# Sound Watching – Travel and Storytelling in Sound

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**ABSTRACT:** Living in an essentially visual culture, the dominance of sight has dulled our other senses. Through digital media we daily relate to the landscapes and images of places all over the world, but what do these places sound like? If opening our ears may offer insight and raise reflection concerning complex environmental, social, political and economical issues, could something such as *sound tourism* contribute to educate travellers towards leaving behind a smaller soundprint? Assuming that something such as sound tourism could be possible and even useful, what can be said about sound within the context of travel? And what can be written about travel within the context of sound? Can sound art and travel narrative cross–pollinate in order to analyse, understand and describe the sounds that best define each place, ultimately telling its story in a resonant fashion?

**KEYWORDS:** soundwatching, cartography, sustainable tourism, soundprint, walkscapes, soundwalk, *flâneur*, sound art, travel narrative, soundscape, acoustic ecology, storytelling.

# 1. Introduction

Is it possible to imagine New Delhi without the echoing chants of the city's *pheriwhallas*? Can one conceive Mexico City without the songs of the street organ grinders, or Manhattan without its whimpering ambulances and unsettling police-car whoops? Can the idea of Granada be stripped of the guitar chords that sprout from each window in the Sacromonte neighbourhood?

Living in an essentially visual culture, the dominance of sight has dulled our other senses. While vision is typically treated as the defining sense of our era, hearing has traditionally been regarded as a secondary sense, which is consistent with a disturbing absence of hearing reports or narratives regarding a great number of major cultural processes.



**Figure 1.** Sentimiento (CC) 2009 Mikel Cortés Arrondo.

Fuelled by the emergence of recording technologies, the 20th century witnessed a rising interest in the sounds of the environment, both within scientific study and artistic practice. From radio culture, the conceptual works of Futurist artists such as those developed by Marinetti between 1927 and 1938, and Walter Ruttmann's *Week-End* – a film without images directed in 1930 – to the fundamental roles played by Schaeffer and Schafer within concrete music and sound environment studies, respectively, renewed attention and intention concerning everyday sounds began to take off, further developing throughout the late

20th century. The emergence of concepts such as *soundscape*, *acoustic ecology* and *soundwalk* revolutionized our perception of culture, identity and territory.

## 2. Sound cartography

> In the last few years we have come to believe that image has partially exhausted its semantic strength as bearer of truth, evidence and proof. The world seems to have been fully cartographed and territory cannot be contained into simple recon images. Humans have walked into a doubtful situation concerning image and started using technology as a means to turn back towards a time of *viva voce*. (…) Just like the phonograph in the first decades of the 20th century, (…) sound maps are currently a means to understand the changes concerning life within urban territories, and the relationship between people and their communities. (Ribeiro 2015)

According to Luis Cláudio Ribeiro, teacher and researcher in the fields of Communication Studies and Sound Culture, the map has progressively lost its role as a pure instrument of power to become a catalyser for metaphor and illusion: in some way, looking at a far away destination on a map can practically feel as if one had actually visited the place. To this metaphoric and illusory character of the visual map, sound mapping adds a dimension of presence and immersion, transcending the distant perspective that characterizes the former. Audition brings an expression of the depicted territory, converting motionlessness into effective and affective action, conveyed by the qualities of sound: "opacity transforms into a vibration that affects all." (Ribeiro 2015)
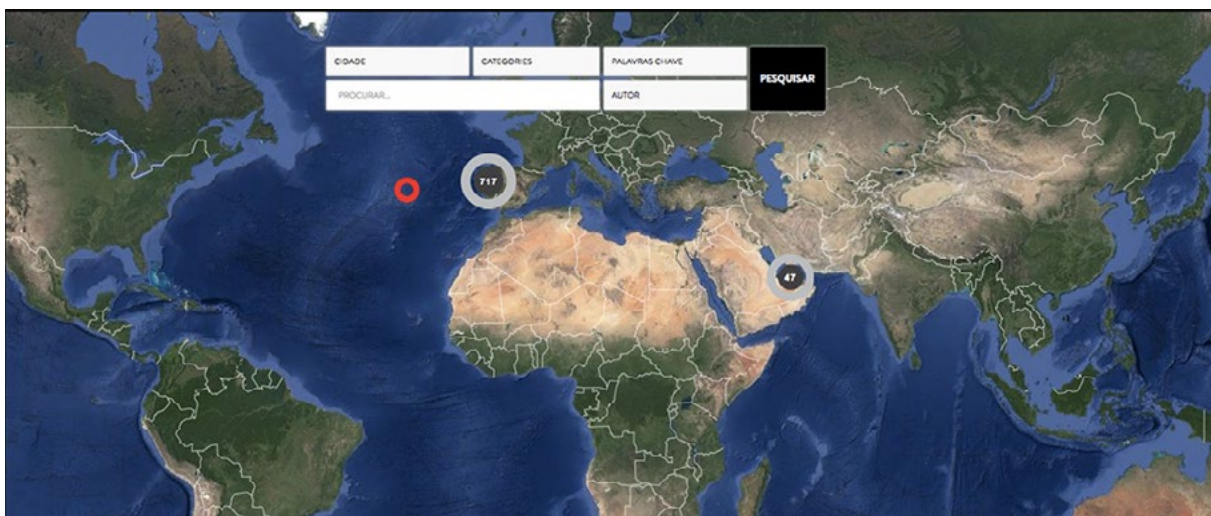


**Figure 2.** Phonambient.

Since the late nineties, advances in web technologies like audio streaming and web mapping allowed for the emergence of a rising number of online sound maps. Amongst these are global projects such as *Freesound*, *Radio Aporee* or *Soundcities*; regional initiatives such as *Open Sound New Orleans*, *Montréal Sound Map* or *Mapa Sonoro de Curitiba*; and others focused on more particular matters, like *Nature Soundmap*, a global community of nature sound recorders, *Wide Noise*, devoted to the study of sound pollution, or MSELIO, dedicated to the geographic distribution of original indigenous languages from Peru.

Sound cartography has also been extensively adopted within more conceptual approaches. In *Chatty Maps*, for instance, emotions and perceptions concerning urban sounds are central; *Sound Transit* uses a flight search engine interface to let its users book a virtual sound flight between two countries. From Portugal also emerged a few consistent sound-mapping initiatives worth mentioning, such as *Phonambient*, *Cinco Cidades* or *Lisbon Soundmap*. Besides cartographic, sound maps can also assume compositional and performative forms:

> The definition of sound map should not be taken too literally. The idea of map (...) should not be taken at face value, that is, as a two-dimensional means-to-an-end. (...) Not all swans are white, not all maps are two-dimensional. Maps are ultimately representations (...) and should be accepted as subjective truths insofar that the map is an abstraction derived from something – the geographical territory – but it is not the thing itself. (ECHOXIII 2013)

## 3. What do places sound like?

While sound cartography and the sounds of the environment have acquired growing relevance amongst artists and researchers, and sound has increasingly begun to be understood as a fundamental element concerning territorial and cultural identity, the field of travel remains yet mainly connected to vision: through digital media we daily relate to an immeasurable mass of visual data that depicts landscapes and images from cities and places all over the world. But what do these places sound like?

Figre 3. *What do places sound like?* (CC) 2015 Hugo Branco.

Founder of *Soundcities*, UK–based artist Stanza is interested in the way that sounds reflect the identity of each place, revealing emotional and responsive ways in which people interact with their environment. According to Stanza, found sounds have a lot to teach us about the identity of places and of the people who inhabit these spaces, while they also stimulate our senses in a musical way.

> The city is its own music, constantly evolving, a beautiful composition of squeaks, clanks, and pulses. The city is the orchestra. (...) We are just con–ductors whose interactive actions compose this music as we walk around. (Sanza s.d.)

## 4. Sound Watching

It is common today to travel considerable distances in order to attend a certain concert or to listen to a revered musician. But how many of us would travel that far just to experience a particular soundscape or the weird and wonderful acoustics of a specific space? In his book *Sonic Wonderland: a Scientific Odyssey of Sound*, Trevor Cox – Professor of Acoustic Engineering at Salford and President of the Institute of Acoustics – guides us through some of the "sonic wonders of the world" in what may presumably constitute the first travel guide to sound.

**Figure 4.** *Gol Gunbaz* (CC) 2015 Ashwin Kumar.

Encouraging readers to open their ears to those sounds that they often overlook in their visually obsessed lives, Cox explores a considerable variety of sounds around the globe in his quest for unusual acoustics. From extremely reverberant places to surprisingly long echoes, ancient theatres, bizarre sounding animals and acoustic mirrors; from the booming Kelso Dunes, in the Mojave desert, to the singing roads of Gyeonggi-do, in Korea, the incredibly loud waterfall of the Jökulsá á Fjöllum river, in Iceland, or the whispering gallery of the Gol Gumbaz Mausoleum, in India, the book transports us through a hidden reality of acoustic oddities: a richer, fuller and sonically diverse world, expecting to be properly heard.

> Increasingly, people are going to capture the World's sonic wonders, whether deliberately by recording what they hear on a mobile phone, or almost by accident, as the soundtrack on a video recording. (Cox s.d.)

At his website, Cox published a sound map that features some of the sonic places described in his book, while encouraging users to suggest their own sound watching sites where unique sounds or rare acoustic phenomena can be experienced. By identifying places with singular sound characters, the author explores a new use for sound cartography: rather than just an online library of sounds, this particular sound map is about finding places to visit and inspiring people to become sonic tourists.

# 5. A brief history of tourism

Since its inception, tourism has polarised: it reveals numerous views ranging from the total approval of its potential for enriching self-realisation combined with recreation to critical rejection due to the belief that it causes harm through the systematic dumbing down of entertainment and avoidable environmental destruction. (Gyr 2010)



**Figure 5.** *Cruise ship* (CC) 2009 Hans Christian Haaland.

Accounts of recreational and educational travel remount to the classical world and further back to Egypt under the pharaohs. Although with the fall of the Roman Empire travel became more difficult, dangerous and complicated, according to the history of tourism proposed by Ueli Gyr, the medieval corporate society witnessed the emergence of the desire to experience the world as an individual guiding principle, especially amongst certain professional groups, such as scholars and merchants.

Between the 16th and the 18th century, the grand tour became a common way for young nobles to broaden their education and to discover new exotic forms of pleasure and entertainment: exclusive and elitist, it presumably represents the earliest form of modern tourism. When wealthy members of the middle class started emulating the traveling habits of the aristocracy, the nobles felt compelled to find more exclusive destinations and activities.

During the 19ᵗʰ century, increased mobility, improved labour rights and a rise in real income paved the way for today's mass tourism: in 1804, Thomas Cook offered the first all-inclusive holidays, thus becoming the founder of commercialized mass tourism. In the beginning of the 20ᵗʰ century, summer retreats would become accessible to employees on low income and, between 1933 and 1939, having identified tourism's potential for political exploitation, the Third Reich would propagate a new strain of popular tourism. Promoted by the KdF ("National Socialist Association Strength through Joy") and the RWU ("Travelling, Hiking, Holiday") ministry, to the benefit of the Nazi regime, mass tourism was born.

After a decline period caused by World War II, European tourism began its golden era during the 1960s: ingredients such as the increasingly low prices, new holiday styles and destinations, and the democratization of car and air travel, allowed tourism operators and travel companies to push the industry towards the global phenomenon we know today, so deeply pervasive concerning economy, politics, culture and society in general.

> Artificial holiday worlds in the form of amusement parks and theme parks are becoming increasingly important. (…) These are made up of post-modern pseudo-events, simulated worlds and hyper-realities, which the tourists internalize as adventure, fun, game and competition, despite the fact that the visitors see through their artificiality. (…) The traditional touristic consumption of symbols (sights, other worlds) has been extended or replaced by an experience-laden entertainment culture that is part of a new way of perceiving the world." (Gyr 2010)

## 6. Is there such a thing as sustainable tourism?

> The (tourism) industry resembles a high-speed train, crammed with passengers with cheap tickets, racing toward a cliff edge. (Pollock 2013)

It is well known that tourism is currently one of the world's fastest growing industries: in many countries, it is now the primary source of employment and income. According to the UNWTO (World Tourism Organization), international tourist arrivals increased from 25 million in 1950, to 527 million in 1995, to a staggering total of 1.133 billion in 2014. But, while the apparent advantages of such ubiquitous phenomenon are widely broadcasted, its disadvantages are less likely to be discussed.

**Figure 6.** *Rambla, Barcelona* (CC) Chiara Stevani.

According to a study from Scott, Peeters and Goessling, if tourism was a country, its current GHG (greenhouse gas) emissions would rank fifth, right after USA, China, the European Union and Russia. Nevertheless, while other sectors are required to reduce their emissions, GHG emissions generated by tourism are not explicitly included in the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, although there is a high risk that the industry soon becomes the world's main climate killer.

Independent writer and Cultural Sustainability, Landscape Architecture, and Visual Studies researcher Anita Pleumarom believes that the latest rhetoric trends – embodied by concepts such *sustainable tourism* and *low carbon travel* – are actually distracting tourists from the urge to cut down on their emissions. The situation is further aggravated by misguiding calculation methods used by global institutions and policymakers to cover up the actual impact of air travel and *indirect emissions*, as well as other tourism related endeavours, such as the clearance of wild areas for building infrastructures or the transportation to tourist destinations of consumer goods, hotel accessories and equipment of tourist activities.

Moreover, *sustainable* measures promoted by travel companies and tourism operators, which claim to save carbon, are often mere public relations strategies that actually lead to the violation of human rights, increasing land grabs and conflicts with local communities in developing and underdeveloped countries. While major polluters are allowed to buy cheap GHG pollution rights elsewhere, instead of pursuing actual solutions involving non-fossil

technologies, the necessary innovations towards a climate-friendly future will keep getting delayed and ignored.

Finally, although UN's policymaking institutions keep arguing that tourism is responsible for impressive economic development and poverty reduction in the developing world, it is important to notice that the industry is largely controlled by corporations from the developed countries, and that the average level of financial leakage – the money that actually leaks out of developing tourist destinations onto foreign companies – is reported to lie somewhere between 55% and 80%, which ultimately means that the positive economic impact is minimal, and that tourism is rather responsible for further widening the gap between the rich and the poor, both amongst and within countries.

> The erosion of social structures, traditional values and cultural heritage can be experienced in all tourist destinations driven by over-commercialization. Behind the tourist centres' glittering facades, the majority of local residents are suffering from rising living costs, mafia-style politics and corruption, social erosion, sex, drugs and crime, as well as from environmental degradation. Today's international tourism system (…) is one of the clearest manifestations of unsustainable, wasteful consumption. (…) The globalization of tourism (…) is also a form of exploitation, the victims being the urban upper-class people in developing countries who are encouraged to spend their surplus income on dreams and illusions, at the expense of the environment and other members of society. (Pleumarom 2009)

As Portuguese architect Pedro Levi Bismarck points out, it seems clear that our criticism towards tourism cannot be sequestered to our criticism towards the dominant politics of space and towards a political space, discourse and debate which seem to be in an advanced state of decomposition. Tourism as a global phenomenon is inseparable from the "organization of space and time, of bodies and their social, cultural, spatial, affective and political relations under capitalism." (Bismarck 2016)

## 7. Traveling in sound

Although global policymakers and multinational economic groups can be considered the main responsible for the current situation concerning tourism, the roles of both tour operators and consumers shouldn't be overlooked. Both ends must realize that the world is not a limitless "resource to be exploited, but a sacred place to be protected and celebrated." (Pollock 2013) And while hosts must stop thinking of their customers as mere consumption units, tourists must unconvinced themselves that cheap travel is now a God-given right

and that the world is a huge combination of a department store and a fast-food chain to be consumed and discarded at will.

If the idea of sustainable tourism is not achievable within an unsustainable global scenario, can the praxis of responsible tourism, at grassroots level, be viable as a means to get as close as possible to that ideal, effectively reducing the industry's ecological footprint? And could something such as *sound tourism* be coordinated with the practices promoted by responsible tourism in order to help educate travellers towards leaving behind a smaller soundprint? Furthermore, could it contribute to a more sustainable model of tourism by raising awareness around issues like sound pollution or the preservation of endangered sounds?

While conducting field recordings in Tulum, Mexico, amongst several other social, environmental and economical paradoxes, I stumbled across one that became too evident to be ignored. In the context of a tropical paradise that had been progressively colonized by all sort of *eco-chic* resorts, overpriced raw food restaurants and wealthy yoga enthusiasts, I noticed a specific set of sounds that seemed to stand out from the endemic acoustic ambience, which was mainly dominated by the yet unfamiliar birdsongs, the soft surf of the Caribbean and the whisper of the wind rustling through the palm leaves.
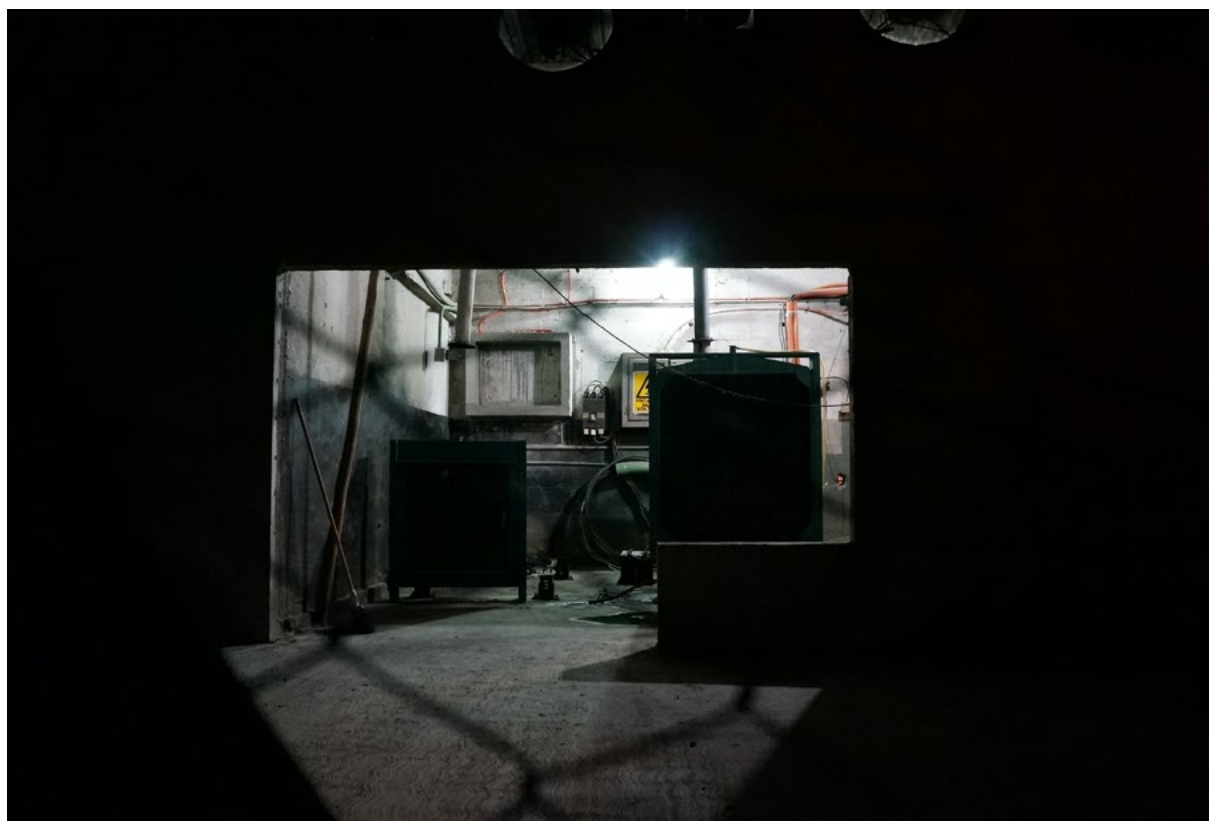


**Figure 7.** *Power generators* (CC) 2015 Hugo Branco.

Aligned by the road that ran along the beach, behind the scenes of the allegedly sustainable and environment-friendly eco-resorts, were countless power generators. Despite

challenging the singing of the birds, the murmur of the waves and the rustle of the wind in the palm trees with their insistent hums, I realized that these were the devices that actually sustained the natural and serene lifestyle they so absolutely seemed to oppose. Having reflected and inquired about the subject, the sound performance that I later presented at a local arts event included a clear moment of compositional confrontation between the natural sounds and the dozens of generator tones that I had previously recorded.

Such a simple sonic occurrence struck me as a fundamental example of how opening one's ears may offer insight and raise reflection concerning complex environmental, social, political and economical issues.

## 8. From walking to soundwalking

In his book *Walkscapes: Walking as an Aesthetic Practice*, the Italian architect and researcher Francesco Careri claims that the mere act of walking can be seen as an aesthetic tool "capable of modifying metropolitan spaces to be filled with meanings rather than things." (Careri 2002) In this sense, can't practices such as soundwalks modify public awareness regarding visited locations, granting new meaning to both the experienced sounds, the actions and circumstances by which these sounds are generated, and the spaces where they occur?



**Figure 8.** *Walking* (CC) 2012 Cristian Carrara.

Together with "long-standing artistic, philosophical and political concepts that theorize through the practice of walking, such as haiku poets' use of daily walks as a creative structure, writing about the figure of the *flâneur* and the Situationist concept of the dérive, as well as the approaches of conceptual artists, such as those in the Fluxus movement," (McCartney 2014) soundwalks can be understood as a way of consciously relating to our environment.

> An inherent characteristic of any soundwalk is the inspiration and insight that listeners gain from noticing the soundscape with its specific qualities and details. It is powerful because listeners are affected on a personal perceptual level first and can then connect this experience with their professional insight and knowledge. (Westerkamp 2006)

Composer, radio artist, sound ecologist and soundwalks pioneer Hildegard Westerkamp claims that, besides opening up our ears to the sounding details of a place, soundwalks also have the power to alert all our other senses, creating a "sense of inspiration, excitement and new energy", while opening our "inner space for noticing" in a "living connection between the listener and the space." (Westerkamp 2006)

Besides raising awareness and helping to connect individuals to their surrounding environment, a rather quiet activity such as a soundwalk can also inspire participants to travel at a slower pace, leaving behind a smaller soundprint in particular and, eventually, a smaller footprint in general. Soundwalks can even be specifically designed towards provoking a deeper ecological awareness on the participants, thus helping educate a new generation of more conscious travellers.

## 9. What kind of traveller is the sound traveller?

> The tourist is a collector of lived experiences. That's why he marches in a hurry without any time to loose. His anxiety is directly proportional to the amount of objects and situations he feels compelled to live, that is, to consume. The tourist transforms his own life into a product to be consumed. And every *souvenir* he carries along with him is the *Made in China* symbol on the experience that he never ceases to pursue, but that he will never have. (Bismarck 2016)

In direct ontological opposition to the tourist, the sound traveller shares the fundamental traits of the flâneur – the "deliberately aimless pedestrian who wanders around the city without apparent purpose, but who is secretly attuned to the history (and in this case to the soundscape) of the streets he walks." (White 2008)

Though the sound traveller may occasionally put considerable effort into experiencing a very specific sound – like in the case of the sound pilgrimages proposed by Trevor Cox or when passionately determined to record a certain sound – he does not "feed on that which he destroys," (Bismarck 2016) rather taking "the streets as an unfolding and open text comprised of infinite possibilities. He looks for the beauty, the ugliness, the poetical, and the unexpected in order to find inspiration and make a personal sense of the physical spaces." (Torsi 2016)



**Figure 9.** *Agios Kirikos* (CC) 2015 Hugo Branco.

Declaring both walking and listening as fundamental aesthetic practices, the sound traveller gladly trades-off monuments and museums for busy streets, quiet outdoors or reverberating water reservoirs, aspiring to deeply connect with the city's inner pulse. Being open to all things foreign and unknown, whilst simultaneously aware that uniqueness often comes inside the most mundane of packages, the sound traveller understands the world as one comprehensive musical composition in which we, as listeners and sound makers, are all active participants.

# 10. Storytelling in sound

Assuming that something such as sound travel could be possible and even useful, what can be said about sound within the context of travel? And what can be written about travel within the context of sound? Language itself is dominated by visual references, and the vocabulary available to describe vision-based experiences is vast when compared to what can be said about senses like audition or smell. Can sound art and travel narrative cross-pollinate in order to analyse, understand and describe the sounds that best define each place, ultimately telling its story in a resonant fashion?

Since 2015 I've been developing a project called *Sound Escapes* that I understand to be a natural evolution of a prior collective project called *Membrain*, which I presented as final project for a Master in Digital Arts completed in 2007 at the Pompeu Fabra University, in Barcelona. In *Membrain*, itinerant field recordings were conducted throughout the Iberian Peninsula. The resulting sound archive was then used to feed a virtual platform designed for real-time audio sharing within a visual 2D persistent multi-user environment. Based on spring-related physical laws and on the organizational system known as Folksonomy, *Membrain* worked as a particular sound map within a dynamic shared environment where the changes operated by users on the semantic relations between its elements caused the environment to visually rearrange in real-time.

Eight years later, departing from a less technological and more personal approach, *Sound Escapes* allowed me to combine sound art with travel writing, while aiming to generate a transmedia narrative that could aspire to analyse, understand and describe the sounds – urban, natural, verbal or musical – that best define each visited place, studying each eco-system from a sonic *point of view*.

Nomadic in essence, the *Sound Escapes* project departed in February 2015 from Porto, Portugal, and then progressed through Tulum, Bacalar, San Cristobal de las Casas, México, and Ikaria, Greece. Each visited place was perceived as a new episode in a series, and suggested its own underlying problematics and paradoxes. The work developed in each location included research and interviews concerning fundamental acoustic patterns and identity; field-recordings and development of an endemic sound archive; a travel article written from a sonic perspective; and finally a live sound performance presented *in loco* by manipulating the recorded sounds. Along the way, partnerships were established with institutions, media, local businesses and initiatives, local and foreign artists, and local arts residences.

**Figure 10.** *Sombrero de Brujo* (CC) 2015 Hugo Branco.

The resulting travel articles are currently being published in English at the *Sound Escapes* website, where it is already possible to access the first two, respectively about Porto and Tulum. The same articles are also being published in Portuguese at *Correr o Mundo*, a blog for invited travellers from the *Fugas* travel magazine. Field-recordings and live sound performances are currently being uploaded under a *Creative Commons* license to *Soundcloud*.

On one hand, I'm interested in identifying the processes by which sound can be perceived and used more creatively and wisely as a central storytelling factor in the context of travel narrative. On the other, I propose to detect which mechanisms can be used within travel narrative in order to make people more aware of their sound environment, both when traveling and back to their own ecosystem and daily lives. Finally, I wish to understand how sound performance and installation can ultimately encompass both the pace of travel storytelling and the expansion of awareness, ultimately revealing individuality as a part of a grand, developing song.

By embracing and depicting an approach to traveling that is akin both to the concept of *flânerie* and – as much as possible – to the practices advocated by responsible tourism, I also aim to generate debate over the subject of travel itself, demonstrating that life on the road is not as unattainable as it may seem, and contributing to the education of both travellers and agents towards a more responsible model of tourism. Indeed, travel can be as more rewarding as travellers learn to respect and to positively contribute to the local contexts and

causes – whether social, cultural, economical, political or ecological – that they encounter within the visited locations.

> I woke up slightly before eight in the morning to the sound of an amazing orchestra of unfamiliar birds. I opened the door, listened around and took a deep breath: You're in Mexico! – shouted the birds, the palm trees, the dirt road and the lively colours of the surrounding houses. (...) For the next week I lived in this neighbourhood that had seemed "grimy" when I had first arrived, and that seemed friendlier day after day. I got to know the characters who I had first though of as "dodgy" and that now smiled at me, in between sentences spoken in a strain of Spanish that I slowly started to understand. Listening to the pulse of the town, while playing with stray dogs, I was gently assaulted by a melody yet unheard: the sound of my silly European fears slowly fading away. (Branco 2016)

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