

Like Birds in a Cage: Accounts About Social Isolation Soundscapes During the Pandemic in Brazil

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Abstract

This article presents and reflects upon the transformations on the soundscapes of Belo Horizonte (capital of the state of Minas Gerais, in Brazil) and the surrounding countryside areas, noticed during the current social isolation period due to the health crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Introduction

The starting point is a discussion about the concepts of landscape and soundscape, upon which our work is grounded, as theorized by scholars in the fields of geography, art, and sound studies; and also, the notion of proxemic zone, which guides our understanding of the relation between the listener and their space. The article then moves on to the authors' own experiences during these pandemic days. One has stayed put, remaining in the center of a city with a population of 2.5 million people and taking notes of the different pandemic phases through the changing soundscape. Another has left her apartment in a bohemian part of town to stay at her countryside home, replacing the musical soundscape of nearby bars with the singing from tropical birds. Finally, the third author alternated his stay between places located in different neighborhoods of the city, looking at certain times for refuge in a farm in the countryside of the Minas Gerais. In addition to our own perspectives, we also discuss the experience accounts from 76 undergrad students, from Journalism and Advertising courses at the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG, in Portuguese), regarding their social isolation soundscapes. These accounts have been originally gathered for the "Sound and Sense" class, guided by Raymond Murray Schafer's sound diary, from his sound education exercises (Schafer 1992), and adapted to observe the soundscapes during the social isolation period due to the pandemic. The students' accounts and the authors' experiences are presented and discussed from a sound studies perspective, addressing the ways in which our sonic environment can shed light on urban changes and transformations in sociability.

1. Landscape/Soundscape: First Stop

Our starting point is the general notion of landscape. The term refers to the portion of an area accessible to an observer's senses of perception, so they can see, listen to, feel, and reach an established point of view. Therefore, a landscape can be considered as an object open for consumption, a domain of intervention and human activity (Lopes).

The relief variations become more evident in soundscapes described by Schafer (1994) as *hi-fi*, where one can clearly distinguish the elements, as opposed to *lo-fi*, where the superimposition of the elements makes it

difficult to distinguish different points on the relief map, since “individual acoustic signals are obscured in an overdense population of sounds” (Schafer 1994: 43).

We consider that such elements exist in a relational perspective, since that landscape is dynamic and depends on the action of the *flâneur*/observer/listener in the listening processes in order to make sense of its inter-related objects. As highlighted by Barry Truax, listening habits can be very different, creating a relationship between an individual and their environment. Moreover, the author emphasizes the listener’s active role in perceiving and ascribing meaning to soundscapes – as in “listening for”, not just “listening to” (Truax 16).

In this context, the listeners become part of the soundscape with their presence, even if they do so silently, and, at the same time, they operate their consciousness, experience, aesthetic and moral skills by observing it. The soundscape acts as a matrix by proposing frameworks, interpretations, and the construction of meaning to the listener. The effects of meaning arise, then, from the relation between the soundscapes’ textualities with the listener’s repertoire, described by Malraux as an “imaginary museum,” in listening practices grounded on the relief, through the listener’s wanderings across the landscape guided by their imaginary museum.

Neither confessions, subjective dives or classic essays, the landscapes relating images and concepts are signs of a subject made out of externalities, of a text of surfaces. The landscape is more than a style of thinking and writing, it is a way of living through wandering (Lopes 133).

Thus, we will move on to examining the accounts from the listeners of the changing soundscapes during the pandemic social isolation period. We agree with La Rocca, who approaches cities from a “sociological and cultural climatology” standpoint, in a way that observes “social temperature,” “cultural winds,” “symbolic precipitations,” “aesthetic clouds,” and similar weather phenomena happening at urban spaces at certain times. According to this view, “therefore, time contracts in space, thus giving a new meaning, a new accentuation of spatiality. Such spatiality could be called ‘imaginal,’ and it contributes to the accentuation of the present” (La Rocca 161).

Regarding the experience with the listener's space, there is another relevant notion in which our work is grounded: the concept of a proxemic zone, commonly used in studies about vocal gestures and the configuration of semantic spaces. The idea of proxemics refers to bonding and establishing relationships, allowing for a sense of integration, correlation, sharing affections, senses, and reasons (Maffesoli).

By referring to the notion of proxemic circumscription, we also align with Steinberg's definition, who approaches it as units of space and relations, capable of guiding discursive procedures, sensemaking, interactive positions, as well as establishing units of communication. It concerns a branch of semiotics, capable of unveiling the process of signification and semantization of the events in human spaces: an area of occurrence in which can emerge the presence of interlocutors and physical, non-human items, composing the scenario with their own agency and corresponding senses (Malcher).

Proxemics reveals the circumscription of three zones of sensemaking: 1) intimate space, concerning the voices and sounds that closely surround the listener, right next to them, only a few centimeters away; 2) private space, regarding an idea of proximity that can be a little wider, demanding louder noises in order to trigger the listener's senses; 3) public space, requiring some distancing from the listener while interacting with many dispersed people. Through reflecting upon the sounds from voices and other things, tuning those sounds to create a semantic space, we encountered a way to make sense of what was heard during the period of social isolation.

What is happening during the Covid-19 pandemic? Are there any remarkable changes in the soundscape occurring during these pandemic days? In the next section, we outline some changes in our own sonic environments, as perceived by this article's authors, and discuss some of our undergrad students' experiences, gathered through a remote teaching activity. These accounts, narrated by the voices who are currently experiencing these hard times in Belo Horizonte and other nearby towns, will shed light on significant social changes taking place in our surroundings.

2. Pandemic Experiences Heard by the Authors

2.1. First experience: staying in town (Lucianna Furtado)

The pandemic has had a profound impact on urban mobility, and, consequently, on urban soundscapes. Working remotely from home, most of my experiences of the city during the pandemic happened through my apartment's street-facing windows, on the second floor of a residential building in downtown Belo Horizonte, the sixth-largest city in Brazil, with a population of 2,5 million citizens ("[Belo Horizonte](#)"). Since most of my work as a researcher and PhD student was done remotely even before the pandemic, I had a clear parameter for comparing the changes of the surroundings' soundscapes throughout the different phases of public responses to Covid-19, such as the suspension of commercial activities, the transition to remote work, and social distancing and isolation.

This is a very busy area for both vehicles and pedestrians, so the noises of cars, buses, motorcycles, horns (especially during rush hours), restaurant employees cleaning the sidewalk in the afternoon, gym doors closing at midnight, people talking and laughing at the bus stop just outside, a friendly stranger in the street responding "Bless you!" to my boyfriends' sneeze in our living room – those were all part of my daily routine. Even on weekends, it would be very busy, because I live only one block away from the biggest street fair in the city, with 60 000 visitors every Sunday. In fact, those sounds were so common that I would usually "tune out" in order to keep working and studying, so for me, they became part of the background.

After the new coronavirus reached Brazil in March and people adhered to social isolation measures, by the last weekend of the month, there was a 72.5% decrease in traffic in Belo Horizonte (that decrease refers to data from March 28-29th, in comparison to the first week of the month – [Martins and Passarini](#)). At this point, *the silence became very unsettling*. As it turns out, all those sounds that I would sometimes complain about – or, mostly, ignore, as usual when it comes to keynote sounds – were very significant signs of the urban life around me, and their absence became a constant reminder of the pandemic outside.

With this sudden decrease in the traffic noise, the few remaining sounds became very outstanding, such as motorcycles – not just passing through, but mostly the sounds of the pilots stepping on the brakes or slowing

down as they looked for the right address to make a delivery. This would be more common at night, on weekdays, and also on lunchtime on weekends. The exception was on July 1st, when food delivery workers went on strike countrywide ([Rochabrun and Mello](#)), demanding better safety and health conditions, along with improvements on the apps' payment and evaluation procedures. That night was more silent than usual, without the sounds of the bikes' brakes, parking, and the motor running again after a few minutes.

This very revealing silence drew my attention to social inequalities in our context – inequalities that certainly precede the pandemic by a few centuries, but have also been significantly intensified by the new configuration of work relations. By September, some of the well-known sounds started to get closer to their usual pre-pandemic times, but they did not do so in an even manner. For instance, from my point of listening in Belo Horizonte's city center, I have noticed that the late-March silence in traffic slowly gave way to an increase in the sounds of buses, more intensely than the noise of typical rush hours, made by cars for individual, personal, or family use.

Working remotely is a privilege held by very few people in Brazil: in July, only 11.7% of the population worked from home; 64.5% of those working remotely were white and only 33.8% were Black; 73.5% of people working from home had a college degree ([Lisboa](#)). This way, by being louder and more frequent than the cars' noise, the sounds from public transportation became another reminder of the asymmetrical conditions that expose lower-class workers to higher health risks, due to their jobs requiring their physical presence and some level of proximity to their coworkers and/or customers.

Another relevant change in the surroundings was the return of a somewhat old custom, still heard in the suburbs or in small towns, but not very common in the capital's city center: sound ads, played in cars with loud audio systems slowly driving through the neighborhood, usually announcing local services or products. Known in Brazil as "the capital of bars," Belo Horizonte has a strong cultural tradition of bar sociability, which was heavily missed by its citizens during the pandemic. Some bars and restaurants in the city center, prohibited from opening to the public for six months, shifted to take-out and delivery services to try and compensate for the decrease in their main income source: lunch meals for downtown workers in public administration or private companies, and night customers out for drinks after work. With many of those employees

working from home, they resorted to their city center neighbors in order to keep up.

One of those bars/restaurants is La Greppia, famous for its 24-hour service (a very busy lunch buffet and a nightly all-you-can-eat pizza and pasta buffet) in downtown Belo Horizonte. From late May until the end of June, I could hear the car slowly driving by, sometime between 10 and 10:30 in the morning, playing “Tarantella Di Napoli” in the background while repeatedly announcing executive meals for take-out and delivery. A few smaller businesses followed suit, offering vegan meals or fresh bread delivery.

However, as some other commercial activities were further resumed in the city, those sound ads went silent again. Since early September, when bars and restaurants regained their authorization to open and sell alcohol to customers face-to-face, the late-night silence is slowly being replaced with a few loud voices talking, laughing, and making jokes outside by the bus stop. We are, however, still very far from what it used to be, considering the Covid-19 pandemic is not nearly over.



Fig. 1. Window facing the city center, Belo Horizonte, Brazil. Photographer: Lucianna Furtado.

2.2. Second Experience: Leaving Town (Graziela Mello Vianna)

Same city, same virus, but a totally different experience. When the University where I work as a professor decided to suspend all classes due to Covid-19, I decided to leave town immediately. I packed everything that was important to stay a month out, took my cat, put it all into my mother's car, and got on the road toward my countryside house. At that time, I couldn't imagine that I would stay longer than a few weeks. I was supposed to travel to Lisbon for my first exhibition as an artist and, a month later, to Paris, for an academic conference. But the pandemic days are unpredictable and everything changed – the most significant change, in this case, was the soundscape.

I used to live in a neighborhood known for its bohemian atmosphere and musical tradition. If Belo Horizonte is the “Capital of bars,” with a higher bars-per-person rate than any other city in Brazil, the Santa Tereza region is particularly crowded with them. A single one of its streets, for example, houses sixteen bars alone.

Belo Horizonte is a fairly young city, planned to be the capital of the Brazilian state of Minas Gerais in the end of the 19th century. Santa Tereza is one of the places where the workers who built the city used to live, therefore being also one of the oldest neighborhoods in town, with traces of the very beginning of Belo Horizonte's history. Throughout the 20th century, the neighborhood gave birth to musical movements such as Clube da Esquina and the careers of some renowned artists, who became famous both home and abroad (such as Sepultura and Skank, among others).

Clube da Esquina (Corner Club) was a Brazilian music artists' collective, originating in the Brazilian state of Minas Gerais. Clube da Esquina mixes rock and roll, progressive rock, bossa nova and jazz styles, with Brazilian popular music and classical music influences. The Beatles were also an important influence on Clube da Esquina. Together with Tropicália, Clube da Esquina is usually regarded as the Brazilian musical movement that achieved the greatest international resonance in the post-bossa nova period (beginning in the late 1960s and early 1970s) ([Light in the Attic Records](#)).

The city's oldest bar still in operation – “Bar do Orlando” – is also located in Santa Tereza, about 100 meters from the apartment where I used to live up until the pandemic. Before social isolation, people would gather in

this bar at least four times a week for activities like Carnaval rehearsals, as well as to play and listen to samba, chorinho, and MPB (Brazilian Popular Music).

It is important to emphasize that a huge part of bar sociability in Brazil is related to live music. Therefore, walking down the Santa Tereza streets at night, before the pandemic, was similar to a *flânerie* through a radio dial: different songs at every station, every bar, every corner. Despite living in a fairly quiet street in the neighborhood, where the birds waking up at dawn were the main sound marks composing the local soundscape, at night I could hear, from my window, distant echoes of the bars' music, the percussion from the Carnaval groups' rehearsals – from September until the King Momo party in February – or the descendants of the original musicians from Clube da Esquina, all together to play at the famous corner where their parents created this musical movement in the 1970s.

By leaving this bohemian and musical neighborhood to follow social isolation measures in my countryside house instead, in a gated community outside Belo Horizonte, the music hearing sessions became no longer unintentional. The music does not come to my window anymore, there are no bars, nor musicians around, and neither can I wander through the night. Live music is only possible if heard remotely on social media “lives,” mediated through technology. When I want to listen to music, I set my vinyl records in motion, browse my computer's music collection or look for songs on-line in my intimate space. In 198 days of social isolation, I listened to 205 vinyl records. The FM radio signal is very weak around here, so, in order to simulate the randomness of listening to a musical radio station, I put my records on in the same order they are placed on the shelves (without prior categorization). My plan is to listen to all the vinyl records in my personal collection before social isolation measures come to an end.

Considering Schafer's view (1994) on the soundscapes' relief and my place as a listener of such soundscapes, I take the birds singing as a sound mark of my morning soundscape in Santa Tereza, which had as its keynote sounds the distant noise of the cars moving through a wide avenue on the edge of the neighborhood and also a mining company's train, whose railway line runs parallel to that same avenue. During the pandemic, isolated in my countryside house, the sounds that stand out in the soundscape and the ones that are heard as keynote sounds have reversed roles: the birds have taken the place of keynote sounds, present

throughout the day, becoming sounds, to which I don't always pay attention. Cars hardly ever pass through here, only the few cars belonging to my neighbors, the community's security service and delivery services.

Other sound objects became part of the fabric of the soundscape during social isolation: the croaking of frogs; the loud sound of cicadas at the end of the day; the grinding sound made by toucans; the high-pitched sounds of parrots, seriema birds and tamarins; the wind blowing the trees back and forth; the loud sound of machines blowing the leaves scattered on the grass of the community's backyards; the neighbor's rooster singing every morning. However, despite the profusion of sounds that are part of my soundscape during this social isolation period, I hear it as a hi-fi soundscape, since I can clearly distinguish all the sounds, even those whose sources are located very far from my ears.

On the very few occasions that I left my countryside isolation to go to Belo Horizonte, the city's urban soundscape – where I was born and have always lived – seemed very strange to me, for different reasons as the months passed.

The Covid-19 pandemic arrived in Brazil in a moment of intense political polarization between those who adhere to the World Health Organization's recommendations, recognizing the need for social isolation and using facial protection masks, among other biosafety measures, and those who align with the country's presidency and its tendency to deny the pandemic's severity, using the economical crisis as an argument against social isolation measures. In this scenario, the decisions concerning the mandatory use of masks, the closing and reopening of commercial activities, such as stores, gyms, beauty salons, private and public schools, have all been delegated to local governments, on a municipal level. In March 2020, Belo Horizonte was among the first Brazilian cities to establish a temporary shutdown policy for non-essential stores, schools, bars and restaurants, to enforce a mandatory use of masks and face coverings, and to recommend social distancing and isolation.

Therefore, when I briefly returned to the city in March and April, the urban soundscape sounded offbeat: the urban sonic mass, usually constituted by a profusion of noises from cars, buses, horns and people on the streets, had been silenced. In the neighborhood of Santa Tereza, there was no trace of its bohemian character, no echoes of musical notes,

no one walking the streets. The bars were closed. I did not recognize that silent, almost apocalyptic, soundscape.

If Belo Horizonte's city hall was one of the first to set biosafety measures into effect, over the months, it gradually gave in to the pressure from many economic sectors to make those policies more flexible. Nonetheless, I stayed in social isolation in the countryside, conducting my research and teaching activities remotely, since the University has also kept its decision regarding emergency remote classes for 2020. I spent months in my countryside house, without setting foot in the city, the whole time surrounded by the sounds of nature in a hi-fi soundscape.

When I made a trip to Belo Horizonte in September, in order to solve some urgent issues, I was again astonished, but this time, to find a loud soundscape. Due to the reopening of commercial activities, urban life seemed to me as if it was almost fully back to its usual pre-pandemic flow. The city sounds like the coronavirus has stopped spreading and infecting people: cars, buses, and many people on the streets of the city center. In Santa Tereza, bars and restaurants were back in business. The only evidence of a pandemic going on was the sight of some faces still covered by masks.

While the silence sounded heartbreaking the first times I briefly returned to the city, this time, the loud resounding clatter from the urban soundscape where I lived most of my life, left me astonished. The noise just sounded excessive to me. The perspective of coming back, at some point, to live in this lo-fi soundscape made me somewhat distressed. I realized I got used to the comfort of the countryside hi-fi soundscape. And, finally, I wished for the "tuning" of urban soundscapes, as did Schafer, in his ambitious *World Soundscape Project*, established as an educational and research group at Simon Fraser University during the late 1960s and early 1970s, and grown out of Schafer's initial attempt to draw attention to the sonic environment through a course in noise pollution (Schafer 1994; [The World Soundscape Project](#)).



Fig. 2. Polaroid of Graziela's vintage turntable. Photographer: Graziela Mello Vianna.

2.3. Third Experience: From One City to Another, Between the City and the Countryside (Ricardo de Freitas Lima)

It is possible that my adherence to social isolation measures preceded most of my colleagues, from the institution where I work, by a day or two. Having recently arrived from Europe, I was well aware of the dangers and risks caused by the new coronavirus, so I anticipated the transition to remote teaching, keeping in mind the importance of taking precautions. At the time, I arranged two places in Belo Horizonte where I could safely stay during social isolation – two places with very distinct soundscapes.

The first one, in a gated community crowded with other residents, is located in a neighborhood far away from the city center. Normally, it would be possible to hear the regular clatter from the people living there: roars and screams from those watching their soccer teams on television, the noise from the bar right outside, incomprehensible voices coming

from the apartments' windows, the noise from peoples' steps while walking in the backyard, and sounds from the cars coming and going in the garage.

The second location I have available for isolation, although far from the city center, is an apartment in one of the most densely populated neighborhoods in the city. Located on a street which is strategic for road circulation, on regular days I can hear an incessant series of noises, as usual for large cities: cars coming and going nonstop, motorcycles, buses and sirens combining in a loud noisy *continuum*, which makes it almost impossible for any other sound to clearly stand out. When it finally happens, I'm surprised by a welcome set of sounds slipping through the gaps between the motors' noise.

Aside from the isolation while still in the city, I had the opportunity to retreat to the countryside on two occasions, in a coffee farm just outside Caratinga, a small town in the eastern region of Minas Gerais. On both trips together, I spent about 30 days experiencing this typical countryside soundscape, diversified in clearly distinguishable sounds, although not always recognizable. They were clear, but unknown to my ears, still unfamiliar with that sonic universe.

Transformations

The usual life in those apartment buildings, normally very loud, was hit by an abrupt decrease in their surrounding sounds when social isolation started. In a figure-ground relation, an almost absolute silence made it possible for minimal sounds to stand out, including the chirping of a bird that I have never heard before and who recently began to perform on the early morning soundscapes. The surrounding sounds were no longer capable of drowning out the birds' singing, or the sounds of crickets and cicadas nearby. In fact, a number of rustling sounds have been amplified by contrast. I could hear the lo-fi feature of the city going mute.

Clearly distinguishable sounds would stand out and, sometimes, were crossed by the regular loud motors from cars, sirens, or lawnmowers. The dogs barking furiously, usually noticeable only in the early hours of the morning, would now stand on the foreground in broad daylight. During the first couple of months in these conditions, the most dominant and constant sound came from a newborn baby, who would cry almost incessantly throughout the day – a sound coming from the back of one of the apartments' bedrooms, which would not even be noticeable in

normal conditions. The sounds of car tires in friction with the asphalt have disappeared almost completely, making it possible to hear a piece of silverware falling on the floor in the apartment next door. The rustling of the trees now combines with the singing from nearby great kiskadees in order to compose the main sound theme.

It is relevant to mention a sound that was already very common in large cities and has become even more frequent, now that their acoustic counterparts have been quieter: cars selling fresh produce door to door. Since the idea is to stay home, many street vendors have widened their routes in an effort to deliver their products to customers' houses and apartments – purchases that would otherwise require them to go outside more often, something highly undesirable in the current conditions. It emerged, then, a loud new arrangement, which combined the subtlety of natural sounds with the sonic properties of low-quality loudspeakers-- authentic representatives of the urban soundscape.

In conclusion, the urban soundscape, normally a lo-fi setting – mainly due to the loud noise from combustion engines – has become filled with silent moments. These, in turn, have been crossed by low-intensity noises. Like a restorer who carefully removes the layers of varnish that cover a wall painting, I saw the urban landscape peel off some of its layers during the first days of the pandemic. The shock, the fear, the incomprehension at the start might be responsible for the fact that we could not hear, for example, a single song coming from cars and their powerful speakers (moving around in its Doppler effect). Even my loudest neighbor could not be heard then.

Music, like most sounds, have also retreated to an intimate space, such as personal earphones or Bluetooth activated speakers. The sounds were retreating to some sort of proxemic zone, private and intimate, away from public life. In its public counterpart, on the other hand, it has been encapsulated in live transmissions on social media or in virtual meetings platforms. The public, for quite some time, had its perspective and its features deeply changed and controlled by the selective possibilities of organization of an intimate, private soundscape.

A quick stroll through the city in order to understand that (lack of) movement, but also to go from one space of isolation to another, has revealed and confirmed the absence of urban activity. It sounded like high-quality music to an ear already tired of dealing with a multitude of noise stimuli. Only a few cars, almost nobody in the streets, and the usual

sound resulting from layers and layers of overlapping sounds was deconstructed. The soundscape has given us the detail, the imperceptible sound, like an imposed truce. A sonic detox.

At the second location, where I spent the weekends, the contrast was even more intense. The dominant noise from the usual vehicle traffic was almost completely gone, for many weekends in a row. At normal times, my morning schedule would be set by the chaotic symphony of the urban movement: buses circulating from 5am on, garbage trucks at 8am. Without that noise, I repeatedly lost track of time and got up later than I had planned.

This place's soundscape changed even more intensely than the first one. The silence, previously a scarce element, even in the early hours of the morning, has now become clearly and frequently heard. Parrots and other birds have announced their existence from other apartments' windows. The silencing of the street has also brought up the other, the neighbor, with their soundtrack and their noise while cleaning up the house – something very significant in a neighborhood marked by impersonality, where people do not know and almost never see the ones who live next door.

The Third Refuge

The countryside, as I expected, had a soundscape with clear, distinguishable sounds – although, being unfamiliar with most of them, I could not always identify their sources and meanings. Slowly, the noises made themselves known for their reason and function in my routine. The time to wake up, which was usually set by my smartphone alarm or my perception of the urban movement around me, has been determined by the sound of geese cackling outside. In fact, the profusion of noises stunned me, impairing my attention and ability to sleep, since the unknown did nothing to ease my curiosity and, sometimes, fear. A loud cracking sound in the attic would startle me and, later on, I found out there were possums up there hunting. Tiny crackles, which seemed amplified by a profound nightly silence, would reveal some not entirely harmless insects.

The noise that drew my attention the most was one that sounded like some sort of laughter, slowly fading away, in an intensity gradient. For a few days, I thought they might be coming from monkeys. They would normally turn up alongside the crackling sounds from the huge trees

around my room, crackles that were sometimes confused with woodpeckers' sounds. Sometime later, I found out they were seriema birds. For me, this was no doubt the most characteristic sound from this place's soundscape.

There is something else that drew my attention while I was there: although we were in the countryside, this was where I most intensely heard the sounds that I recognize as typical from the urban universe. The tractors running, alongside trucks, harvesters, ovens, coffee production equipment would all cross the hi-fi environment described above very loudly, especially in the mornings. Due to the farm's security system, employees would move around the place on motorcycles. With all that going on, I experienced more engine sounds there than I had, so far, heard in the city during the pandemic.

Another unexpected element was the loud presence of cars with powerful audio systems and home audio equipment, playing *carioca* funk music (from Rio de Janeiro) and other music styles traditionally associated with the listening universe of AM radio stations. All that was playing very loudly – something more common in large cities, usually heard in the first social isolation space described above, that has since gone silent during the pandemic. At the farm, maybe due to the absence of Covid-19 infections so far, it seemed that life was going on as usual, ready to be celebrated--loud and clear.



Fig. 3. Dried leaves in the banana plantation: a farm at Dom Modesto, Caratinga, Brazil. Photographer: Ricardo Lima.

2.4. Sounds Beyond Our Listening Range: Dialogues with Undergrad Students

Due to Covid-19, our university had suspended teaching activities for five months, resuming classes in August as an emergency remote education. We proposed to our Advertising and Journalism students an activity based on Schafer's sound diary (1992), so they could attentively listen to their surroundings and reflect upon the changes in the soundscapes and in its reliefs during the pandemic. Out of 76 students, 15 spontaneously mentioned leaving Belo Horizonte, either to farms and holiday homes in rural areas or moving back to their parents' house in small towns:

After social isolation measures started, I left my apartment in Belo Horizonte for my parents' house, in a small town in Minas Gerais. Since they live in the countryside, the sounds are usually very different from what I used to hear in the capital. Since the pandemic began, my daily routine has had a lighter sonic

aspect, surrounded by the birds singing and sounds from other animals, the sound of the wind rustling through the trees' leaves, and, sometimes, car noises (Henrique's sound diary).

We had consent from the students who kindly allowed us to reproduce excerpts from their accounts in this article, and agreed to refer to them in the text only by their first names. For many of those students, this change of scenery meant replacing the city's intense traffic and neighborhood noises with more relaxing soundscapes, which allowed for a new relationship to these sounds, sometimes taking them as intimate, while other times perceiving them as distant and strange. Those soundscapes were composed by the sounds of wind rustling through trees, various pet birds and wild birds singing, crickets, cicadas buzzing, running water from nearby rivers or gardens, dogs barking, and cats meowing. Amanda F., one of the students, mentioned an increased attention to the singing of birds, since she is spending more time at home: "The singing of great kiskadees, sparrows, green parakeets, parrots, and my pet cockatiel. Apart from those species, in my countryside house, I can also hear toucans and saffron finches, alongside crickets and cicadas... Even the sound of the wind has become more noticeable." The changes in our daily routine due to social isolation have led to transformations on our listening habits as well, making us more aware of the sounds in our surroundings.

However, for Ana Paula, another student, the expectation of calm and tranquility by moving back to a small town was not realized: "What was supposed to be quieter turned out to be the opposite, considering the town is working close to normal. One could say there is no social isolation going on here, since the local factories resumed production at full throttle. Therefore, my soundscape has been the usual for my parents' home, only intensified by a constant apprehension about the pandemic." Just as the case of the delivery services mentioned above, this contrast draws attention to the unsafe health conditions imposed on factory workers, also highlighting that the pandemic damage is suffered by people in a disproportionate manner, based on their class and other social hierarchies.

Some of the students had only recently moved to Belo Horizonte from various distant Brazilian towns, but still decided to stay in the city. Some are making an effort to find similarities between the current soundscape and the ones they knew from their hometowns – like Leonardo, who left

a beachside city on the south region to come live in the mountains of Belo Horizonte:

I moved away from the sea and I miss its sounds. Since I arrived in Belo Horizonte, three weeks before social isolation started, my soundscape has really changed, geographically speaking. But the main differences on the soundscapes are far away from me during social isolation: the neighborhood where I live in Belo Horizonte is very quiet, and the sounds of birds take me back to my hometown, where I woke up with an intense noise from several different birds. This sound, constant and slowly extending through the afternoon, is combined with the regular sound of delivery workers, garbage trucks, construction noise, neighbors, and children. It is not very far from a wide and busy avenue, which seems to create a smooth and continuous frequency in the background – almost like a modern sea – but it also seems to disappear most of the time and goes unnoticed, until a truck or a hasty motorcycle draws attention to its existence. Each bird has its own color, always brighter and more alive than the grey sound of construction (Leonardo's sound diary).

We identified that most of the students' accounts mentioned an increased perception of sounds that were previously present in the private spaces of their homes and neighborhoods. This greater attention to the sounds of everyday life was justified both by the pandemic, considering they started spending more time at home than usual, and the sound diary activity itself, since it demanded careful and attentive listening to and making sense of their sonic environment. These sounds that would go unnoticed before can be exemplified by doors opening and closing, someone cooking in the kitchen, keys being turned in locks and thrown on a surface afterwards, neighbors and passing strangers in the street talking, singing or fighting about something. In this sense, many brought up the intensification of family sociability in a positive manner, like spending more time talking with their relatives. When discussing the sounds that have changed or increased during the pandemic, Philippos stated:

I think the most significant would be my mother's voice. Even though we already had a close relationship before the pandemic, it definitely grew a lot during this time, since it is just the two of us in the house, both in social isolation, and therefore having mostly each other to socialize. It has been a pleasant experience; we have been sharing the office room and

spending some time talking during the day (Philippos' sound diary).

Still, regarding positive interactions, many declared to be spending more time with children, cooking together, and sharing meals more often with their families. Some have also mentioned negative aspects of family life, such as being bothered by others' conversations, snoring, and excessive noise. Relationship problems prior to the pandemic have been worsened in isolation, due to the stressful times and the intensified proximity of family life. The students' sound diaries, although not exposing the details and motivations for such conflicts, have revealed certain difficulties complicating family relationships:

The day started in a very sad and upsetting way for me. I woke up early so I could sort out an issue with my father before he left home. Unfortunately, the first thing I heard was the worst sound any daughter can hear: my mother crying. She has been going through some very difficult times with her family and has been very sad about it. I always try to talk to her and comfort her whenever I can, but it doesn't always work to make her feel better, and it breaks my heart (Isadora's sound diary).

One of these cases was Sabrina's: "It feels like my family's noise at home is way louder than before, and they also seem to be talking more than ever." The pandemic has also established the need for new family care routines, especially in families in which the parents are at a higher risk of infection or severe illness from Covid-19. One of the students, Fernando, states:

A lot has changed during the pandemic, like the regular sounds I hear on my daily routine. Usually, I wasn't the one responsible for getting groceries at the supermarket, but considering my parents at a higher risk, I started doing so. With that change, sounds like the cart wheels, the 'beep' from the cash register and the meat slicer have become more common (Fernando's sound diary).

Some elderly relatives have moved to their sons' or daughters' homes during the pandemic, significantly altering the homely soundscape and the intimate proxemic zone with their presence:

My grandparents have moved to my house, since they had to cut some costs with housekeeping and couldn't stay on their own, so it is common now to hear my grandfather singing

around the house. He is of Portuguese descent and a very passionate soccer fan, so every now and then he starts singing the national anthem of Portugal or his team's songs. Even more, he sweetly created the term "Symphony of the dogs", to refer to the daily event that takes place at 5pm sharp. The church bells start ringing and all the dogs from the street, including mine, get outside to bark (André's sound diary).

In the reverse direction, some of the grandchildren have moved back to their grandparents' house, where they used to live when they were kids:

Now, during social isolation, I had to come back to the same house where I used to live. The sounds that are part of my childhood and early teens are still almost the same, with only a few differences. The birds singing are still here, but are more and more combined with the sounds of cars, since my street has become busier throughout the years. My grandmother keeps singing songs in which, sometimes, the lyrics are indiscernible. She also likes to whistle and join the birds singing. The house is also a bit more crowded, compared to a few years ago. My mother and my aunt got married and both their husbands moved in, so what used to be a one-story house became basically a three-story building. My grandfather, although being the quieter one at home, can also make some very peculiar sounds, with his dragging way of walking, his singing while in the shower, his wooden keychain rattling against his keys, or when he tries to escape social isolation to go to the bakery nearby. We're just like birds, we're not supposed to be locked up (Julia's sound diary).

One student came back to her parents' home in the countryside of Minas Gerais, where she found a soundscape with a significant relief and typical sound marks of the house's surrounding region:

When social isolation started, I returned to my hometown, and I noticed some very peculiar sounds, typical from this region, which I had completely forgotten or got used to, since I haven't lived there for about three years. It sounds like an explosion, coming from the mine right in front of my house – everyday at 4pm, a loud, strong and distant sound, which makes the whole house tremble (Maria Eduarda's sound diary).

It also includes the sounds coming from the neighbors' homes, like Melissa narrated in her sound diary: "Just as my classes were suspended and I had to stay home, so did the children, living nearby. Every day I can

hear a child, who I never met, running behind my apartment, with his footsteps loudly echoing all around; and a four-year old girl next door, playing with plastic cups and happily laughing. I can also hear the older neighbor across the hallway, whose emotions I have now learned to identify only by his voice tone.” In Yasmin’s perception, the neighbors have also become part of the soundscape during social isolation, blurring the lines that separate these different proxemic zones:

The most distinctive sounds during this time are definitely the neighbors’ noise, the combination of voices and different musical tastes have become part of my daily sonic routine. In each point of my house, I can listen to the different vocal tones coming from the neighbors’ houses, something that would go completely unnoticed before, on my regular routine (Yasmin’s sound diary).

Other students also mentioned the sound of children next door and conversations from their neighbors, as well as their choice of music, discussions on the phone, personal fights – “once again, I heard my neighbors’ voices, but this time they were arguing. I heard the father say, angrily: ‘I already told you not to talk back to your mother like that!’” (Victoria’s sound diary) – and people yelling at the TV while watching soccer games – “the noise from the neighborhood, which never really bothered me before, is now a lot more annoying. When they are screaming about their soccer teams or playing music, it echoes inside me like a sign that they have more freedom than I do, even if that’s not really what’s happening” (Filipe’s sound diary).

Some families decided to adopt new pets during the social isolation period, which has also changed their houses’ soundscapes. Amanda’s account is one of the examples of this transformation:

During social isolation, we have decided to adopt a puppy dog, and since I’ve never had a dog before, it was something completely new to me. She is still adapting to living with us, so she still cries sometimes and usually barks a lot. I can’t say yet if I’ll ever get used to these sounds, but I hope I’ll do, because I’ve grown very attached to her (Amanda’s sound diary).

The students’ accounts show that a significant number of people decided to renovate their houses during quarantine, since many of them observed that the soundscapes have become louder due to the construction noise coming from their own houses or their neighbors:

We decided to do some renovations in the house, so our homely soundscape has completely changed. The sounds of construction work are very striking and seem to multiply throughout the house. A broken wall outside sounds like the ceiling is falling over my head. It's very funny after all. We shared the house with the daily construction noise for about a month. At 7am, the workers would ring the doorbell to open the door for them. Minutes later, all the banging, pounding, and hammering would start. Then, the silence right after lunch. More noise in the afternoon. The end of the shift at 4pm. Only a few sounds at night. That's what my days were like for about a month. When the work had taken enough of the house so there wasn't any space left for us, we moved to our farm. Another change of scenery and, therefore, a change in the soundscape (Maria Gabriela's sound diary).

Some other students have written, in their sound diaries, about the absence or the presence of sounds coming from the streets during the pandemic. Those who live next to schools have missed the regular presence of children around, on their way to class, and have also noticed the silence replacing the school bell ringing, announcing the beginning and the end of the classes, as well as the break time in between. With masses suspended for the first few months of social isolation, some students have noticed the absence of the church bell. In addition to these sound signals, some students mentioned the absence of other regular sounds, an absence that we take as a sign of the impact caused by the pandemic on the sociability relations in cities:

Since I live in a small town in Minas Gerais, we have a quieter, more nature-like soundscape than the one in Belo Horizonte, for example. I miss some of its elements, like children playing in the streets, elderly men and women sitting by their doors and talking about their days. Because of the pandemic, these sounds are no longer present in my routine, having been replaced by muffled voices inside the house (Yasmin's sound diary).

Others have brought up sounds from the public space that were always present in their soundscapes, but only recently assumed the role of signaling the time on their daily routines, since they can always be heard at the same time every day. There were recurring examples of this scene in the sound diaries, such as the egg-selling car – "I couldn't fail to mention the egg-selling man in his car, which passes through my house every single day at 4pm sharp" (Rhayssa's sound diary) – or the bread

vendor on his bike – “I can hear his bike’s honking sound every day, at 9:30am and again at 5pm. It sounds like a manually-activated horn, because it doesn’t sound like the ones from cars and motorcycles. It’s more like an organic sound, although it’s still metallic” (Victoria’s sound diary).

There are people selling different products as well, and always on time: “Some sounds can let me know what time it is without ever having to check the clock, since they are so punctual everyday: the woman who sells executive meals at lunchtime and the corn cake vendor’s car in the middle of the afternoon” (Ellen’s sound diary). Some students admit that they have never noticed these sounds before this social isolation period: “the noise from the bread delivery man on his bike, honking (beep beep beep) exactly at 8am, every single day! To be honest, I’ve never noticed him before, since I used to leave the house earlier than that” (Marina’s sound diary).

Other sounds registered in the sound diaries are directly related to the current political context in Brazil. As a way of protesting against Jair Bolsonaro’s government, people have joined in “panelaços”: sonic manifestos that consist of going to the windows or balconies to bang on pots and pans. With participants in all the major cities in the country, this protest usually takes place during the president’s official announcements on television. On this matter, Ellen stated: “Some weeks were marked by ‘panelaços’ and screams at the windows, protesting against the current government. Those sounds were not present in my routine before, but I joined my neighbors in producing them whenever I could.”

Another recurrence was the ever-growing presence of sounds in their intimate spaces that indicated technology-mediated social relations. Out of 76 students, 27 answered the question about their perception of pandemic changes in their soundscapes with at least one of the following sounds: noise from computer keyboards, mouse clicks, CPU coolers, printers, their own and their families’ smartphones’ ringing and notifications, computer apps’ notifications, video call apps, and an increase in their own and their families’ consumption of digital content from radio, podcasts, television, streaming services, online videos, video games, and music playlists:

Some sounds have recently become more frequent, while we are in social isolation. The first I can point out is the sound made by my preferred online meeting platform when I join a call. I have

been joining such meetings every single day now, so I believe this sound will always remind me of being in social isolation. Another sound that I can mention is the soundtrack of the game “Fall Guys”, since I have been playing it quite often to have some fun at home (Luís Eduardo’s sound diary).

One of the sounds that became more intense during the pandemic was the sound of music, playing more frequently. I always spent about one or two hours of my day listening to music, in my routine between work and the university. Now, since I am doing everything from home, my music listening time has increased to about eight hours a day (Jordan’s sound diary).

Some of the sounds registered on the sound diaries indicate the adaption to new habits, in terms of physical and artistic activities during social isolation:

I started exercising more, so the sound of the treadmill has become part of my daily routine. I have also been cycling more often, so the noise from the bike’s gear chain and loose breaks have become more frequent. Moreover, I discovered some new attractions that introduced new sounds, such as painting, with the quiet noise from the paint coming out of the tube and the brush moving across the canvas. (Yasmin’s sound diary).

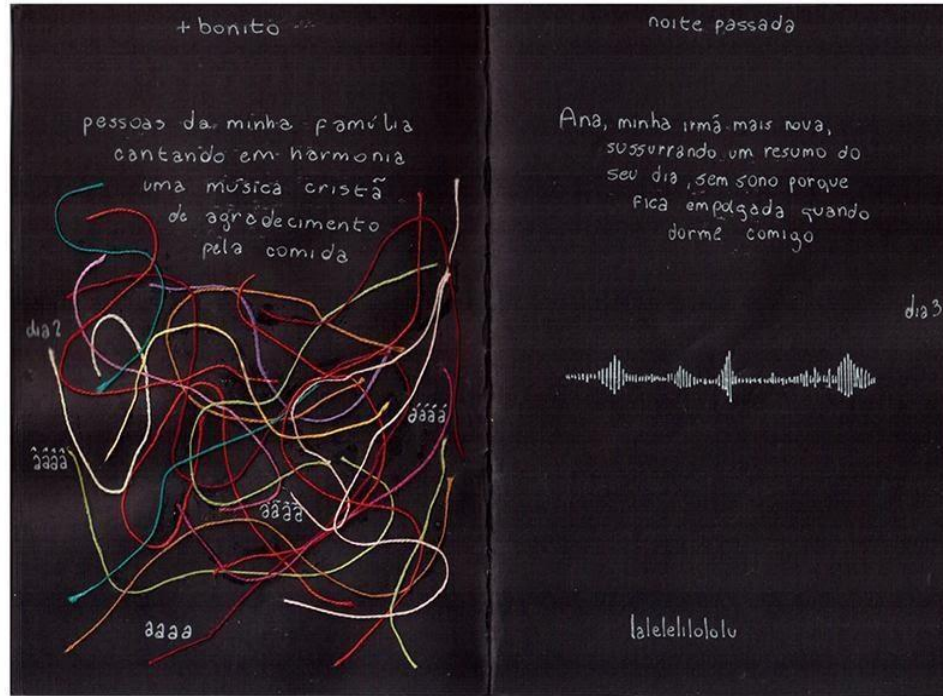
During social isolation, I grew closer to my artistic side. I always loved doing illustrations, but I have never been so dedicated to it as I am now. I decided to use my spare time to get better at two things I love: illustration and tattoos. Drawing was already a part of my life, but tattoos weren’t yet, and I am very excited about it. I love hearing the sound of the pencil lead in friction with the paper, and when the lines are looser and more fluid, the sounds are even more delightful, because I can really listen to the drawing. When it comes to tattoos, I can hear the machine and its motor running, starting to turn the body into a canvas (Beatriz’s sound diary).

While reading the students’ sound diaries, we have identified some similarities between their relief maps and the soundscapes experienced by this article’s authors. Due to the pandemic, some people have moved either to a different house or a different city or town, while others stayed put. Some soundscapes have become quieter, almost silent, with mostly flat relief while others have become significantly more complex. Some lo-fi soundscapes have changed into hi-fi versions of themselves when social isolation started.

Every single soundscape described above has its own peculiarities, even in cases in which the listeners live close to one another, in the same region or the same city. Considering the soundscapes' dynamic nature, the listener's perspective and listening practices help make sense of what is being heard: a sonic event might really stand out to one listener while not making that much of an impression on another. For this article, we made an effort to identify recurring sound objects as they were described both in the students' sound diaries and the authors' experience accounts. However, even in cases when they are recurring, the forms of representation and meanings that were ascribed to these sounds in each account were very distinct, making them different in comparison (note that we have decided in this article, to reproduce the authors' writing and long direct quotes from the students' sound diaries, in order to show the representations and meanings used to make sense of the soundscapes from the listeners' perspective).

Nevertheless, all of the soundscapes described above have something in common: they all have been transformed by the pandemic to some extent and, therefore, serve as indicators of new habits, new relations of sociability, or even new forms of experiencing the surrounding spaces, which were inaugurated during this long period of social isolation. We will further discuss this aspect in the next section, in which we outline our final considerations.





Figs. 4-5: Pages from Beatriz's sound diary.



O pássaro

Pássaro sem nome, canta todos os dias
na minha janela para eu acordar.
Canto doce, canto alegre. De tão singelo poderia jurar
que seu canto é amarelo.

FIUPIUFIUUUU... FIUUUUUU .



O caminhão

Máquina grande de barulho
ensurdecedor, faz tremer minha casa,
parece atropelar minha cabeça.
O som da sua buzina poderia ser representado com
um tom de vermelho puro. Grave e agudo. Como pode?

FOOOONNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNN.

Figs. 6-7: Pages from Ana's sound diary.

3. Last Flight: Final Discussion

We have identified that the reliefs of the sounds from intimate and public spheres have stood out in the soundscapes from the first days and months of the pandemic. By approaching the students' sound diaries and reflecting upon our own experiences, we have discovered that the aspects of intimate and private proxemic zones have become the leading elements of the sonic universe in question. Not only that, which would be a merely quantitative feature, but we have also realized that the sonic elements of these pandemic soundscapes are significant because of their ability to integrate semantic refuges that point to a non-pragmatic sensitivity, related to an *ethos* of comfort and care. Many students have returned to their parents' home. Those who already lived with their parents have started spending more time together, because of the changes imposed by the pandemic on their routines.

The alarm clock, a song being played on smartphone or computer, their parents', siblings', and other relatives' voices talking and singing, the sounds from fans as summer gets closer, all of those objects were brought up in many of the students' sound diaries. Although some may cause some discomfort (like alarm clocks and similar examples), these sonic elements establish a new routine which is increasingly shared with the other people living in the house, at the same time creating the comforting sensation of being welcome in an intimate refuge while there is a global pandemic going on out there.

However, we should not romanticize these new forms of sociability imposed on families by the pandemic, considering some of those relationships might not be necessarily healthy or comforting. Research has identified a worldwide increase in domestic violence during the pandemic, including in Brazil. A study presented in May 2020 has revealed a 22.2% increase on femicide rates in the country during the pandemic, comparing data from March and April 2020 to the same period last year ([Basilio](#)).

Early data shows that helplines in Singapore and Cyprus have registered a more than 30 per cent increase in calls. In Australia, 40 per cent of frontline workers in New South Wales reported more requests for help with violence. In France, domestic violence cases increased by 30 per cent since the lockdown on March 17. In Argentina, emergency calls for domestic violence have increased by 25 per cent since the lockdown on March 20 ([Dept. of Global Communications](#)).

Some of the students' diaries mention sound objects that indicate conflict in the family private sphere. We have noticed, however, that this was a rare occurrence in the sound diaries. Would that be because most of the students have the privilege of coming from well-structured families? Or would it be a sign of shame that they would expose their family relationships in a diary to be shared with their professor as a class assignment? Or, alternatively, would it be a filter, some sort of modesty concerning the exposure of their intimacy at an age when those limits are somewhat imprecise?

As Daniel Miller states in his work on material culture, "There are a wide range of reasons why people might not feel that the house is simply a vehicle by which they are positively constructed and developed" (Miller 138). Nevertheless, in order to find precise answers to these questions, it would be necessary to conduct a more in-depth research, something that does not fall within the scope of the present article.

The relations of family sociability have changed, as well as the place and the soundscape, which these families have come to inhabit while in social isolation. Among the families that have decided to stay in the same house, the soundscape was invaded by the noise from construction work, either coming from their own homes or their neighbors'. Based on an ethnographic study conducted in Norwegian homes concerning small transformations, such as moving the furniture, Miller states:

In itself trivial, but when seen over a long term, such actions have two important consequences. Partly they bear on the horror people have of the idea that they are nowadays stuck in rut, that nothing is ever going to change. Households may not want to have to contend with things that are significantly different. The chair might be put back in the way it always was, after a while. But at least the inhabitants have expressed their agency over that of other persons and things. They can demonstrate to themselves that they still retain a capacity for change. Secondly, these are in effect small experiments, ways of re-thinking how things could be, different configurations that mostly will not amount to anything, but occasionally become the catalyst for more significant changes in the environment within which people live (Miller 147).

Despite having published these thoughts ten years before the pandemic, Miller's contributions can help us understand the recurrence of the

desire for remodeling the house, for changing the space in which we live in a moment when the outside world, currently in (a health) crisis, is completely out of our control. This concerns the very state of agency of the house, its non-human agency, which acquires – even if through a human input – autonomy and power of transformation, of altering the state of things and procedures, making us act as a legitimate and active being, ordering to reorganize and reposition. We cannot act on every single chaotic aspect going on out there in the pandemic, but at least, inside our own house, we can exert some control and establish some understanding about the agency of these elements toward an interaction with them. And when our anguish about the outside world can no longer fit inside that space, we go somewhere else, we look for another place to isolate – something that emerged quite often in the authors’ accounts and also in the students’ sound diaries.

If the sounds from large cities are not always pleasant, in the context of the pandemic, this occurs, to some extent, due to the fact that these noises can mean an unavoidable invasion against a sociable space created for protection from outside dangers. Some families have decided not only to leave their houses but also the city where they lived for a landscape closer to nature, for an outside soundscape that does not invade the intimate refuge of the home or, at least, tend to enter it in a softer, smoother way. Therefore, some elements from a supposedly outside world, aligned with the intention of retreating, have been associated with the private or intimate semantic space, as if being embodied into it.

This applies, for example, to a bird singing in freedom, which is not exactly part of the intimate proxemic zone but cannot be understood as belonging to the public universe/space either, considering that their singing is being repositioned *in* and *through* intimacy. Sounds like these achieve a level of transience capable of re-signifying their own manifestation, capable of embodying or omitting senses and presences, according to the people’s repertoires and dispositions.

It is important to highlight that some of the accounts unveil the listener’s desire for a hi-fi soundscape, with a higher incidence of silent moments, especially with those who moved (back) to small towns or retreated to the countryside. However, that expectation was not always fulfilled. The safety sensation experienced through being far away from the pandemic’s main events and statistics made some spaces sound careless or even disrespectful regarding the danger and the number of deaths

caused by the virus. These soundscapes were composed of dancing tunes, party noises, the rumbling sound from indistinct conversations in large groups, all invading the baseline sounds from the hi-fi landscape – usually limited to the sound of the wind rustling through the trees, the singing of birds and, especially, silence itself. In turn, experiencing these changes led to an acoustic adaptation, showing that individuals have acclimated to this new soundscape mostly characterized by the sounds of nature. In the face of this adaptation, the city’s lo-fi soundscape caused discomfort to those ears upon their return. In this sense, the urban soundscape seemed to hold, at least semantically, the public dangers capable of deadly hovering and circulating through the air.

Many of the students’ accounts also mention recently deciding to adopt a pet. Would that be linked to a need for social interaction, occupying the adults’ and children’s off-line time, or maybe a way of reducing the stress caused by the pandemic? The diaries do not indicate the reasons guiding that decision, but we have noticed that this has been a common phenomenon in Belo Horizonte and in many other cities around the world, with a significant number of people deciding to include a pet in their family circle. This worldwide tendency was reported in a news article from the *The Washington Post*, published in August 2020:

What began in mid-March as a sudden surge in demand had, as of mid-July, become a bona fide sales boom. Shelters, nonprofit rescues, private breeders, pet stores – all reported more consumer demand than there were dogs and puppies to fill it. Some rescues were reporting dozens of applications for individual dogs. Some breeders were reporting waiting lists well into 2021 ([Kavin](#)).

These new family members have become an important addition to the private space of the home, also adding new sounds to the existing soundscape such as barking, meowing, or purring. It is still not clear whether these families worldwide will keep their pets after they return to their usual lives as we, as a society, manage to control the pandemic; or there will be an increase in animal abandonment rates as we approach the end of the health crisis.

Some people have stayed in the city and closely monitored the transformations on the urban soundscape, which varied according to the rhythm set by the local administration’s decisions regarding mandatory biosafety measures. They listened as the traffic noise slowed down, as the pandemic arrived in the country, and accelerated again, as non-

essential commercial activities resumed. Away from the city center, it was possible to hear the typical jargon from street vendors selling eggs, bread, or executive meals, as they kept their daily routes on quieter streets. They have heard and joined the use of sounds as a political act against the federal government. Especially during the first weeks of social isolation – in which the overall silence in large cities sounded disturbing and unsettling, alongside the presidency’s speculative and misinformed (lack of) action regarding the pandemic – the loud noise from banging on the pots and pans worked as a way to overcome the sensation of fear and neglect. The already tired spectator let out a metallic, rhythmic, and insurgent “scream.” The pans, followed by screams and sometimes replaced for honking cars, have become sonic metrics of distress. Personal accounts from microblogs and social media have registered an increase in their perception of the pans’ symphony, conducted by the very desire to overcome the current political and health crisis.

The noise from citizens banging on pots and pans in Brazilian soundscapes has emerged as a form of political protest with different uses and consequences depending on the context. Originally used in the 2016 political crisis by those who supported the institutional coup against former president Dilma Rousseff, recently the “panelaços” have turned on Bolsonaro’s far-right government, elected in 2018. In this sense, the same sounds were used as a form of protest, at different moments, by opposite sides of the political spectrum. Explaining the peculiarities of Brazilian politics to foreign readers is a very difficult task – as the famous Brazilian musician Antônio Carlos (Tom) Jobim used to say, Brazil is not for beginners. According to Ruy [Castro](#), this saying, which is commonly used nowadays to emphasize the country’s complexity, was originally a joke made by Tom Jobim in response to Peter Kelleman’s book, *Brazil for Beginners*, published in 1961. Castro describes the book as a hilarious, detailed, and almost always on point guide to navigate the small scams and swindles applied by Brazilians – a mass of benign corrupt citizens in Kelleman’s view – in order to make a living.

No matter where they were – a large city, a small town, or the countryside – many sounds have intensified during the pandemic as indicators of new studying, working, and entertainment habits, now conformed to the impossibility of face-to-face interactions. The sounds from online meeting platforms and devices, game consoles, music playing, certain terms used to ensure the virtual presence of someone hidden behind digital avatars and other dialogic gestures have combined to construct some sort of noisy repetition. In fact, they are so repetitive

that they become almost predictable in their sonic features, some sort of pre-audibility which is characteristic of certain environments and interactions.

From a semiotic perspective, certain noises with specific volumes, pulsations and timbres were capable of revealing aspects of a conversation status or a call for a dialogue. This points to the constitution of an intimate soundscape which is profoundly crossed by sounds from the public sphere inside intimacy itself. It refers to the sounds of meeting platforms, miscommunication, as well as message notifications. Not to mention the increasingly common use of phrasal sounds such as: “Your mic is on mute,” “The internet connection failed,” or “Your screen is frozen,” which have become some sort of deictic expressions, indicators of another space, a cyberspace, which has given a whole other kind of relation to the space-time dimension. It seems that the conditions imposed on us by the pandemic have provided us with moving ways of being and existing, requiring different ways of experiencing presence, especially considering its ubiquitous and dematerialized condition.

However, using technology for many hours in a row can cause significant exhaustion, and therefore some of the students sought to minimize its effects by dedicating to off-line hobbies (such as painting, drawing, and other activities), or watching their soccer teams on television, even though sports practice had been suspended during the first few months of the pandemic. We have identified an increased importance of every proxemic relation that could be adapted to people’s intimate zones. Even if it is no longer possible to go to the sports stadium and soccer is now accessible exclusively through television, radio, and social media, it still sustains its association with the public proxemic zone, especially when we hear fireworks or someone nearby, stuck in isolation, insisting on screaming: goal!

The constitution of a place through its sound concerns the identification of a space of relations built through a sensitive dimension, combining its physical, sonic, and visual features. We have identified, in some of the students’ accounts, attempts to recompose the space of relations when sometimes, the public and private spheres had become hard to distinguish.

Throughout this article, while writing about our own experiences and discussing the students’ accounts, we have highlighted many transformations that took place in the soundscapes during the pandemic.

However, we must emphasize that our positions as professors, researchers, and college students are privileged ones, especially considering we are able to isolate ourselves in our homes and work remotely. In this context, we must not forget about the citizens who cannot do the same, either for working in essential services – such as medical doctors, nurses, supermarket and drugstore employees, mail delivery people, sanitation and waste collection workers, public transport drivers, among others – or for being part of disadvantaged social classes, whose precarious work conditions or social and economic high-risk situations have not allowed them to isolate – such as housekeepers, street vendors at traffic lights, app-based drivers and food delivery workers, among many others.

In this context, it is important to remember the first confirmed case of death by Covid-19 in Rio de Janeiro: the victim was Cleonice Gonçalves, a housekeeper whose employer, having recently arrived from Europe experiencing symptoms of coronavirus infection, still kept her working in the house and omitted her suspected illness (the case was reported by Slattery and Gaier in their news article [“A Brazilian woman caught coronavirus on vacation. Her maid is now dead”](#)).

We must also keep in mind that the suburbs and favela communities in large cities have a higher incidence of death by Covid-19, due to unsound sanitary conditions and overcrowding in small spaces that do not allow for social isolation. As reported by [Eisele](#), these communities “have been largely abandoned by the state in the fight against coronavirus,” with residents having to organize their own response through initiatives for awareness, mask production, and distributing hygiene kits and groceries.

For people who had their work routines remain basically the same and could not access the comfort and protection of safe private spaces, the soundscapes might not have changed as much when compared to the ones we discussed in this article. What would the sound diaries reveal if they were written by people whose professional presence in public space enters someone else’s private space, routinely composing part of the soundscapes of those who are isolated? For example, the bread vendors who were mentioned in many diaries – how did they perceive the changes in their soundscapes? What would be the nuances and transformations identified by workers who keep riding the bus to their jobs every day? Were their experiences predominantly marked by differences and contrasts or by a disturbing sense of permanence in an increasingly abnormal world?

Maybe the pandemic times will be an opportunity for us to better engage in listening practices in many different senses, reflecting upon the profound social inequalities that structure our social lives. In dialogue with Rocca's contributions to think in terms of a "sociological and cultural climatology," the pandemic might allow us to measure more accurately the "social temperature" in the urban soundscapes. In the end, the public dangers circulating through the landscape's air end up making more victims among those who must leave their nests' safety in order to take flight through the city and bring sustenance back home.

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