noises in Nottingham, while working on a text about sounds at home, and realizes that sounds can be present and absent, at the same time, in his poem, "Innings." MJ Thompson, in "Death by Garbage Truck," draws our attention to the absurdity (or not) of human beings – "loud but unheard" – being run over by garbage trucks – "loud but unhearing" – in the city of Montreal. Finally, BJ Shapiro recalls, in his poem "BQE," a moment when snow hit his windshield on the Brooklyn Queens Expressway in New York City and the sound it made was so abrupt and loud, that it made him think of BB guns.

A series of diary entries from Brazil comprise Section Six, where seven students offer their experiences of sound in different cities and neighborhoods of Rio de Janeiro's metropolitan area. Part of The Sociology of Music class taught by Jorge de La Barre at Fluminense Federal University during the first semester of 2021, those students deliver their sound reports, documenting various aspects of their daily life during the pandemic. Michael David Brasil Nix, in "A Day in Quarantine," describes a day of quarantine, in his practice of studying and listening. Dan Rodrigues, in "Routine," points to some new routines of sounds and listening. In his short auditory report, in "Listening Log# 1 – Distribution," Diego da Silva Silveira depicts an almost normal working day, if it were not for the pandemic. Marcos Cardoso Quaresma, in "Listening Point – Daily Soundscape Recordings from a Window of an Apartment in a Building Located on a Street in a Residential and Commercial Neighborhood in the City of Niterói, State of Rio de Janeiro," proposes a meticulous objective register of the sounds heard at certain moments of the day, through his "listening point" – the window of his apartment. In "Soccer Sounds, from Ingá," Gabriel Góes takes advantage

of a soccer game watched on TV, at home, to be attentive to the sounds and cries that might have occurred differently, were the fans to watch the game from public places such as bars or restaurants. Ilana Marina Alves takes careful notes, in various moments during her day, of the sounds heard inside and outside of her house, in "All Sounds Are from My Home: Nova Iguaçu, Rio de Janeiro." Finally, in "While Taking My Dog for A Walk – A Sound Diary," Daniel Ramalho Grande da Luz takes the opportunity to pay attention to the sounds around him. In his afterword, he tells us about how the practice of writing a sound diary led him to dedicate his research project to some rock bands from Rio's underground scene, and how they coped with the pandemic, rehearsing, playing, or recording.

This diary-format is followed, though more extensively, by two more pieces from Brazil in Section Seven, the first one of which, "Like Birds in a Cage: Accounts About Social Isolation Soundscapes During the Pandemic in Brazil," offers an approach where soundscapes theory and sonic panoramas intersect. The authors, Graziela Melo Vianna, Lucianna Furtado, and Ricardo Frei Lima, professors from the State of Minas Gerais, share their own sound diary entries from the places they occupied during the pandemic lockdown, as well a collection of their students' sound diaries completed during the same time. This allows them to make observations, among which the uncanny one that isolation, though much complained about, is in fact a privilege unavailable to front line workers, favela residents, and the disenfranchised. The second piece, which closes the volume, is the comprehensive year-long diary of Jorge de La Barre, "Lockdown, Soundscapes, Dreams: A Diary (July 25, 2020 – August 8, 2021)," which provides a curious merge among stream of consciousness (dreamscape), sound theory, and film criticism. Sounds and silence have occupied La Barre's dreams and reflection, with equal intensity and urgency. His piece, as a culmination of the collection, asks us to consider sound as territory that can be established, given up, negotiated, contested, protected, imagined.

We hope that you will enjoy the diverse urban sound choreographies that the contributors to this volume have charted.

Note: This *Streetnotes 28* is our third joint collaboration for the journal, after *Streetnotes 25: Public Space: Between Spectacle and Resistance* (2016), and *Streetnotes 26: From Above: The Practice of Verticality* (2019).

About the editors

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