

# Arguing for the discrete processes of a gentle geography: London's East End soundscape.

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# Arguing for the discrete processes of a gentle geography: London's East End soundscape

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**Abstract**

In this article I will make an argument for a gentle geography of the urban, where the tacit comes at the forefront, our experience of the sensuous dialogues of the city guiding our making of place. I will use an example from my research based in London's East End to illustrate the ways in which the tacit urban relates to our making of place, notably by examining the process of listening participatively, hence placing ourselves in amongst what we are listening to. Thus, opening the doors to a reflection on the ways in which the senses shape our conception and making of place and the city.

**Keywords**

soundscape; making; place; senses; body; urban; listening.

## 1. Sounds of the city

### 1.1 A bike ride, a crash and laying out the journey

It is dark outside; the December air feels crispy in this cold and not yet rainy day. The bike tires are moving smoothly through the asphalt, a relief after a few days of snow. The road is still dry so I must make my way before the humidity of the air settles as frost with the cold. The pedals move in sync with my legs, advancing at the speed my feet turn. Downhill. The front brake aids slightly my legs in slowing down the bike. I can hear the subtle caress between the road and the bike, rubber gently running over the smooth firm dark surface. Then my bike slowing down, the tires of a car speeding to make a turn with no anticipation, the strident sound of the bike break at its tightest and then the sound of wind softly caressing my ears for a split second before the sound of my body impacting on the asphalt once, the lenses of my glasses breaking and the sensation and sound of the metallic frame from my glasses twisting and incrusting itself into my nose bridge, becoming part of its anatomy violently. Imperceptibly shortly afterwards, a second impact of my head after a short but sharp bounce of the upper body while the lower body carries on dragging along while burning several patches of exposed flesh; almost simultaneously to the metal frame of the bike being scratched by the road, car tires screeching, braking suddenly. And then all the musical ebb and flow that accompanies a road accident, sirens approaching through the winding roads, racing up the hill, cars doors opening and closing letting out people in different levels of distress, trying to talk, trying to get help, getting the belongings that had been distributed around the road, asking me questions without receiving an answer; all this beautiful sonic mayhem unfolding around me, being listened to from its epicenter, making me feel like a distracted director who has lost its orchestra to their own increasingly non synched rhythms. I would have never thought the sound of a body impacting the road and the orchestra of minuscule sounds around it could have such a beautiful disorganisation to it, coming together in a fleeting soundscape too elusive to grab hold on, ensounding my body in its passage.

Above, I have narrated a soundscape etched in my memory from the years I lived in London. It is a life experience that helped my research take a definitive turn towards

having the sense of hearing as a sole focus, mainly because my vision is unreliable and thus, my sonic experience of the environment was suddenly brought to the forefront of my spatial experience. This eventually lead me to the question of 'how does the soundscape relate to the making of place?' which has articulated my research.

Researching the ways in which listening to the soundscape relates to our conception and representation of the spaces around is researching our making of place sensuously. Here place is understood as a network of connections that happen within the dynamics of space (Massey 2005), and as such, the relations we establish with the space surroundings us are part of our making of place, our ways of inhabiting space.

I undertook my research in London's East End from 2009 to 2015. I have been researching the ensoundment (Ingold 2007) of bodies and the construction of place through listening participatively (Nancy 2002) to the understated geographies of sound. I have conducted this project through methods involving shadowing (Jirón 2011), and shadow-recording the urban soundscapes suggested by the participants of the research. In this paper, I argue that shadowing, walking and listening can be gentle methods of research.

Gentle research invites for the research to be paced alongside the rhythms of both researcher and participants. As Kye Askins stated in August 2015 (Askins 2015) the conception of gentle research is currently striving to find a definition. In this case, I understand by gentle research a process that primes the rhythms of the participants and is focused on making the process as self-reflexive as possible. A gentle geography is based on the tacit knowledge of space that bodies develop and may then forget during their everyday routines (Perec 1973). Hence why placing the emphasis on the senses, and in this case the soundscape, is a way to re-gain access to this tacit knowledge through a careful examination of our own ways of listening participatively (Nancy 2002) to our surroundings. In addition, and as I will be retaking in the last part of the paper, a gentle methodology enables the resurfacing of the sensuous and reflexive processes around one's own emplacement in space to take a centre stage in the research and produces sociological accounts that are as alive as the processes they depict (Back and Puwar 2013). Therefore enabling the domain of the subtle and sensational to enter sociological literature as main players in the research process.

## 2. The tacit urban

### 2.1 Bodies in sound

Ingold (2007) argues that we hear sound *in sound*. Our bodies always live in sound, our ears are constantly subjected to it (Tonkiss 2003) and amongst this sound that we are in, we hear sound. As Ingold defines, our bodies are ensounded (ibid 2007), living in sound and listening to sound among this sound; constantly feeling the vibrations of the sounds that surround us.

In addition, sound interacts with our bodies even if we do not listen to it. Sound traverses our bodies and vibrates through our bones, flesh and organs. There is constant ebb and flow of vibrations, in fact sound is a vibration amongst which we live. Ensounding our bodies is taking note of the ever-present vibrations that traverse us. It is tuning into them and by doing so, becoming aware of the dialogues that the sounds of the soundscape are inviting us to have (Berrens 2015, 2016).

However, reducing our experience of sound to an immersive one limits the transductive possibilities of sound (Helmreich 2010). For Helmreich, transduction is the way sound can connect beyond the immediate, beyond the idea of immersion. Sound makes our flesh and bones vibrate as it goes through our bodies, but it can also make us vibrate emotionally and through our memories. The transductive attribute of sound makes for the listener to be able to listen in, out and beyond the soundscape<sup>1</sup>. Listen in when one listens to the sounds of the soundscape, listen out when one listens to oneself in space, and listen beyond when one listens to oneself listening, unleashing memories and emotion thus connecting with oneself and one's orientations (Ahmed 2008) with sound. Therefore, we can argue that listening to the soundscape goes beyond the immersive quality of sound. We can connect with the vibrational qualities of sound from flesh and bones to our emotions.

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<sup>1</sup> Schafer defined the soundscape (1994) as the sounds that emanate from a certain space. In this sense the soundscape is the spontaneous composition of sounds that come from a specific space. The soundscape is composed of sounds and, as such, is also ensounding, vibrational and transductive. For a further definition of the soundscape please see Berrens 2015.

## 2.2 Listening to listen

In this research I have investigated the relationship between the soundscape and the making of place<sup>2</sup>. In doing so, I listened to eight people (hereafter my participants) that had the East End as the space of their everyday life (either working or living there) attend to the urban soundscape and reflect about it through their relationship with their listening practices. Endeavouring to listen to somebody listening needs trust and above all, to be patient in the research.

In order to gain a better understanding of their perspective of the soundscape, we first met several times and discussed their everyday life routines and the soundscape they recalled. Initially this took place in the form of semi-structured interviews. Then, in order to observe their ways of navigating space and walk through it, we carried on talking about their perspective on the soundscape while walking around the East End, letting them guide the wandering. We agreed to navigate together (either walking, cycling or being still) a route or site of their everyday life routine that they found more representative of what they considered the East End sounded like for them. I would shadow them. Therefore, with this decision to shadow my participants (Jirón 2011), following them around, I wanted to let the participants control the pace and limits to this spatial wandering, respecting their rhythms their choices and observe how their walking was or wasn't guided by emotional attachments to different sounds in the soundscape that had come up in the previous talks. In this sense, the making of place (Agnew 2011; Berrens 2015) responds, in part, to these attachments and is related to both their ways of navigating (Ingold & Vergunst 2008) but also of sensing space (Rhys-Taylor 2010, Scarfe 2011, Bates 2011)

We had spoken at length about them, their relationship to the urban soundscape and with space. However, being shadowed in a routine route of their everyday life brought the sensational into the mundane. In this case, the shadowing can be seen as a respectful yet incredibly rich and powerful method of research that brought their attention back to this route, to their every move and invited them to raise their awareness on all the sensory stimuli that were unfolding around. Shadowing made

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<sup>2</sup> Understanding place (Agnew 2011) as the nexus of relations that make space (Massey, 2005) and its making as the relationships that we establish with space and in doing so, make place.

them become aware of their own bodily attitude towards space, their ways of relating corporeally to it and focused their mind into the act of moving through space and into being followed, which made them become self-conscious.

In addition, I recorded this route. I will dwell more on the effect of recording in the next section. First, I want to refresh the concept of listening from the introduction and then examine a listening practice to highlight the importance of a participative listening (Nancy 2002).

### 3. Listening

#### 3.1 Listening to Lila

Lila is an outreach project worker, focusing on the Bengali community in London's East End. In her work, she uses art to aid several groups of Bengali women to gain a better understanding of the urban spaces they inhabit and to feel empowered to have a more independent everyday life (most of her pupils barely speak any English and as such depend on brothers, fathers or husband in order to be able to carry out their daily activities). She also teaches English lessons to vulnerable (that have been or are in immediate risk socially and economically) Bengali women at a few centres in East London. When we speak about her relationship with the soundscape Lila notices the pace of the steps of the people that walk along the street. From the leather or rubber soled shoes to the sound that the fabric of the clothes people wear make depending on their walking rhythms. She told me that she started paying attention to the sound of shoes when she noticed how the pace of the steps of her students would *relax* just before entering one of her English lessons. She could hear them from the other side of the long corridor, rushing at first and then calming down, as the women started to chitchat with each other. It gave her a sense of *presence*. Lila asked me to accompany her in a sonic walk of the streets she transits the most around East London, notably the area around Brick Lane market on a Sunday. She loves the business of the market and the superposition of sounds, from the metal bars of the stalls clanging with the items that are hung, to the cries of food sellers "*a pound a bowl!*" "*banana banana bananaaa*".

We went for the walk on a busy Sunday morning. Lila remained silent for the duration of the recording and was guiding me with her hands. She did not do her shopping as she usually does while we were recording. After the recording, we sat on a street corner and she told me how walking through a space that for her has become ingrained as part of her routine while being consciously followed was bizarre. Lila became more aware of her corporeality in that space, of her own steps and rhythms. She said that listening to the market while being followed made a mundane event become sensational and, as such, to grant a re-evaluating of her own experience.

In this sense, we can argue that using shadowing as a methodology to walk with a participant, invited her to attend to her own ways of walking and navigating. Having a silent presence following into her footsteps made her reflect about her way of walking and of experiencing the space surrounding her. In this sense, shadowing can be thought as a gentle method since it invites the participant to attend; it is an open invitation that the participant may or may not take. In this sense we can argue it is a gentle methodology that invites the participant towards a reflexive approach, hence through having an experience of their everyday urban routines in a totally different way it can transform the participants' own perception of the city. Shadowing puts an emphasis on the mundane to become sensational (Perec 1973) and thus brings about a re-consideration of the ways of navigating and relating to space and of the making of place.

The re-evaluation was further enriched when we listened back to the recording. Time elapsed between the making of the recordings for the research and listening to them. This time allowed for the participants to listen to the recordings from a detached perspective. They were no longer fully immersed into the research, with many having moved onto different jobs or different spaces. Thus, listening to the recordings re-floated some memories that had not been present in their current everyday lives. After listening to the recordings, we met one last time and spoke about it.

Lila had a sense of disconnection with the recording. She recognised it was what we had done together but she could no longer place herself at the heart of the sound. She was astonished to the amount of sounds she had not noticed before. As mentioned

earlier, the shadowing highlighted an otherwise routine event and made the relationship between Lila and the soundscape be put into question, or at least, become more conscious.

### 3.2 Listening and recording

Rosa is a primary school teacher with a special interest in language. In her work, she teaches pupils across primary school and particularly does one-to-one teaching support. She likes to listen carefully for accents and lexical mannerisms in people's ways of speaking. Listening to the recording, Rosa noted an uncomfortable sense of disjunction between her memory of our cycle from her home to her work (ergo her daily commute) and the sound she was listening to. In fact, she was lacking a bodily sensation that had otherwise been present during our time together, notably when it comes to cycling, she was very adamant in stressing the loss of any bodily feeling both in terms of thermoception (temperature feel) and sensorially. That sensation is what participative listening brings, a union between the listener and the soundscape that goes beyond a physical vibrational exchange and expands into the inner and reflexive self of the listener. Participative listening occurs when the body is ensounded and there is an awareness of this ensoundment. In this case, Rosa became aware of the ensoundment of her body by listening to the recording and feeling its lack.

In turn, that made her realise the importance of the corporeal presence in space, thus telling me how she felt the soundscape was another way of relating to the city, a non-visual approach to our surroundings that, once attention had been brought to it, enabled her to gain a different understanding of the space around her. For Rosa the soundscape was another way of making sense of the space surrounding her that transcended the notion of hearing a sound and engaged all our body in listening.

Going beyond the sounds of shoe soles, Lila reflected on the ways in which the soundscape provides non-visual information that inform her about her surroundings through listening to the people's paces, into the temporalities that some people are in. It may be a series of fast paced steps that move towards a tube entrance, bustling with people that try not to overstep over each other, clearly in a rush to arrive or to depart

somewhere. Else, it can also be a nonchalant walk around Whitechapel High Street Market that some tourists take, observing the market stalls, without intending to purchase, just having a nose around.

The ways in which we relate to space, inhabiting, navigating and conceiving it, hence our making of place, relate to our perception of the soundscape since this one can tune the ways in which we live through that space. The relation we establish with the soundscape is reflected in our making of place because it conditions our perspective and conception of the spaces we transit, and as such, the places we make and inhabit.

Listening participatively warrants a full-body engagement with the dialogues of the city and places us at their core. There is no dialogue without a listener, we are the other party that the city is constantly trying to engage, while at the same time being an intrinsic part of its constitution. The body is in space, traversed by the vibrations of sound, living in sound, being ensounded. The body is connected both to the sound, its production and its potential for connectedness. Hence ensounding the body enables the engagement between the body and the soundscape to transcend the space where this exchange happens and make place through connecting memory, emotion, the sentient body and space. Listening participatively is an engagement with the soundscape that transcends the temporality of sound and connects the listener deeply with their own sensory and emotional self.

For all my participants, re-listening to the tape without being ensounded by the soundscape as they would have been if they was listening 'live' to the soundscape made them feel a bodily sense of discomfort, later identified as not having the same bodily sensation. However, they also noted that their way of listening to the soundscapes of their everyday life shifted, they listen attentively, attending to their body ensounded. Feeling the sound as much as listening to it. Re-listening to the recording was also a method that invited the participants to attend to his or her own corporeality and it also enables this re-acquaintance with one's corporeality to be transferred into the sociological account, thus producing accounts that transport the aliveness of a sensational process (Back and Puwar 2013) instead of muting the sensuous.

## 4. Engaging

### 4.1 Listening and engaging

In this case, the methods depicted, the shadowing and the re-listening to the recordings were aimed at raising the awareness of our modes of attending to the urban sensorium, notably our ways of listening. They encouraged the listener to come to its aural sense, and notice the differences that emerge when we listen participatively. However, I did not use any kind of imposition, the participants were prompted to follow their own ebb and flow and let their relationship with the soundscape grow (or not) at their own speed.

Listening participatively engaging into the moment of sound (LaBelle 2010; Nancy 2002) calls for a presence within our bodies in space, a presence that needs us to connect to our corporeality, giving back to the sensorium its lead role in the perception of our environment. However, it also demands an emotion, mental and rational presence that will enable our bodies to become ensounded and connect us with the soundscape but also out of the soundscape with our emotions and, in turn, beyond the soundscape with our memories. This is a process that emerges differently for everybody, depending on the relationships with their senses and their emotional selves (Greco and Stenner 2004). In this case, gentle research methods enabled the participants to feel respected in their rhythms and to take their time and decide their degree of engagement with the process of the research in addition to producing an account of alive sociology (Back and Puwar 2013) as I will explain in the following paragraphs. The methods devised were meant to invite them to attend to the soundscape and their corporeality without placing an obligation to do so.

The gentle methods depicted in this article are inscribed in two recent methodological trends.

The first one being the theoretical shift from embodiment towards emplacement (Pink 2009). In this case, the methods used have enabled me to get as close as I have possibly been able to the participant's emplacement with regards to the spaces of their everyday life but also to their relationship with the soundscape. In addition, through

inviting them to come to their own ways of listening, these gentle set of methods have also enabled the possibility of the participants reflecting about their own emplacement. Albeit no on those theoretical terms per se but more in terms of a reflection of ways of inhabiting and relating to space and the soundscape, informed reflexively.

The second one is the shift towards an 'alive sociology' (Back 2012) of which Back and Puwar (2013) are some of its main advocates. This school of thought argues that we shall bring sociology back towards the sociological imagination depicted by Mills (1957) and produce accounts that reflect the aliveness of the society depicted instead of drowning the life out of the research with the methods. Back argues fiercely for using a set of methods that enable the research's account to vibrate alive with the phenomenon depicted. He argues that sociology must move beyond applying a *standardised* set of methods in order to fulfill a non written requirement to validate the research institutionally and instead strive to employ methods that enable the liveliness of the phenomenon researched to permeate through the pages of the research account.

The aim of the gentle methodology used in my research was not only to adapt and respect the participants' rhythms but also to transpose them into the final account and have their experiences shape the account, from words to sensations. I have endeavored to produce an account that resonates with their rhythms and paces but also with their practices of listening and understanding of the soundscape, so that the reader can enter a sensorial ambience upon reading the account thus producing an alive account of the ways of making place in London's East End through listening to the soundscape and to the participants listen.

A gentle approach like the one proposed in this article may enable and encourage the participant to consider their listening practices and engage into participative listening, at their pace, and their way. A gentle research is a caring research, and it focuses on making the process of researching and being researched an experience to enable both researcher and researched to evolve.

## 4.2 Engaging with ability

In the introduction I have narrated a soundscape of my past. From that crispy evening in December onwards, my relation with my own sensorium changed. It may be because of the sudden. I had to learn to re-adapt myself both to my newly awakened sonic sensibility and to my newly obscured sight.

Our experiences of the urban are shaped by our ways of sensing it. The senses are not only the gateway to our surroundings (Rodaway 1994), they are also ways of relating to space and as such, make place. Therefore an attention to our sensuous selves will not only enrich our relationship with space, it can bring more awareness to our own processes of making place, as we have seen in this article through a brief example on having one's body ensounded and listening participatively. Attending to our corporeal relationship with space can help further inform our own processes of making place and, as such, shed light into our ways of inhabiting the city.

The geographies of the senses have a larger scope for differently abled bodies's stories of making of place to emerge. A gentle research methodology is not only aimed at pacing the research in accordance to the participants, the researched and the researcher but also in establishing a relationship where there are no hierarchies of 'abled-ness' or differently abled bodies. We all establish our relations to the urban from our bodies, they may be messy bodies, fleshy and non normative bodies (Smart 2007), but they are the gates to our environment. The ballet of everyday urban life orchestrates its compositions from the *prégnance* of our bodies. Hence the importance of methods that accompany and include the senses and the sentient body.

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## Resumen

*Mi proyecto investiga la relación entre el soundscape urbano y hacer lugar. Se basa en el Este de Londres por sus fuertes contrastes sonoros.*

*En este artículo argumentaré a favor de las geografías gentiles urbanas, son los espacios dónde lo tácito emerge y en los que nuestras experiencias e intercambios con los diálogos sensibles de la ciudad guían nuestro hacer lugar. Usaré un ejemplo de mi investigación para ilustrar como la ciudad tácita se relaciona con hacer lugar, examinaré el proceso de escucha participativa, el situarnos en medio de aquello que escuchamos. Así se abre una reflexión sobre los modos en los que los sentidos forman nuestra concepción del espacio y consecuentemente al hacer lugar en éste. Para concluir, inscribiré mi propia experiencia como investigadora sensorialmente discapacitada para llevar más lejos la reflexión sobre la importancia de escuchar el soundscape y los procesos involucrados en el hacer lugar.*

## Palabras clave

*Soundscape, lugar, sentidos, cuerpo, urbano, escucha*

## Resum

*La meva recerca investiga la relació entre el soundscape urbà i fer lloc. Està basada a l'Est de Londres pels seus forts contrastos sonors.*

*En aquest article argumentaré a favor de les geografies gentils urbanes, ón tot allò tàcit emergeix, ón les nostres experiències amb els diàlegs sensibles de la ciutat guien com fem lloc. Empraré un exemple de la meva recerca per a il·lustrar com el urbà tàcit es relaciona amb el fet de fer lloc, ho faré tot examinant el procés d'escolta participativa, i per tant situant-nos enmig del que escoltem. Així s'obren les portes a*

*una reflexió sobre les maneres en les quals els sentits donen forma a la nostra concepció i a fer lloc a la ciutat. Per concloure, inscriure la meva pròpia experiència com a investigadora sensorialment discapacitada per tal d'empènyer més lluny la reflexió sobre la importància d'escoltar el soundscape i els processos discrets de fer lloc que recercar a través dels sentits pot desentelar.*

**Paraules clau**

*Soundscape, fer, lloc, sentits, cos, urbà, escolta.*

