

## **Aural Ethnography and the Notion of Membership: An Exploration of Listening Culture in Havana**

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In my mind's eye, I often think about Havana, and the time that I have spent there either conducting research, or just simply visiting. I imagine meandering through the public squares of Habana Vieja, marveling at the grand facades of the Spanish colonial architecture. I can see myself sitting along the Malecón, watching the waves crash up against the sea wall. I can feel the scorching heat of the midday sun while I spend a lazy afternoon reading on the balcony. But what colours my memory of Havana the most is not what I see in my mind's eye, but what I hear in my mind's ear. I hear people calling out to one another on the street, or from their apartment windows to the sidewalk below. I hear the roaring engine of a classic American car, one that would stand little chance of passing an emissions test here in Canada. I hear children shouting, playing with a Frisbee on the boulevard in the middle of Avenida Paseo. And finally, I hear music coming from a home with the windows wide open, as if to say, "I'm not going to listen to this alone".

Havana has a distinct aural culture. Its soundscapes are dynamic, and are spaces created with intention and purpose through the act of soundmaking. Locals actively engage their surroundings, and they demonstrate a willingness to contribute to the composition of the acoustic environment. The result is a soundscape that is rich in communicative potential, offering the individual a sense of being present within a familiar community – one that has intimate ties to the physical terrain on which it is situated. But what is it exactly that creates the conditions for such a dynamic aural experience? And what is it about the Havana soundscape that sets it apart from the sounds of any other urban environment?

There are two notable qualities that are fundamental to the vibrancy of Havana's acoustic environments, both of which will be addressed in the coming pages. The first of which is primarily spatial, and it concerns the local climate, architecture, and the city's physical geography. The second of which involves the local history of listening practices, it remains mindful of the significance of musical listening as a form of cultural participation, and it considers the present-day absence of personal media technologies. Both of these features have contributed to an aural culture that can be defined as communal and participatory. It is from this position that the local citizen embeds him or herself within the larger socio-cultural context, and develops a sense of belonging and membership that is in many ways definitive of what it means to come from Havana.

Throughout this paper, I make use of terms such as belonging, inclusion, and membership, and I conceptualize them in a manner that can be defined primarily by and through aural practices. This approach understands the phenomenology of listening as a catalyst for affective resonance, and sensory experience as a condition of emplacement. That is to say, I approach membership and belonging as sentiments that are cultivated through sensuous experience, and that which is simultaneously affixed to a particular physical terrain. It is not my intention here to engage the discussion that has taken place concerning Cuban citizenship or membership as it is effected on the level of state policy

(see Bronfman, 2004; Fuente, 2001, etc). Rather, in light of the more recent rise of memory work as a means of pursuing these very issues in the name of Cuba's diasporic community (Behar, 2007; O'Reilly Herrera, 2007), and given the intimate relationship between sound and memory, an aural approach has much to contribute to the body of knowledge surrounding contemporary Cuban cultural studies.

And finally, before proceeding, it is worthwhile to mention that in terms of its potential depth and overall scope, this project remains in its infancy. Many of the sonic impressions that are used to inform this analysis are living artifacts of my own memory, and have not been derived from any recent ethnographic fieldwork. In this sense, this paper is an instance of placing the cart before the horse, and is in some ways more of a project proposal than it is a finalized collection of thoughts. With this in mind, I will do my best to convey with the utmost clarity and brevity what it is I hope to accomplish during my tenure as a doctoral student, and why aural ethnography, in particular as it pertains to culture in Havana, is something that is worth pursuing.

### **Listening as a Methodology**

As cultural researchers, listening affords us unique opportunities. It allows us to think in new ways about space, how it is constructed, and how it is used. It is a chance to further consider the process of communication, and to address the extent to which the practices of soundmaking and listening are a part of that process. It gives us a point of contact to explore our own behaviour, perceptions, and habits, and to simultaneously explore those of others. And ultimately, by listening with a curious ear, we create a means of better understanding and negotiating the social and cultural communities in which we are situated.

Soundscape studies, or acoustic ecology as it is also known, represents the first and likely the most significant move toward reintegrating the listener in the study of sound.

Developed by a team of researchers at Simon Fraser University during the 1960s and 1970s (Schafer, 1977; World Soundscape Project, 1977), soundscape studies established a discursive and a methodological frame that remains fundamental to the way that we discuss the attributes and the functionality of the acoustic environment. Perhaps the single greatest example of this is communicated by the term *soundscape*, which is not only the aural equivalent of landscape, but more importantly, it refers to the manner in which sound is perceived. In this sense, there are as many soundscapes as there are listeners, each of which is constructed by and through one's own personal associations, experiences, and memories with sound.

With that said, the acoustic observations that I make as an aural ethnographer are inevitably done so from a personal perspective, one that is contingent upon my own unique history with sound. For this reason, many of the sounds that I described at the outset of this paper were for me striking, and in turn memorable. They were not so foreign that they were unrecognizable; yet, that they were so prevalent and thus a naturalized part of the Havana soundscape was something that was foreign to my personal sensibilities.

During the research process I will be presented with the challenge (and the opportunity) of utilizing my own personal tendencies as a listener in order to better comprehend the listening tendencies of others. That is, by ‘listening to what is being listened to’ so-to-speak, the potential arises to develop a better sense of aural culture in Havana today. In order to do this, I aim to locate and understand the many sounds that have communicational, and therefore social and cultural significance for the local community. We will subsequently refer to this as an *acoustic community*, which is any system, no matter the geographical range, within which acoustic information is exchanged (Truax, 2001).

I begin negotiating the acoustic community by locating its *soundmarks*: sounds that have cultural and historical significance for the local population, and those that are worthy of preservation (Truax, 1999). An example of a Havana soundmark is the nightly cannon ceremony at El Morro in the harbour. The cannon first began sounding in the 1700s, and was used to signal the daily closing of the harbour gates. Today, it can still be heard throughout Habana Vieja and across the northern parts of the city, as it is now used to commemorate Havana’s status as one of the major port cities of the Americas during the colonial period.

But soundmarks represent only a small portion of the sounds that compose the many acoustic communities throughout Havana. So as a listener, I remain closely attuned to the everyday sound signals, and the capacity that they possess to communicate information for the local inhabitants. Car horns honking, telephones ringing, voices that can be heard and overheard, and music playing, are typical of an everyday experience in Havana. Such sounds contribute immensely to the acoustic community by offering information about the behaviour and the social activity that is taking place within that particular context.

In terms of the temporal dimension, there is inevitably a rhythmical form to these sounds, one that is indicative of the time of day, and perhaps even a specific time of year. For instance, as is the case in most large cities, in Havana one is likely to hear increased traffic sounds beginning by about 7:45 or 8:00am, and then again at around 4pm, signaling the daily commute to and from work. Similarly, during the evening hours and on weekends, the sounds of neighbours chatting on the front stoop, on the sidewalk, or in the neighbourhood park, are most prevalent. Yet, during the summer months, and as a result of the extreme heat, many people tend to stay indoors, or at least spend large amounts of time in the shade. And so while I have never visited during that particular time of year, we might hypothesize that the sounds of voices, people in the streets, and perhaps even automobile traffic, would demonstrate a decreased overall presence during the summer season.

In the same way that sounds have the capacity to communicate information about time, they are also quite telling of the space in which they are sounding. I will save a discussion of the particulars of sounding space for the coming pages, however what is most important at this point is to consider that the information offered by the soundscape can only be truly acknowledged, understood, and employed, by assuming a particular position as a listener – one that is acute, active, and curious. From this perspective, using listening

as a methodological approach creates the opportunity to think about the relationship between place, culture, and community in a way that so often gets overlooked.

### **Aural Architecture and the Culture of Sounding Space**

The tropical climate in Havana has lent itself to an urban design that is in many ways typical of that which exists throughout the Caribbean. This includes open public spaces, few neighbourhood high-rise apartments, and uniquely coloured concrete buildings and homes. Living spaces are often built in close proximity to one another, whether it is in the form of low-rise apartments, attached rows of housing, or even detached homes, which usually stand mere feet apart. What is most interesting about these living spaces (and perhaps something that is also self-evident) is that in order to keep the temperature at a level that is both comfortable and accommodating, many people will often leave the windows and the doors wide open at most any time of day. In fact, given the potential for damage during the rainy season, there are very few windows that even contain panes of glass, and are instead outfitted with wooden shutters, or something of the sort. The resulting effect is that it becomes increasingly difficult to establish the acoustic parameters of one's home. In this setting, inside is outside, and outside is inside. It should come as no surprise then, that in Havana, the notion of acoustic privacy takes on a vastly different shape, as the sounds of the street, conversation, and household activity, are forever extending into and out of one's home.

What does this mean in terms of the soundscape, the acoustic community, and the resulting notion of membership? There are two separate, yet interrelated approaches to conceptualizing this. At the micro level, which we will regard as the domain of the individual listener, the notion of *acoustic space* is fruitful. This concept was developed out of what we might call the McLuhanesque tradition of aurality, and it offers a profitable approach for describing the dialogue between aural perception, sound, and space. At the macro level, and by this I am referring to the context created by the whole of the acoustic community, we will make use of the notion of *aural architecture*. This is a more recently articulated method for describing the relationship between sound and space, and is one that emphasizes the physicality of the terrain insofar as its social function is concerned. Both concepts are spatial in scope and emphasis, and through their joint use, we can develop a richer, more comprehensive understanding of Havana's acoustic geography.

The concept of acoustic space was most thoroughly communicated in the anthropological and the ethnographic work of Edmund Carpenter (Carpenter E. S., 1973; Carpenter & McLuhan, 1960). It addresses, first and foremost, the information that sound carries with it about the physical location in which it is generated. Sound, and the manner in which it propagates, is contingent upon the material construction of the space in which it is sounding. However in terms of perception, the propensity for the individual to draw upon such information is largely dependent upon the social, cultural, and the historical context in which the act of listening has been learned. The work of Steven Feld and David Howes among other sensory anthropologists has shown that sensory engagement takes on vastly different shapes and configurations in divergent social and cultural contexts (Feld, 1990; Howes, 1991). As such, the very act of listening can be considered an act of culture; an

embodied response that is conditioned and employed in ways that are unique to the socio-cultural and socio-historical position of the listener. And by extension, the attributes, and the communicational significance of acoustic space are also dependent upon the aural history of the perceiver, and the extent to which they have been required to acknowledge and draw upon such information.

In Havana, the composition of acoustic space is by necessity inclusive of the acoustic community. Here, aural orientation occurs not through soundmaking practices that are primarily insular and solitary, but also (and perhaps even largely) through the sounds that are created by others. In this setting, one's conception of space, and therefore one's position as a listener, is informed, cultivated, and conditioned by and through the behaviour and actions of others. This is not to say that such an observation is uniform, and that it applies to everyone and at all times. Nor is it to suggest that the inhabitant of Havana demonstrates a more sophisticated, or a superior aural sensibility. Rather, the point here is simply that the conditions under which aural perception is nurtured in this unique socio-cultural context are such that acoustic space is created by and through communal participation. In this sense, the sounds of others tell the listener more about the spaces that they themselves inhabit, whereby it is increasingly difficult if not impossible to disassociate the impression and the memory of one from the other.

Aural architecture on the other hand, offers an opportunity to think about the ways in which spaces are used socially, and how physical design lends itself to the process of communication via the act of soundmaking. This concept was developed through the work of acoustician and digital audio pioneer Barry Blesser and sociologist Linda-Ruth Salter (Blesser & Salter, 2007), and it refers to the manner in which the practice of soundmaking "illuminates" the physical attributes of space. It suggests that the nature of the soundscape is determined in equal measure by the space that contains it as it is by the type of sounds that compose it, and that the spatial design weighs heavily upon how sound is used and understood by its inhabitants. That is to say, aural architecture refers to the relationship between sound and space insofar as its social uses, rather than its physical properties as such, are indicative of whether it is positively or negatively functioning in terms of acoustic communication.

The Havana soundscape is composed with the physical attributes of space in mind. Here, soundmakers are actively aware of their spatial setting, and approach communication according to the character of the physical terrain. An example of this is the interpersonal communication that often takes place between private living spaces, or between the home and the street. I remember quite vividly, living on the third floor of an apartment, the manner in which my friends would capture my attention to notify me of their arrival. There were no phone calls, no text messages, nor were there even doorbells ringing. Rather, they could often be heard (and at quite a distance I'm sure) yelling up through the balcony door and into the open windows from the street below: "Vicente!". It took me a very short time to realize how sound was being used to communicate in this context. This required a simple shift in my position as a listener, and to appreciate that I too was a participating member in this acoustic community. The point that I am after here, as obvious as it may be, is that the acoustic qualities of physical spaces in Havana are

understood and are used as communicational devices. Such spaces are not subverted, nor are they neglected as they might be in a highly privatized, media-rich environment. The resulting acoustic geography is one that demonstrates an inseparable relationship between sound and space.

What then, might we say in terms of the notion of membership and its relationship to sounding space? Membership, as it is often conceptualized in Cuban cultural studies, connotes an affiliation that is not only cultural, but also one that is also spatial in scope and emphasis. For the local inhabitant, space is imbued with a history of traditions, customs, and cultural practices that work to construct one's conception of the physical terrain. Perhaps not quite as apparent, and exactly that which I hope to have illuminated here, is that the conception of the physical terrain extends beyond what is merely visible. As we have discussed, in Havana, the culture of sounding space is such that the community in which one resides is constructed in large part by and through aural practices. That space and sound are so intimately conjoined, and that they are done so through the sounds of communal activity speaks to the participatory and the inclusive nature of the practices of soundmaking and listening. In this sense, and perhaps more than any other tenet of local culture, sound represents the axis, or the bond, between what is at once enacted, shared, spatial, and cultural in Havana.

### **Music, Technology, and the History of Aural Practices**

It would be difficult to overstate the social and the cultural significance of music over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Cuba. As such, any attempt to develop a comprehensive account of aural culture in Havana must acknowledge Cuba's cultural history of music making and musical listening. Beginning in the 1930s and the 1940s, authors such as Emilio Grenet, Alejo Carpentier, and Fernando Ortiz heralded not only the esteem of the musical form in Cuban society, but also its contribution and influence on a global level. Today, scholars such as Robin Moore and Vincenzo Perna among others have continued in this tradition by offering their own take on the culture's musical evolution, while simultaneously addressing the prominent societal role that music assumes in contemporary Cuba. As a result, there is no shortage of material to draw upon in order to trace the history of aural practices in the musical context.

In terms of this body of literature, the matters that receive the greatest amount of attention usually concern the configuration of the musical form in and of itself, and/or that of music's social function. This is for good reason, given that since the birth of the *contradanza* in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, until the rise of *timba* during the 1990s, much has changed in terms of both musical soundmaking, and thus Cuban culture more broadly (and vice versa). Not to mention the added intrigue created by the political rupture in 1959, which has raised many questions concerning the ongoing dialogue between the musical form and the prevailing socio-political ideology. However, the act of musical listening, and in particular when it is framed alongside listening practices in an everyday setting, also presents an intriguing, and certainly a valuable point of departure to further extend the discussion of aural culture in Havana. It is with this correspondence in mind, that we will approach the treatment of the musical environment.

In much the same way that musical soundmaking can be regarded as a performance of the cultural form, so too can the act of musical listening. As such, the emphasis that is placed on music as a means of cultural production should necessarily also be present in its reception as well. This brings into question, ‘with what ears’, so-to-speak, might music be listened to and thus understood? Or to put it more succinctly, what types of associations, experiences, and memories are employed and activated when a member of the local community listens to a form of cultural expression that resonates on so many levels amidst the socio-cultural narrative? While the answers to these questions are surely multi-layered, complex, and dynamic, we might begin to address them by considering the contexts in which musical listening most often takes place.

Whether the setting is sacred or secular, popular or subcultural, the conditions for the listener to be an involved, active participant in the musical experience are abundant. First and foremost, dance is without question the definitive behavioural and emotive response activated by and through the act of listening. Its aesthetic and cultural significance rivals that of music (of course the two are inseparable), and it is an integral part of the musical experience for so many of the island’s musical forms. The live performance is another example, one that requires the listener’s physical presence, and the occupation of a shared environment that is inclusive of musicians and audience members alike. And finally, even listening to music in the home, on the radio, or on a stereo, presents a context that can be suggestive of inclusion. Whether it is being listened to by two or more individuals within the home, or overheard by a nearby neighbour, the potential remains for music to contribute to the soundscape added information about the local context. Perhaps more than any other type of sound, music is single-handedly capable of producing and binding an acoustic community. In this sense, the configuration of musical listening that has prevailed in Cuba over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has much in common with soundscape listening, as it too is to a large extent a shared, communal, and a participatory act of culture.

To extend this conversation, we must also address the means through which musical listening takes place, which inevitably entails the role of modern media. In Havana, the embedding of sound into a new context through electroacoustic practices (done so via the radio, the television, and of course the stereo) has become commonplace. Today, Cuban musical culture both relies upon, and requires the dissemination of music through the channels offered by the aforementioned media. Yet in every case, the design of these media, given that all of which make use of the loudspeaker, permit the continuance of a similar form of listening that has come to define local culture. That is, the capacity to create and/or contribute to the acoustic community still remains.

The one notable mode of listening however that is more-or-less absent from the Cuban context, and that which largely defines listening practices elsewhere, is one that is manifest through contemporary digital technologies. Throughout Cuba, the privatization of the soundscape remains a foreign listening practice, and so the local history of aural culture is one that has eluded modes of attention that are insular or detached from one’s immediate environment. Cell phones have only recently made their presence felt, and seldom are they used for dialogue. More significantly, headphone listening, through the

use of the personal media player, remains an untapped mode of musical consumption, and it certainly does not demonstrate the ubiquity that it does in a socio-economic environment that is founded upon a consumerist approach.

So, what might we glean from the current disconnect that exists between the communal aural culture in Havana on the one hand, and the personalization of listening practices on the other? Can we attribute the participatory nature of the local soundscapes to the absence of personal media technology? And to what extent might the practices of soundmaking and listening undergo a shift once contemporary digital technologies become a naturalized part of the listening experience?

Any responses to these questions at this moment would be speculative. It remains to be seen what and how profound the effects of the introduction of the solitary soundscape might have upon aural culture in Havana. To be sure, the resulting configuration of acoustic communication in this setting will be one that remains complex, multi-dimensional, and surely not of the design of a single element. However until then, and for reasons that include not only the absence of personal media devices, but also the local history of musical listening, as well as the culture of sounding space, locals remain aurally engaged with the immediate context. The majority of interpersonal communication is conducted acoustically rather than electroacoustically, and listening continues to be an act that is part of the public domain, rather than something that has become insular and privatized. Music maintains its role as a highly valued, and widely revered performance of the cultural form. And finally, the soundscape continues to articulate a collective presence, and the acoustic community persists as a rich social, cultural, and communicative resource.

### **Conclusion: Listening Ahead**

While this study has merely just begun, I hope to have presented a worthwhile case not only for soundscape studies, but also, why it represents a valuable approach to conducting ethnographic research in Havana's social and cultural context. At present, there remains much work to do in terms of constructing both a historical and a contemporary account of everyday aural practices in in this setting. However, with sound studies gaining both traction and currency in contemporary ethnographic research, and a growing number of individuals employing an aural approach to conducting cultural studies, this significant element of the cultural narrative is one that may soon be addressed. Surely, the role of both music and that of media will assume a significant place in this story. However, it is the notion of the acoustic community, and the intentionality and purpose that contribute to its design, that prevails as the central theme of aural culture studies in Havana. And it is how this community resonates within the individual, cultivating the sentiments of belonging, inclusion, and membership that are the sites in which culture is not only sensed, but also felt, and lived.

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