

A proposition toward a materialist politics of atmospheric listening

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The sounds of a place reveal much of its conditions. By listening to the ambiances or atmospheres of a place we get a sense of the complex and shifting terrains that make up its infrastructures, the sudden flashes of activity, the unremarkable meanderings and stutters, the relations of organic and inorganic matter. Listening closely allows us to hear for sonic topologies – those continuous tones and harmonics that hum throughout moments as they articulate themselves. Through concerted listening we are able to encounter sound as a way of ‘knowing’, as an acoustemology. Put another way, through ‘emphasizing the temporal, active and collective dimensions of sound’ as Jean-Paul Thibaud stresses we are able ‘to study and to document the unfolding of an atmosphere’.

In this paper I want to introduce some propositions on listening to atmospheres that have relevance for a materialist politics. This is to indicate the potential for incorporating a sonic framework into how we engage with and make sense of the world. Going further than this, it is to argue that our geographical analyses of political economy would benefit from the sensitive and more nuanced registers that the activity of listening requires. Sound can be a means to engage with, and elaborate upon, contemporary social-economic and political landscapes that require polyphonic and dynamic readings. In the time I have today I want to signal two elements of this proposition: firstly the importance of sound to an understanding of atmosphere, secondly the practice of acoustemology and what it means for a political geography. This introduction will be traversed by recordings that were made in various locations within Sector V New Town/Rajarhat: a special economic zone in West Bengal, Kolkata.

To begin with the theme of atmosphere and ambiance (and I am using these terms a little loosely although they do not necessarily mean the same thing): if an ambiance is a ‘space-time qualified from a sensory point of view’ as Thibaud puts it –that is to say how a space is sensed and how it feels – sound is a prevalent component. Sound comes to us from all directions – we are immersed in sound on a pathic level. This is to do with the resonant frequency of sound, which means the vibratory quality of sound making it something that is felt through bodies on registers that go beyond that which is audible. In his work on sound and urbanity, Thibaud speaks of resonance as critical to sensing our environment – being entangled in our subjectivation. He writes ‘with the idea of resonance, the world of sound makes explicit the very power of ambiance. It helps to describe the very process by which I feel and sense the world’.

How we hear and feel sound is contingent on its relations to the material and virtual architectures of space. According to Brandon Labelle ‘sound sets into relief the properties of a given space, its materiality and characteristics, through reverberation and reflection, and, in turn, these characteristics affect the given sound and how it is heard. There is a complexity to this that overrides simple acoustics and filters into a

psychology of the imagination'. LaBelle's comment illustrates the intertwining of the spatial and the relational, at the same time as it indicates the role of the imaginary. Sound both fills space and is filled by the spaces into which it is projected, to set into motion worlds that encompass physical, psychic, emotional and affective geographies.

This dynamic to sound in space is addressed through what Barry Blesser and Ruth Salter refer to as aural architectures: the 'composite of numerous surfaces, objects and geometries' of a given environment. Sounds require space and air for their form, which means they take shape on different scales of space just as they do different temporal scales. This is how spaces manifest sound, even if the sound energy does not originate from the space itself; this occurs through reverberation – spaces, through their material densities and gaps, modulate and refract sounds and voices in peculiar ways.

The interactions of space with sound are necessarily effected by the vast quantities of objects, bodies, affects, ideologies and movements that propel them. If, as acoustic ecologist R. Murray Schafer argues, 'the general acoustic environment of a society can be read as an indicator of the social conditions which produce it' then sounds are correlative to social contexts. We can take this further to suggest that political and economic conditions articulate the character of the sonic environment at the same time as sounds iterate and reflect aspects of a political culture. On the most basic level we might think about the variations in noise floor and density across urban environments, which speak to differential economic profiling – from the implementation of noise zoning regulations in specific neighborhoods, designation of vehicular flows and routes, the occurrence of green areas and parkways to dampen sound, to architectural materials and structural composition. Where and how sound is heard tells us something of how geographies are categorized and allocated, by whom they are populated and in what capacity. At the same time, specific geographies and the worlds they comprise are productive of soundscapes and ecologies that are inherently contextual and embedded in their sites and modes of expression.

To consider the resonant qualities of atmospheres or ambiances through sound in a manner that does not veer toward overly descriptive or aesthetic narrations, it is useful to look at the economic and political conditions of soundscapes through the tweaking and extension of what has been called an acoustemological approach. 'Acoustemology, acousteme', defines music ethnologist Steve Feld as the 'potential of acoustic knowing, of sounding as a condition of and for knowing, of sonic presence and awareness as potent shaping forces in how people make sense of experiences'. Acoustemology means that as a sensual space-time, the experience of place potentially can always be grounded in an acoustic dimension. Acoustic knowing is the knowledge that derives from the intersections of sound, space and place. Thus sound is understood as an empirical dispositif. Less typical of the readings done in anthropology, ethnomusicology and sound studies are the more materialist concerns that are interesting to political economy and geography.

I want to illustrate this point with the soundscapes presently being heard. As mentioned earlier they were recorded within a special economic zone in Kolkata: a bus depot, three building sites, a wetlands area and food markets, all within a few miles proximity of one another. The sounds were documented using a combination of binaural and directed microphones in order to better capture both the general atmosphere as well as specific sound zones.

Soundscapes underscore the highly textured topographies of a space. The sites I visited in New Town were in the process of construction and transition. These were predominantly areas with recent histories of conflict – state-assisted corporate acquisition of land and resources for the development of commercial and housing infrastructure. Established in the 1990's New Town is a planned satellite city directed toward the IT industries, built on cultivable land with water bodies formerly (and still currently) used for subsistence agriculture and animal husbandry. The signs of displacement are apparent; alongside the skeletons of business industrial centres and apartment buildings were farmers tending to small plots of land and moving rubble. What struck me across the different sites I visited were the tight consolidations of rural and urban sounds, demographics of age and gender, digital, mechanical, animal and organic noise – which rather than being exceptional in their interruptive and compact patterns, seemed integral to the rhythms of labour and social reproduction. The particular relations and assemblages of people and objects in these spaces, the ways that space is mobilised and interpolated, were audible, oftentimes even more so than they were visible. Moreover, the enmeshing of rural and urban soundscapes composed layers of silence and noise that were unanticipated and highly evocative of the complex transversals, complicities and antagonisms that such construction processes undertake.

The three building sites were in various stages of development. While from the outside they appeared in frenetic development and were surrounded by heavily populated roads and shops, they contained vast stillness: long tracts of concrete lying inert, clanging heard only through far off echoes. This stillness however was intersected by intensely concentrated nodes of labouring activity indicated primarily through acousmatic cacophony (that is to see heard but unseen): a room full of workers arc welding, children pushing wheelbarrows and throwing bricks, a security guard singing while walking through a half finished underground car-park, the splashing and thudding as a group of men heaved mud onto the bank of a lake, dozens of cows grazing in the background only a few miles away from corporate IT parks.

The mobilities and interstices of noise and silence on re-listening highlights the many concatenations of activity and stillness within these atmospheres. To recall Blesser and Salter, we sense the physical dimensions of depth and size in the resonances of rooms, steel and concrete frames, the clatters of heavily populated food stalls, the thick passing of traffic. Kolkata is a sonically dense city. In this satellite city of Rajarhat one starkly hears the tensions unfolding primitive accumulation into neoliberal commerce and the daily rhythm of its progression through the tenors of voiced instructions and conversations, the pitch, volume and speed of construction,

but also the stalling and evacuation of sound. We also hear my own interruptions, the mishandling of recording devices, buzzing from a broken microphone, weather interference, the failed dialogues and the negotiations of boundary lines.

There are a few points I would like to emphasise here on how an acoustemological analysis can be generative within the economic social sciences. The first has to do with the forces of power such a reading illustrates. The acoustic elements that constitute the soundscape are products of systems of value articulated in this case through neoliberal practices of what David Harvey calls 'accumulation by dispossession', re-territorialisation and employment, embedded in corporate capital expansion. By paying attention to the sonic compositions in a place we can hear how power and economics are critical to the everyday unfoldings of geographies.

Secondly an acoustemological approach definitively reminds us that the production and reception of knowledge – in this case the ear – is never passive, nor are the technologies used to record, transduce, edit, playback and disseminate it. How knowledge, here sound, is framed and analysed, speaks to compositional dynamics of power, and this is in no way obfuscated. Thirdly, such an approach can help us to experiment with polyphonic and more complex epistemological (re)productions in that the landscapes of sound are always shifting and always contextual. This helps us to hone a sensibility attenuated to the interpretative and creative activity of knowledge production at the same time as requiring us to be sensitive to the resonances and disjunctions we are exploring. I would argue that an orientation toward the sonic aspects of geo-political and economic processes opens up a means to work with dense materials in ways that do not seek to enclose or reduce their multivalencies, that do not seek to ossify ambiguous and conflictive processes, and are able to grasp their historical and contemporary relations and environments in conjunction with their specificities.

To be sure, to usefully employ a materialist method of acoustemology and atmospheric listening we need to understand soundscapes in the same way as we do any empirical device – as infused with conditions and limitations that temper definitive discourse. If we are to approach sound as a way of knowing we need to reflect on what it reveals about the stakes of our hearing. We have to ask: what does it mean to listen, to be a listener, and to produce sound as knowledge? How do we recognise the moment of recording a sonic geography for what it is, one moment in a world of many, affected by the technologies of digitisation, interpretation, editing? And if we acknowledge this, how can we discover and unravel the threads of what we are hearing while we translate them? Attention to the soundings of atmosphere can contribute to a practice of observing that is finer in its reading. This is a useful perspective to take if we wish to engage the relational and material political elements that contribute to these atmospheres, and the differential economies of sound that compose them.