

Towards a Sonic Perambulation: Journeying through the Sound of Space

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Acts of walking occupy a central and inextricable role in the performance of my creative disposition, which is an arts-focussed subset of cultural identity. While studies into cultural identity have been conducted through various disciplinary lenses, it is useful to draw from social psychologist Henri Tajfel's definition. He describes cultural identity as

that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership in a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership.¹

In addition, for intercultural communications theorist Young Yun Kim, cultural identity comprises individual and social concepts, it is adaptive and negotiable, it is an individual choice, it is a group right, and it is expressible through creative and communicative practices.² Expressions of ethnicity, race, political affiliation, sexuality, gender identity and socioeconomic status are relational and linked in with the locality of an individual or group.

Melbourne's cosmopolitanism has been evolving since the early 1980s. As the city's official website notes, its population is made up of

people from all over the world. Around 140 cultures are represented, from Victoria's original Indigenous inhabitants to more recent migrants from countries in Europe, Asia and Africa.³

In this modern and ethnically diverse city, we are socially united through locational contiguity. Here, I understand contiguity to connote linkage, proximity and connectedness, and am thinking specifically of infrastructural support systems. These systems include, but are not limited to, underground storm water drainage networks and public transport services. Given that infrastructural support systems do not operate in silence, we can extend the idea of locational contiguity to include the soundscapes that reverberate throughout our day-to-day social behaviours (sounds from the systems that make our modern living, working and interpersonal arrangements possible). The soundmarks of a city, its infrastructural polyphonies, are associated with one's membership of it and thus can be explored as part of a personal choice to invest in a culturally reflexive learning journey. Walking has facilitated my physical access to areas of the built environment from which critical listening, with a creative outlook, can be done. Audio recordings of these spaces enable future listening opportunities and can be treated as raw data to be processed in the context of an experimental sound-based practice. This writing is an opportunity for me to articulate key features of how my perambulatory walks have found aesthetic translation in the context of improvisational sound-sculpting performance.

In 2007, I completed a PhD in visual arts and continued with the painting and photographic practice that I had been pursuing since the early 90s. This practice was directly informed by the formal and tonal characteristics of industrial spaces such as the Fremantle Harbour in Western Australia. I enjoyed visiting the wharfs late at night and, when the tide was not too high, would climb past the safety barriers and deterrent signage to explore the sub-structural

cavities between the heavy wooden boards and the lightless water mass that swelled not far beneath my feet. I enjoyed the surreptitious aspect of this behaviour, the feeling of transgressing a security fence and entering a hidden space, encountering infrastructure with the aim of appreciating its visual and sonic characteristics, without being cognisant of the engineering expertise required for its construction. Once I had found a place to perch, I would spend some time looking out from under the boardwalk, staring across the dark harbour to the red, white, blue and green lights blinked arrhythmically around where the horizon line had been. With one hand steadying myself against a thick beam, with the other I took photographs using an old SLR camera, subjecting 35mm film to exposure times, without a tripod. Before the ubiquity of digital cameras, it was normal to drop one's film canister off at a chemist, wait a week before you could return to the drop-off point, open the packet of prints and see how the images had turned out. Today, I am still fond of the strange blurry images that my outings produced, abstract scenes in which various colours streak in concert across a void-like background, lines that document whatever movements my hand made throughout the 20-30 second window that the camera's shutter was open—rudimentary forms of light drawing.



Although I foregrounded the visual experience at that time, upon reflection it was clear that sound also had an important part to play. I was putting myself in an industrial setting with low-level visibility, making semi-coherent photographs, such as the image seen above, while out of sight of any passers-by. I could not see much of what was present on the constructed

horizon, but I could hear the humming and whirring sounds that travelled across the lightless water, and perhaps more easily so at night when the acoustic space was not being shared with small boats, parking cars and people stepping onto the boardwalks. It was what I did to feel a personal connection to, and derive aesthetic pleasure from, my built environment.

As sociologist Anthony Giddens puts it:

Each of us not only 'has', but lives a biography reflexively organised in terms of flows of social and psychological information about possible ways of life... "How shall I live?" has to be answered in day-to-day decisions about how to behave, what to wear and what to eat—and many other things—as well as interpreted within the temporal unfolding of identity.⁴

Although art-making does not always deal with the local, it is one way that a person gets to experience and express a cultural identity that is informed by locality. It makes sense, then, that when my wife and I travelled across Australia to start a new life in Melbourne, the economic and material circumstances in which I subsequently found myself prompted a radical re-evaluation of my creative practice. Firstly, in Western Australia I had a large, dedicated home studio, which enabled me to paint and store large harbour-inspired canvasses as well as the various tools required for their production. Moving to Melbourne and into an old terrace with limited space made this impossible. What is more, for the first few months I was unemployed so, in any case, was not in a position to purchase art materials. To build upon Kim's terms for cultural identity, it was important for me to be adaptive and to negotiate a new understanding of what my creative practice could look like. I needed to test my self-identification as a creative person by reimagining the model of practice through which I could interface with the world and develop a personal connection to a heavily populated inner city setting. It was here that my journey through space and time in general was becoming my journey through the sound of space in particular.

Without an income, what I could do for free was explore the city's streets on foot, enjoying the warm weather and the novel unfamiliarity of its environs. It would be a few more years before my daughter was born, after which time I'd regularly secure her against my chest in an Ergobaby carrier and take her on walks, showing her around and pointing to the sorts of things perhaps only sleep-deprived parents will find interesting. But back then, I just had my camera and notebook, and a desire to document a feeling of disorientation and defamiliarisation as best I could, knowing that it would eventually fade and be lost—to a social version of domestic blindness—as I settled into this city. My writings would later develop into a book, called *The Psychogeography of Urban Architecture*.⁵ Looking back, I can see how the GPS coordinates punctuating the book's second half reveal a need I had to anchor my subjectivity in a material reality, in other words, to map my sense of self against my new locality.

Writing and walking were central to how I interfaced with this part of the world. In an attempt to feed my writing practice, to challenge it head-on as my familiarity of Melbourne grew, I started attending the avant-garde improvised music and sound performances held at Make It up Club in the inner-city suburb of Fitzroy. Here, I'd watch performers operating all manner of conventional and unconventional instruments (guitars, synthesisers, DIY electronics and effects, percussion and found objects, extended vocal techniques) to creatively push the common-sense boundaries of sonic communication. As an audience member, I would try to translate my audio-visual experience into written words, and much of that writing was published in Melbourne's freely circulated, music street press *BEAT Magazine*. However, the main value proposition of these evenings stemmed from their intense focus on the sharing of critical listening practices. The performers valued the perambulatory, they creatively embraced the risks of the unknown and the unplanned, of improvisation and failure. Broadly speaking, these might reflect metaphorically on the human condition. On a personal level, Make It up Club performances resonated unambiguously with the conditions of my own life

at that time. They exposed me to a creative community that motivated me to think differently about my own sonic experiences and they provided a context of creative freedom to appeal to my desire for social belonging.

Just as the experimental music writing ended up on the very same streets I'd been exploring, so did two of the sound-based lessons that I encountered at Make It up Club, and that ultimately helped my creative practice move forward, metaphorically follow me outside. The first lesson came from the writings of R. Murray Schafer, whose *Five Village Soundscapes* project explores the relationship between bell sounds and community identity.⁶ Not just applicable to bells, it was apparent that this consideration of the intersections of sound and identity could be extended to broader thinking around community noises and demonstrations of social membership. My interest in writing about unusual sounds led me to initiate conversations with various performers, which opened up friendships and collaboration opportunities and own creative process made a sonic turn. Secondly, it was at *Make It up Club* that I first learned about the American composer John Cage—his famous three-part composition *4'33"* (1952), its insight into the impossibility of silence and the concomitant idea that the world is already filled with potential music. For Cage, it is the task of the individual to evolve from a passive audience member to an active participant by critically re-examining what it means to listen and to make use of that meaning. It piqued my interest in how the defamiliarisation of habitual and conventional listening practices was a legitimate part of a creative, investigative process and (so far as critical listening does not rely upon commodity consumption) suggests a more sustainable way of interfacing with the world. I realised the boundaries between the creative performance, critical listening space and the sounds of everyday life had long since been dismantled. In a modern living environment, many of the sounds we hear are produced by humans, e.g. infrastructural sounds. I began to understand that by actively challenging pre-conceptions around what is or is not enjoyable to listen to, by practicing openness to alternative and unfamiliar sonic values, an investment is made in progressing how we listen to the differences of others—accents, other people's interests and contentions. Given Melbourne's cosmopolitan urbanity, I think that this is an appropriate context for reflecting on how we choose to live and learn alongside each other. For me, making field recordings and utilising them in an experimental music context has been a way to pursue an ethical practice that has a social function.

The inspection of boundaries is a key function of perambulation.⁷ This defining aspect of walking, when combined with the Make It up Club lessons, informed my understanding that alternative sonic perceptions of the city could be encountered by my walking across borders. In *Intersections of creative praxis and urban exploration*, I discussed my interest in the potential for the urban exploration of underground spaces to inform my own sense of cultural identity and facilitate an aesthetic response to locality.⁸ Stormwater drainage networks often run crossways against the lines of the streets and paths that extend over the surface. The relative invisibility of these subterranean counter-lines has philosophical appeal. Moreover, there have been long-standing ethical questions associated with the practice of wandering around stormwater drains. These have to do with safety and the fact that access can involve jumping over, or shuffling through, gaps in 7ft tall cyclone fencing. Ethical considerations are undoubtedly more pressing than the question of how we might rethink the notion of the artists' studio when the space at hand is a cylindrical tunnel 2m wide and 2km long, or shaped like the drain depicted below. Nevertheless, I tried to clarify that my justifications were informed by a basic human right to pursue cultural identity (on foot pursuit, as it were), and that this identity could derive educational value from experiencing, in a new way, fields of the very built environment in which one's daily life goes on and, given Melbourne's solidified basalt substratum, upon which that daily life intimately relies. The storm water networks are significant to our social membership because they are fundamental to a shared locational contiguity. As a result, I understood walking was a way to make physical contact with aspects of who we collectively are in this city.



I wanted to deepen my sense of emotional and intellectual membership and so was at odds with the fact that such spaces remain officially off-limits. Off-limits spaces constitute areas of sequestration, recalling Anthony Giddens' definition of the sequestration of experience as

the separation of day-today life from contact with experiences which raise potentially disturbing existential questions—particularly experiences to do with sickness, madness, criminality, sexuality and death.⁹

In this sense, the unauthorised practice of accessing and listening to subterranean ambiances presents itself as a political act, sound recording becomes a tool for liberation, and its experimental musical expression belongs to a liberating politic. I find myself listening from within the vital veins of the city yet simultaneously at distance from the social milieu to which I claim membership. During underground walks, I notice how the familiar sounds of surface-life leaked from the outside in, my attention held by the sound of a truck or car driving over a manhole that reverberates hundreds of metres down a tunnel. Nothing quite matches the sound of a tram grinding along its rails, heard from inside a blue-stone tunnel below, or the twenty second reverb tail on a hand clap produced by a 2m x 1300m length of circular concrete pipe. Familiar sounds become strange; perhaps the strangeness is my own.

The practice of recording subterranean sounds, or else of recording surface-sounds heard from an unorthodox acousmatic perspective, affords me the primary artistic material from which I mine and collate samples for subsequent processing in a live improvisational context. Whatever sounds I capture, and wherever they have been found, the selected samples are eventually imported into sound-production software to be layered, mashed and mangled in an improvised, sometimes rather noisy, way. During this perambulatory

approach to sound processing, a listener might detect ghosts of the rhythms and a-rhythms that brought the sounds into being in the first place—a kind of acousmatic haunting that manifests as the samples of source-acoustic events are sculpted, scrambled, warped and blurred across the soundscape. In the performance space, the samples are as vulnerable to distortion as memory itself, such as those memories of the paths I trod in order to find them.



My journeys through sound and art have been about exploring alternative sensory perceptions of the city. Bustling paths, congested roadways, full trains and trams, shoulder to shoulder houses and apartment blocks, civil neighbourly warfare over street parking; these features describe the densely-populated city in which personal space becomes incrementally nearer to a luxury item. It is increasingly important to recognise and respect the personal space of others and to invest time in maintaining our own. For me, reapproaching the finite physical environment via critical listening and urban exploration strategies has meant informing the dynamic construction of psychological space, which feeds into a sense of personal resilience and authenticity amidst the crowd. Performing experimental music based on drain resonances and tram track grinds and other infrastructural sounds facilitate idiosyncratic participation in a creative conversation; it has enabled me to experience some degree of social intimacy without necessitating physical contact.

Endnotes

- ¹ Tajfel, Henri. (ed.), *Differentiation between social groups* (London: Academic Press, 1978), p. 63.
- ² Young Yun Kim, 'Ideology, identity, and intercultural communication: An analysis of differing academic conceptions of cultural identity', *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research*, 36.3 (2007), 237–253 (pp. 240-47).
- ³ City of Melbourne, *Multicultural communities*, (Melbourne: City of Melbourne, 2019) <https://www.melbourne.vic.gov.au/about-melbourne/melbourne-profile/multicultural-communities/Pages/multicultural-communities.aspx> [accessed 15 January 2019]
- ⁴ Giddens, Anthony, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (California: Stanford University Press, 1991), p. 14.
- ⁵ Prescott-Steed, David, *The Psychogeography of Urban Architecture* (Florida: Brown Walker Press, 2013).
- ⁶ Schafer, R. Murray, *Five Village Soundscapes* (Lancashire: A.R.C. Publications, 1977).
- ⁷ Brown, Lesley. (ed), *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary: On Historical Principles*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 2155.
- ⁸ David Prescott-Steed, 'Intersections of Creative Praxis and Urban Exploration', *The Journal for Artistic Research*, 9, (2015), <http://doi.org/10.22501/jar.132765>
- ⁹ Giddens, p. 244.