

# Sonic urbanism(s): listening to the city

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## Abstract

This reflection on cultural geographies in practice draws upon experimental pedagogical practices from a Critical Urbanisms seminar entitled *Sonic urbanisms: Sound, mobilities, culture and identity* convened by the University of Basel and University of Cape Town. In the seminar we sought to explore the sonic aspects of Cape Town and its acoustic territories shaped through movements, circulations, and encounters. By experimenting with methods of listening to an African urban environment we offer insights to citiness developed through ‘sonic dérives’ – building on the concept from the Situationist International – that allowed our pedagogical process to drift with sounds: following, sampling, tracing. In this paper we seek to demonstrate firstly how our sonic dérives highlight emotional and affective relationships with urban space; and secondly, how our experiments shift us from *hearing* the city as a cognitive process of comprehension to *listening* as an active pedagogical and analytical process of speculation and imagination, straining towards possible meaning that is not immediately accessible. The outcomes of our sonic dérives illustrate how sound casts long spatial and temporal shadows, spreading across an acoustic territory without neat boundaries while also disrupting linear notions of past, present and future in the life of the African city through sonic connections to memories, desires and the formation of alliances.

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Through our experiments in sonic urbanism(s) the city is rendered in mobile acoustic territories that are fluid, ephemeral and intersecting as evidenced by a sonic map of Cape Town providing a multi-layered soundscape that is made visible and audible.

### Keywords

dérive, experimental pedagogy, kinshipping, mobilities, sound, urbanism

## Cities and sound

As markers of *citiness*, sound and its related soundscapes are individual, ephemeral and place specific. Urban sound is entangled in the attention economy of the city, and is relational, social, cultural. Sound contributes to our memories and imaginaries and eludes systems of representation. Sound is both slippery and sometimes sticky, therefore it must be understood within its spatial, temporal and cultural contexts. In this writing, we reflect on Critical Urbanism(s), a 2021 graduate seminar organised in a collaboration between students and faculty at the University of Cape Town, University of Basel and University of the Western Cape. Over 5 weeks, we roamed and listened to the streets of Cape Town. We collected sounds in these excursions which culminated in the making of a sonic map of Cape Town.

We have approached our sound work as a combination of participation, dialogue and collaboration,<sup>1</sup> but also of *engagement*, involving ‘encounters with the world around us [. . .] encounters with people and the landscape [in our case, soundscapes] that create, disrupt, transform, and maintain cultural geographies and landscapes of all sorts’.<sup>2</sup> Our sonic experiments allowed us to ‘scramble the familiar visual economy of the city’<sup>3</sup> while also exposing ‘the political’ in urban cultural geographies. Through our collaborations in Cape Town (and later in Zurich), we sought to explore the sonic aspects of the city, and the acoustic territories shaped through a variety of movements, circulations and encounters.

We had several experimental goals. We sought to interrogate the role of sound in the urban experience and life of cities, and secondly, to unpack layers of soundscape to understand meaning-making, subjectivity and place. We tentatively aimed to make soundscapes ‘visible’ (or rather tangible). And finally, we grappled with sounds as non-visual sensory perceptions. Through our experimental sonic collaboration, we have learned about our engagement with cultural geographies of the city as well as the politics of sound through sonic experimentation with hearing and listening. This work contributes to the ongoing interest of cultural geographers in seeking news ways to understand the urban environment – in this case by disrupting the dominance of visual and material forms of exploring and interpreting city life.

## Hearing, listening and capturing soundscapes

Our *Sonic Urbanism(s)* seminar was delivered through a series of both classroom-style (albeit in non-traditional settings including cafes) and field-based activities over 5 weeks. Our first meeting began with coffee, seated together on the pavement outside a coffee shop on the busy main road in the suburb of Rondebosch in Cape Town. The choice of the venue was not accidental. As we sat on the pavement sipping coffee, the sounds of cars, buses and minibus taxis provided a raucous acoustic backdrop as we strained to follow the conversations amongst us. Sitting as we were on a busy street required us to *hear* the city, but also to *listen* to what it might tell us.<sup>4</sup> Sensing the city as noise would have limited the ways that sound carries meaning. By tuning our senses to listening our collective sought to connect sound to meaning,

memory, the formation of alliances, and a variety of ‘relational events’<sup>5</sup> in Cape Town and later in Zurich.

Our work involved experiencing and capturing soundscapes. Our approach to recording involved our own brand of ‘sonic *dérive*’ which builds upon the work of the Situationist International (SI).<sup>6</sup> The *dérives* were fuelled by shared curiosity, and in the tradition of psychogeography, we drifted with the sounds of the city: following, tracing, sampling. Our 5-week seminar included weekly *dérives*. These drifts started on the pavements of Rondebosch in week one; followed by a ground experiment with sound walks<sup>7</sup> in Cape Town’s central business district and Waterfront where we became attuned to sounds. Walking individually and collectively through the city was an important aspect of our ethnographic work as it opened spaces for ‘enquiry into the limits of the visual, the physical and the representational’.<sup>8</sup> While we began our walks together, our acoustic interests would send us off on our own paths, sampling sounds as we moved along. Our ears and devices might be focused at one moment on the playful barking of seals on the quayside and then be suddenly interrupted by the sounds of helicopters overhead. In one instance we realised that we might capture the sound of Cape Town’s Noon Gun from directly underneath, causing us to quickly scramble in its direction towards Signal Hill. At times we allowed ourselves to be passively drawn towards sound, while at others we were active in giving pursuit.

During these excursions, members of the collective recorded sounds on mobile phones. These recordings formed individual sound diaries<sup>9</sup> which provided the materials used to create our sonic map. The purpose of our sonic map (which later extended to Zurich) was to record our *dérives*, allowing the long shadows of sound to extend beyond the moment(s) they were captured and to circulate to others. Each acoustic vignette on the map is accompanied by a reflection from the team member who collected it, lending their own interpretation of meaning to it. Rather than just a soundscape – a term commonly used to refer to the sonic qualities that arise in a location,<sup>10</sup> we have assembled a collection of what we call *sound-tracks* which invoke literal traces of sound gathered through our sonic *dérives* that coincide with the paths along which we were drawn in listening to the city. In our sound-tracks there is evidence of human and more-than-human aspects of the city including the circulation of water and waste, the sociability of public space in the city, and the role of sound in sensing danger. The map allows the listener to be drawn to other places, experiencing touch at a distance.<sup>11</sup> In this way, the sound-tracks constitute and communicate our emotional and affective relationships with place. They cast long shadows over the city (both spatially and temporally) spreading across an acoustic territory without neat boundaries. Our sound-tracks create a ‘sonic shadow’ mediated by the materiality of the city and our individual and collective memories. Our sound map can be heard here: <https://padlet.com/brink4/geurmep53lpp144q> (Figure 1).

Our sonic mapping had different effects for different members of the group. For one member, the city’s sonic footprint helped to make history tangible in the present, allowing for greater understanding of how different histories are interwoven with city spaces, such as the daily firing of Cape Town’s Noon Gun that has provided a temporal bookmark at midday since the early 19th century. For another, our experiments demonstrated how sound can function as a mediator of spatial politics. ‘The outdoor sitting area of the café is equipped with small speakers from which patrons and passers-by are made to listen to French *chansons*’, reads an excerpt from a member’s journal:

An employee slams the car door shut after he off-loaded produce. Cars drive past me – some sound like they have a strong motor, those are the shiny ones. Other cars make a sound because they are transporting a metallic ladder slamming against the rails of the *bakkie* [pick-up truck]. A huge truck’s brakes screech like I have never heard before as it descends the hill past the coffee shop. My attention returns to the French *chanson* which brings my attention back to the “serenity” of the café . . . the small sonic bubble away from the unnerving city sounds. It’s a recreational bubble for those people—like me—with enough



**Figure 1.** QR code for sonic map of Cape Town.

money to spend 40 Rand on a macadamia flat white, after which they can hop into their cars to go back to their airconditioned offices or their cosy home office where they work behind their laptops – secluded again from the screeching breaks and rattling ladders that make up the soundtrack of people spending their days in the streets without French *chansons*.

## Doing cultural geographies through sound

We have listened to each other as we have the city, aware that our ability to hear and our capacity to listen is shaped by different personal experiences, knowledges, cultures and identity. We have grown to appreciate the ‘stickiness’ of sound in place,<sup>12</sup> as different sectors, places, dwellings and buildings have their own social and temporal functions. Through our sonic experiments in Cape Town and Zurich, we became attuned to what Kadiatou Diallo describes as ‘kinshipping’ through sound,<sup>13</sup> by which they point to the transformative quality of artistic practice and its potential for social encounter through ‘affinity, connection, relationship, family, people . . .’ to ‘move, transmit, transfer, shift, embark, direct, address’.<sup>14</sup> The sonic aspects of city life help to shape and sustain such notions of community and belonging. Sonic practices can shape space and translate into social practice, exemplified by concerts, listening sessions, and community radio.<sup>15</sup> These examples of what LaBelle<sup>16</sup> calls ‘relational events’ have the potential to create vibratory models of alliance, capable of not only disrupting dominant orders but also of creating new forms of togetherness that are nonetheless riddled with contradictions and limitations.

From our first interaction as a collective sitting on the noisy pavement in Rondebosch, much of what we heard was connected to mobilities – the movement and circulation of humans, non-human animals, capital, objects and information. Yet, these mobilities (sonic and otherwise) are more than just displacement from A to B, they are full of meaning-making, motive, intention, and judgement. Through listening we found the ability, like Narbed et al.<sup>17</sup> to ‘eschew expectation and attend to what is’<sup>18</sup> thus connecting our sonic senses with mobilities theory and practice. We found that both are culturally embedded and exemplify a range of identities. By listening to the hoot of a mini-bus taxi, it is no longer simply noise: It says ‘pay attention to me, see me, board me . . . I am offering you an opportunity!’ If we listen to the hoots of a frustrated motorist, it says ‘recognise me, respect me, give me right of way’. It is a dialogue with the city, other motorists, and proximate publics. Understanding the city through sound has allowed us to tune-in to the vibrations of the city, its alliances and disruptions. By virtue of the ephemeral, contingent and subjective nature sound, our reflections are – like the city itself – always in a state of becoming.

Through our experiment in sonic urbanism(s) the city is rendered in mobile acoustic territories that are fluid, ephemeral and intersecting. The hard borders and infrastructure of the urban fabric make way for an experience of the city that is constantly shifting. Our experiments de-stabilised the pre-eminence of ‘the visual’ in favour of the aural. We developed an appreciation for a range of mobile acoustic territories built upon Atkinson’s idea of ecology of sound<sup>19</sup> to explore how the urban soundscape is both spatially and temporally ordered, with ebb and flow depending on events from the mundane to the extraordinary, and from the perspective of interiors and exteriors of the city. We grappled with ‘thick listening’, a concept that appreciates the corporeality of the listener, their historic experience of sound, and the materiality of the space in which sound is being received.<sup>20</sup>

Consciously moving from hearing to listening allowed us to complicate our sensory engagement with the city. Our experiments led us to hear sound more than just ‘noise’ and taught us to listen to the city with attention to meaning and power. By doing so we were able to disrupt the dominance of the visual and material aspects of urban life. Our attentiveness to sound thus leads us to new ways of understanding the experience of city, and the role of sound in exposing ‘the political’ in urban cultural geographies. Being guided by listening rather than our sight, cultural geographers may find new ways of comprehending and appreciating the complexity of the urban environment and city life.

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## Ethics statement

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## Notes

1. C.Johnston and J.Winders, ‘What Does “in Practice” Mean?’, *cultural geographies*, 29(1), 2022, pp. 129–30.
2. Johnston and Winders, ‘What Does “in Practice” Mean?’, p. 130.
3. C.Johnston and H.Lorimer, ‘Sensing the City’, *cultural geographies*, 21(4), 2014, pp. 673–80.
4. Hearing is the cognitive process of understanding and comprehension. Hearing the city is contingent on the biological ability to sense waves of energy against the eardrum and the outer skin of our bodies. One of the early theorists of sound, R. Murray Schafer, argued that hearing is mediated by the materiality of the city, a ‘low-fi’ sonic environment (See R.M.Schafer, *The Tuning of the World* (Toronto: McClellan & Stewart, 1977)). Murray understood the overlapping acoustic signals and keynotes as noise, yet we have grown to understand the noise in more complex ways. Listening is to be straining towards a possible meaning that is not immediately accessible. It has roots in the French *écouter* which Duffy describes as the ‘bodily, emotional, physiological and psychological ways through which we attempt to attribute meaning to sound’. (See M.Duffy, ‘Soundscapes’, in T.Edensor, A.Kalandides and U.Kothari (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of Place* (London: Routledge, 2020), pp. 125–34).
5. B.LaBelle, *Sonic Agency: Sound and Emergent Forms of Resistance* (London: Goldsmiths Press, 2018); see also B.LaBelle, *Brandon LaBelle on Sound and Listening*, n.d. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kf6k5jmZP5I>>

6. See Situationist International, 'Definitions', in K.Knabb (ed.), *Situationist International Anthology* (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981), pp. 45–6. David Pinder describes the derive as “. . . critical drifts through the streets . . . through which [the SI] studied the ambiances and emotional contours of existing urban spaces . . .” (See D.Pinder, “‘Old Paris Is No More’: Geographies of Spectacle and Anti Spectacle”, *Antipode*, 32(4), 2000, pp. 357–86.).
7. See T.Butler, 'A Walk of Art: The Potential of the Sound Walk as Practice in Cultural Geography', *Social & Cultural Geography*, 7(6), 2006, pp. 889–908; See also B.Keehan and A.Rogers, 'Reflecting on “Our Place”', *cultural geographies*, 29(1), 2022, pp. 131–9.
8. H.Lorimer, 'Walking: New Forms and Spaces for Studies of Pedestrianism', in T.Cresswell and P.Merriman (eds), *Geographies of Mobilities: Practices, Spaces, Subjects* (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 19–33.
9. See M.Duffy and G.R.Waitt, 'Sound Diaries: A Method of Listening to Place', *Aether*, 7, 2011, pp. 119–36.
10. Duffy, 'Soundscapes'.
11. Schafer, *The Tuning of the World*, p. 11.
12. R.Atkinson, 'Ecology of Sound: The Sonic Order of Urban Space', *Urban Studies*, 44(10), 2007, p. 1906.
13. K.Diallo, *KIN-SHIP-ING*, n.d. <<https://kadiatoudiallo.com/kin-ship-ing/>>
14. Diallo, *KIN-SHIP-ING*, n.p.
15. N.Seebach, 'Sonic-Space Encounters with “the Other”': Kinshipping Stories from a Community Radio in Cape Town' (University of Basel, Switzerland, 2022), Unpublished seminar paper.
16. LaBelle, *Sonic Agency*.
17. S.Narbed (with Exit Map), 'Moving On: Dancing in the Gap', *cultural geographies*, 31(1), 2024, pp. 121–7.
18. Narbed, 'Moving On', p. 121.
19. Atkinson, 'Ecology of Sound', pp. 1905–917.
20. Duffy, 'Soundscapes', p. 129.

## Author biographies

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Ilham Moubachir is a graduate of the University of Basel's Master in Critical Urbanisms. Her interests include the influence of culture in urban processes, spatial inequalities, and place-making, as well as reimagining these through critical perspectives on urban governance and development aid.

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