

Soundwalk-walk – Listening Backwards, Moving Forwards

MAILE COLBERT

mailecolbert@gmail.com

FCSH-UNL, CineLab – IFILNOVA, Lisboa, Portugal

ANA MONTEIRO

anaisabelvieiramonteiro@gmail.com

FCSH-UNL, Lisboa, Portugal

ABSTRACT: The term *soundwalk* was first used by members of the World Soundscape Project under the leadership of R. Murray Schafer in Vancouver in the 1970s. Hildegard Westerkamp defined soundwalking in her 1974 essay “Soundwalking”, as “...any excursion whose main purpose is listening to the environment. It is exposing our ears to every sound around us no matter where we are.” For the first humans the act of walking will have arisen from the need to find ways of survival. Once these needs were met, walking became in part a symbolic form of relationship with the world, possibly the first aesthetic act of humanity. We can extend this theory to the act of listening, in a possible parallel history. *Soundwalk-walk* is a practice-based art research project, holding an emphasis on *walk* guided and shared aural experience of a soundscape along a path, with a concentration on movement, the external and the internal, and the relationship between our bodies listening and moving through time, space, and place.

KEYWORDS: soundwalk, sound studies, soundscape ecology, critical aurality, deep listening, sound ethnography, radical listening, movement studies, bodily listening, kinesthesia, proprioception.

1. Introduction

Why do we call it *Soundwalk-walk*? What makes a soundwalk-walk different from a soundwalk? Or a walk, for that matter? How do we define this, and why do we define this? Having already described a soundwalk, we know that a soundwalk and a walk hold path in common, in the sense that more usually we set out on a path with a means to an end in mind. A soundwalk-walk wishes to hold focus on the moment between the point A and B, and linger there with a study and play on the relationship between the movement of walking with the activity of listening, and consider what knowledge and applications can be gained from this, particularly within a culture and cultural history in which the visual is predominant within a segregated sensory hierarchy in mediating our perception of the world around us. Walking and listening—two acts often took for granted, automatically, not often considered together.

1.1. Walking towards our bodily ears

From the primordial and crude encounter of a moving body in a moving world, walking arose as necessity, but also as an aesthetic capacity to be explored. In the pages of Baudelaire we find the ephemeral figure of the flâneur, an ambivalent figure that, between curiosity and leisure, explores by foot the urban space. But only from the twentieth century has the walk been used as an art form, in an attempt to overcome traditional forms of representation and blur borders between life and art.

The collective forms of action of the Dada excursions, of Surrealist ambulation, and of the Situationist drift, originated from the literary sphere movers were part, operating in an active extension of writing—turning page into territory and pen into the body of the walker. The Dadaists understood that the entertainment system of the tourism would have transformed the city into a simulation of itself, and in response they propose the exaltation of the banal and lack of meaning. The Surrealists understood that there was something hidden in the emptiness proposed by the Dadaists, and within the unconscious city itself. The drift of the Situationists made possible the orientation of the living organism of the city, directing towards places that seemed to incorporate a kind of elsewhere and otherwise, capable of challenging a *Society of the Spectacle*.¹ Here, new forms of behavior appear as modes of occupying space, aiming for autonomy and freedom, in a construction of a kind of liquid city that uses erratic ways of walking as a strategy to deceive dominant control mechanisms in place. (Careri 2002).

In the sixties, when using daily movements and refusing technique in the construction of their work, the so-called Postmodern dance begins to affirm an emancipatory and

1. *The Society of the Spectacle*: a 1967 work of philosophy and Marxist critical theory by Guy Debord, in which he develops and presents the concept of the Spectacle, where social life has been replaced by representation. Debord (1977) [1967] *The Society of the Spectacle*, translation by Fredy Perlman and Jon Supak (Black & Red, 1970; rev. ed. 1977)

democratizing dance agenda. (Banes 2011) Choreographers such as Steve Paxton and Yvonne Rainer started movement research on the apparent simplicity of walking by decomposing its movement, analyzing it carefully, and experimenting with its infinite possibilities. The deceptively simple act of walking slowly, of walking backwards, for example.

We were interested in exploring walking through the decomposition of movement, and as a meditative/imaginative practice in its connection to proprioception: the unconscious perception of movement and spatial orientation arising from stimuli within the body's proprioceptors.² In humans, these stimuli are detected by stretch receptors in muscles and joints, as well as by sensory neurons in the semicircular canals of the inner ear. Here we can apply a playful expression we're calling, "bodily ears", and consider how hearing can involve the whole of the body, and further consider the affect of movement upon that hearing.

There is a focus in this work on exploring the relationship of proprioception and kinesthesia, which refers to the perception of the position and movement of the body by means of how those sensory organs in the muscles and joints affect memory and narrative making. This becomes challenging, as kinesthesia "...remains largely unexamined and any discussion of bodily movement in and of itself as a sensory modality and therefore as potential resource for meaning-making or semeiosis has been largely absent" (Farnell 2012. 121). But in practice, the apparently mundane action of walking can be situated to gain meaning due to social and physical context. Action signs like walking are part of a deictic reference, containing an indexicality and performativity. (Farnell 2012) Combining focal attention on walking with listening during the walk provides not only embodied information, but can create a sense of space and place, providing a platform for exploring memory.

1.2. Listening towards a divination

We begin to hear around four months into gestation, our first soundscape a wombscape.³ Jonathan Sterne writes a theory that everything that is known about hearing in its natural state "...is a result of interactions between ears and sound technologies", which could include at different times various recording and playback mediums. (Sterne 2003: 69) This places the ear in part of a chain of hearing equipment, and hearing equipment tied to "ways of hearing" and "institutional contexts that defined hearing, as well as what was heard", tied to time and history. "The only way a hearing researcher has access to hearing as pure faculty is through the subject's highly cultured act of listening". (Sterne 2003: 72) We could extend this to include the body, and if, as he further theorizes, this can show us how listening and

2. Specific nerve receptors for this form of perception, similar to the specific receptors for pressure, light, temperature, sound, and other sensory experiences. Sherrington CS (1907). "On the proprioceptive system, especially in its reflex aspect".

3. Colbert, M. "Future Memory: Womb Sound As Shared Experience Crossing Time and Space". <https://soundstudiesblog.com/2015/01/12/past-future-womb-sound-as-shared-experience-crossing-time-and-space/>

learning to listen is in part a cultured act, this can further us into the consideration of the wombscape being our first act of learning to listen, through a bodily medium.

A drop of water falls into a puddle and creates a wave. A wave is a disturbance that travels through time and space. It affects everything it touches, it creates other waves, continues colliding and transferring energy to molecules that do the same in turn to other molecules. It can be water, it can be light, it can be sound. It can be many things that collide into our bodily molecules, and our system translates. The water could be cold, the light could be bright, the sound could be loud. This is often passive information. But should we actively feel how cooling the water is on a very hot day, should we actively consider how strong that sun is, and should we actively enjoy how the crash of an ocean wave makes our heart race... our world becomes richer and more complex. We need to sense the world, and we can enjoy sensing the world. Remembering that we aren't limited to just knowing our place in it, but can feel our place in it, allows for a transference and embodiment of information that goes further, goes deeper, creates care and extension of thought beyond our perception of present. Creates empathy, expands, and vibrates the interior and exterior *milieu* as described by Deleuze and Guattari in motion, the description applicable to even the physics of a sound wave...something relational, not merely a thing in itself. Sound becomes sound when we hear it. A vibration that effects, and a vibration that joins. (Deleuze & Guattari 1980: 345)

Hearing has a special relationship to emotion, instinct, and memory, both individual and collective. Tapping into that ancient area of our brain, listening provides immediate information telling us where we are, if it is safe, and how we should feel about that. "Based on hearing, listening (from an anthropological point of view) is the very sense of space and of time..." Roland Barthes wrote in his 1985 essay, *Listening*. Barthes further notes, "[N]oises have been the immediate raw materials of a divination, (clédonomancy): to listen is, in an institutional manner, to try to find out what is happening". (Barthes 1985: 247)

Listening is an active aural act, and an activity increasingly less practiced. We are becoming un-tuned to the bombardment of information of our surroundings, to the information through our devices. We are increasingly passive in how this information enters us; as hearing is an embodied act, we embody whatever this information may be. Sound enters us "pure", we perceive all sound in our frequency range, there is no earlid to close sound out. Listening requires a choice to concentrate, and activation in parts of our brain that often overlap the areas we use when speaking. We listen, we process, we can consider, we can express our consideration and expression of what we listen to, and what we listen for; can transfer information and create new information within the relationship to our "audience". We have a relationship to biologically important sounds that hold information-bearing elements (IBE)⁴ within them, and it is theorized that responses to complex sounds and

4. Suga, Nobuo. 1992. "Philosophy and Stimulus Design for Neuroethology of Complex-Sound Processing". *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences*. Royal Society Publishing. pp423–428.

soundscapes (and for example, cinematic sound design) could be explained on the basis of these IBEs. Most IBEs are generic acoustic patterns and sound elements, deceptively simple, and often even shared across-species, for example signaling danger, or communicating with one's dog. Sound, in all of its complexity between emission, receipt, and auditory percept, can cross many borders.

Anthropologist and ethnomusicologist Steven Feld has researched and theorized about the relationship between sound, sense, and place for decades; and the symbolism of sound as distinct from voice and music. In his book *Sound and Sentiment: Birds, Weeping, Poetics, and Song in Kaluli Expression*, written about his sensory ethnographic studies and time spent living with the Kaluli of Bosavi, Papua New Guinea, Feld writes how the Kaluli “rationalize nature’s sound as its own, then ‘turns it over’ to project it in the form of what is “natural” and what is “human nature”. This is the link between a perception of a sensate, lived-in world and the invention of an expressive sensibility.” The Kaluli feel themselves aesthetically “in it” and “of it” when it comes to nature, they are a part of an expressive flow and “world-sense”. (Sterne 2003: 268) The perception of our soundscapes can also be about design and composition, and Feld also writes on the Kaluli “lift-up-and-over-sounding”, the acceptance of the complexity of the soundscape and the information and sensations that brings us–“the soundscape evokes ‘insides’ *sa*, ‘underneath’ *hego*, and ‘reflections’ *mama*. These notions involve perceptions, changes of focus and frame, motions of interpretive access to meanings packed into layers of sensation...” (Sterne 2003. 266) The experience of listening to the external, translated in the internal.

In David Novak and Matt Sakakeeny’s invaluable book *keywords in sound*, Feld defined the term “acoustemology”, conjoining “acoustic” and “epistemology” to describe sound as a way of knowing and being in the world. His work calls for a sensuous relationship and investigation with place, a call integral to the research and theories within this project. (Novak&Sakakeeny 2015)



1.3. Soundwalk-walk at Invisible Places, 2017

What comes together through sound is emergent and passing time — a sense of duration, the field of memory, a fullness of space that lies beyond touch and out of sight, hidden from vision (...) Through that strange anomaly of the senses, the way we perceive the world and the ways in which we represent those perceptions, we strain to hear what can never be there. (Toop 2010)

On this volcanic island, we could feel the dust from a thousand different times, coming together in one breath—entering the body; the mouth, the nose, the eyes, the ears. Particles mix with particles, blending and compressing time and space, giving us the option within our bodies to form an embodied place. Our feet firmly planted in ever forming soil, we could well imagine peeling back the layers, of era upon era, event upon event, scrolling through time as we walk.

1.4. Case-studies and reflections

There were two opportunities to test the *soundwalk-walk* prior, but separately, to Invisible Places 2017, where we were able to guide in person and together. We had two opportunities after as well:

- A. In Porto, led by Colbert, the soundwalk-walk was performed during a class in a performance course called Expanded Sound Practices for Performance, at the Fine Arts School, in the University of Porto. It was a rainy day, and so the soundwalk had to be performed inside. We choose an acoustically active open stairway, with a large window running floor to ceiling to one side. The interior and highly reverberant nature of the location, along with the students coming from a performative background, led to a kind of micro-ecology of human sounds feeding off of each other, and feed-backing together. A cough became a chorus, and much more of the internal was vocalized and expanded upon. Listening to the recording, made by two of the students who were simultaneously participating—one with binaural microphones, the other with the on-board microphone of a H4 Zoom recorder—it was fascinating to follow this collective and imagined sonic narrative travel somehow from a primordial soundscape, then changing and shaping through time to the dawn of man, an industrial age, and even ending in some sort of imagined sound of the future. You can listen here: <https://soundcloud.com/maile-colbert/expanded-sound-practices-for-performance-recording-of-soundwalk-walk-fbaup>
- B. In the Caribbean, led by Monteiro, the soundwalk-walk took place at a small plaza in the center of the capital in the middle of a weekday. This provided a rich fabric of sound, from cars passing by, to the frantic activities of local businesses, to a mysterious and continuous monotonous sound made by a man laying down in the perimeter of the plaza, which for some participants evocated a ritual. The practice of slow walking, backwards and forwards, caught the attention of those passing by. Some remained—intrigued—while others assumed it was a street performance, and some tourists took photos. While guiding the experience, an awareness arose of the performative and disruptive force of bodies moving in an extremely slowly and focused manner, as it disturbed the overall rhythm of the city, while utilizing daily movements everyone is familiar with.



- C. Our individual experiences led to some changes when we were finally able to guide the soundwalk together at Invisible Places 2017. There were ideal conditions, in a botanical garden of a University on a volcanic island, the immediate landscape and architecture calling up many eras at once. The biodiversity of the island gave a vibrant soundscape, and the weather conditions allowed the soundwalk to be outside. These aspects, in consideration with most participants not coming from a performative background, led us to the decision that this time we would instruct the vocalizations to be internal and imagined.

Some reflections on the experience from participants:

I remember talking to a fly that lingered right in front of me as I tried to match its tones, and the sound of the seeds falling to the ground sounding like explosions as going forward the external from internal became so loud and intense in a good way, communicating with all things.

The walking exercise where we had to move as slow as possible made me very aware of my own body and movements (...) especially its limitations. Since I had to concentrate to the walking itself so much, and simultaneously was asked to listen, I at first mainly heard the sounds of the walking process made by me (and that of the participant nearby): my feet on the gravel, the very light breeze in my ears, etc.

Walking became a sort of touching the floor and the air around me. As a matter of fact, I recall that the slow walking movement also intensified my sense of smell as well. In a way also a form of touch.

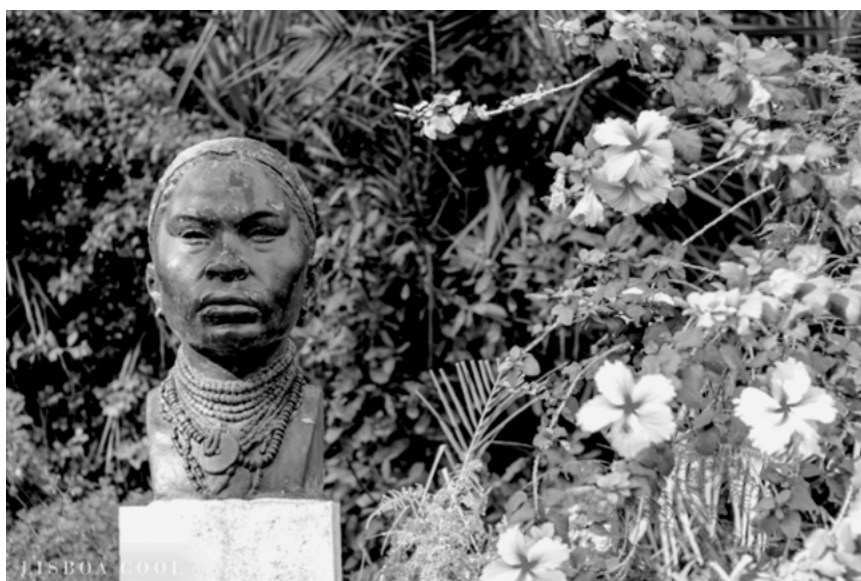
- D. Colleex, a network of the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA), held a workshop, the Ethnographic Experimentation Fieldwork Devices and Companions workshop, at the Jardim Botânico Tropical, also known as the Colonial Garden, in Lisbon, July 2017. Upon contextual research into this location, we were struck by the lack of—or reframing of—information regarding the garden’s problematic past. This included the garden’s official website, where it is stated, “From its beginnings, the Colonial Garden was also understood as a center of study and experimentation”.⁵ We wanted to highlight, even embody, this history using Soundwalk-walk as a sensual art and ethnography practice. At the point in the walk when we begin to guide back through time, we also gave historic information:

The Portuguese World Exhibition (Exposição do Mundo Português) was hosted in Lisbon between June 23rd and December 2nd, in 1940. This massive exhibition was staged to promote and boost Portugal’s sense of superiority in a global playing field. The colonial section, divided into seven sectors, offered visitors the chance to discover ‘in two hours’ the whole of the Portuguese empire ‘from Africa to the Pacific’ and was ‘an ethnographic document of three continents: Africa, Asia and Oceania’. It was installed in the then named Jardim Colonial (currently the Belem Tropical Botanical Garden), with a series of artificial sub-environments designed

5. <https://www.ulisboa.pt/patrimonio/jardim-botanico-tropical>

to give visitors the sensation that they were actually in the heat of the tropics. The third sector comprised the 'Villages and Dwellings of the Indigenous Peoples – a Document of Usages and Customs' where 138 native peoples 'lived'. The settlements it contained were: villages of the Indígenas of Guinea (Bijago, Fula and Mandinka); Angolan villages (including the house of the king of Kongo); the villages of the Muchope and Makonde peoples of Mozambique; replicas of 'typical' Cape Verdean and Macanese dwellings; a village of Timorese Indígenas on top of a cave; a 'house of the Natives' of São Tomé e Príncipe; typical Indian dwellings; and the Village of the Muleques, where the 'Indigenous' children could play.⁶

The inclusion of human beings engaged either in recreations of daily activities or representations or formal performances created the illusion that the activities on show were real, not representations, and this in turn created an illusion of authenticity. However, exhibitions were 'theatrical events' also similar to the practice of colonial politics based on a strategy of ordering everything with the aim of revealing a pre-existing plan and giving a meaning to such practice. (Ferraz de Matos 2013: 204)



From the text for this walk: What of the sensations of those brought to this environment...familiar flora touched, moved, sounded by unfamiliar air. That sonic environment, the known woven into the very unknown. The soundscape, too heavy, too full, with the staged and curated activities of the day to day of many lives and

6. <http://lisbon-portugal-guide.com/lisbon-portugal-history/1940-Portuguese-World-Exhibition.html>

many places and many times, forced and collapsed into a disorienting costume they tell us is home.

1.5. A message from the authors and the anti-conclusion

This work is ongoing, in research and performance. The quietly radical acts of attaching attention to walking while listening, and listening while walking, continues to reveal further connections and research, and provoke further questions and challenge. This is young work, a part one. What feels clear thus far is a call for a more sensory inclusive research and the information that can be gained from that, across disciplines. For now, we would like to offer our score with the welcome to perform it, and the hope for further reflections.

1.6. Soundwalk-walk, the score

Soundwalk-walk is a soundwalk with a concentration on walking, movement, and the relationship between our bodies listening and our bodies moving through time, space, and place, guided by artists and researchers Ana Monteiro and Maile Colbert. A guided, scored, and choreographed walk that includes the focus of deep to radical listening, intertwined with the focus of movement meditation and kinesthetic exploration. Two of composer Pauline Oliveros' scores from *Sonic Meditations*⁷ were woven with a movement meditation, as well as the concept and question of sounding place, and sounding place in the past.



I. (Slow) Walking Meditation – tuning the body

Begin to walk as slow as possible. Take the time to deconstruct and decompose the movement. Observe the contact of the soles of your feet with the ground, while your head is lightly balanced on the top of

7. Oliveros, Pauline. *Sonic Meditations*. Smith Publications. 1974 ; and *Anthology of Text Scores by Pauline Oliveros*. Deep Listening Publications, 2013. Gratitude to lone and the The Pauline Oliveros Trust for permission to publish. The scores are marked with **.

you're neck. Feel the opposition of the weight of your body sliding through your feet into the core of the earth. An imaginary transparent string pulls from the top of your head, up to the clouds. You may notice you are already forming a path. Keep on that path 10 to 15 steps, and when you've reached the end, turn around and trace back the way you came.

Ask yourself these questions while walking:

1. How am I walking?
2. What is happening in/to my body as I walk?

Now...

- > raise your foot off the ground and observe the foot still in contact
- > observe the change of weight in the body as the feet move forward.
- > observe the transition of the weight from the heels to the toes
- > experiment with different speeds of walking and observe what changes

Repeat the process while walking backwards slowly.

Focus your attention inwards towards sensations in your body, and how they relate to your walking, such as breath moving inwards then outwards. Give special attention to the sounds that the body makes when walking—clothing friction, shoes touching the ground, heart beating, blood moving, breath, organs, bones. Notice how deeply you can go inside and listen, as if there were ears in keep points all over your body. Notice how those bodily ears listen, and how that is connected with the bodily movement.



II. Walking Meditation with “Native” –tuning the ears to the body, listening through the bodily ears (introduction of kinaesthetic listening) **

Walk so silently that the bottoms of your feet become ears.



III. “Environmental Dialogue” – tuning the ears **

Each person finds a place to be, either near to or distant from the others, either indoors – or out-of-doors. Begin the meditation by observing your own breathing. As you become aware of sounds from the environment, gradually begin to reinforce the pitch of the sound source. Reinforce either vocally, mentally or with an instrument. If you lose touch with the source, wait quietly for another. Reinforce means to strengthen or sustain. If the pitch of the sound source is out of your range, then reinforce it mentally.



IV. Walking Meditation with "Environmental Dialogue" **



V. Walking Meditation with variation of "Environmental Dialogue" – "Environmental Dialogue Back in Time" **

As the soundwalkers continue to follow and listen to their path, initially silent again, they begin to walk their path backwards, and as they do so, imagine traveling back in time...what would the soundscape around them sound like in different times of the past. Once they reach the time of the past of their choosing, they should stop and once again perform "Environmental Dialogue", this time with the soundscape of the past in their mind, but vocalizing openly. After a while, they can move forward again, "updating" the soundscape, as well as the sound they are reinforcing. This should be continued until everyone is vocalizing the present again. Variations can happen.

** Follows scores and variations on scores from Pauline Oliveros, *Sonic Meditations*.

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