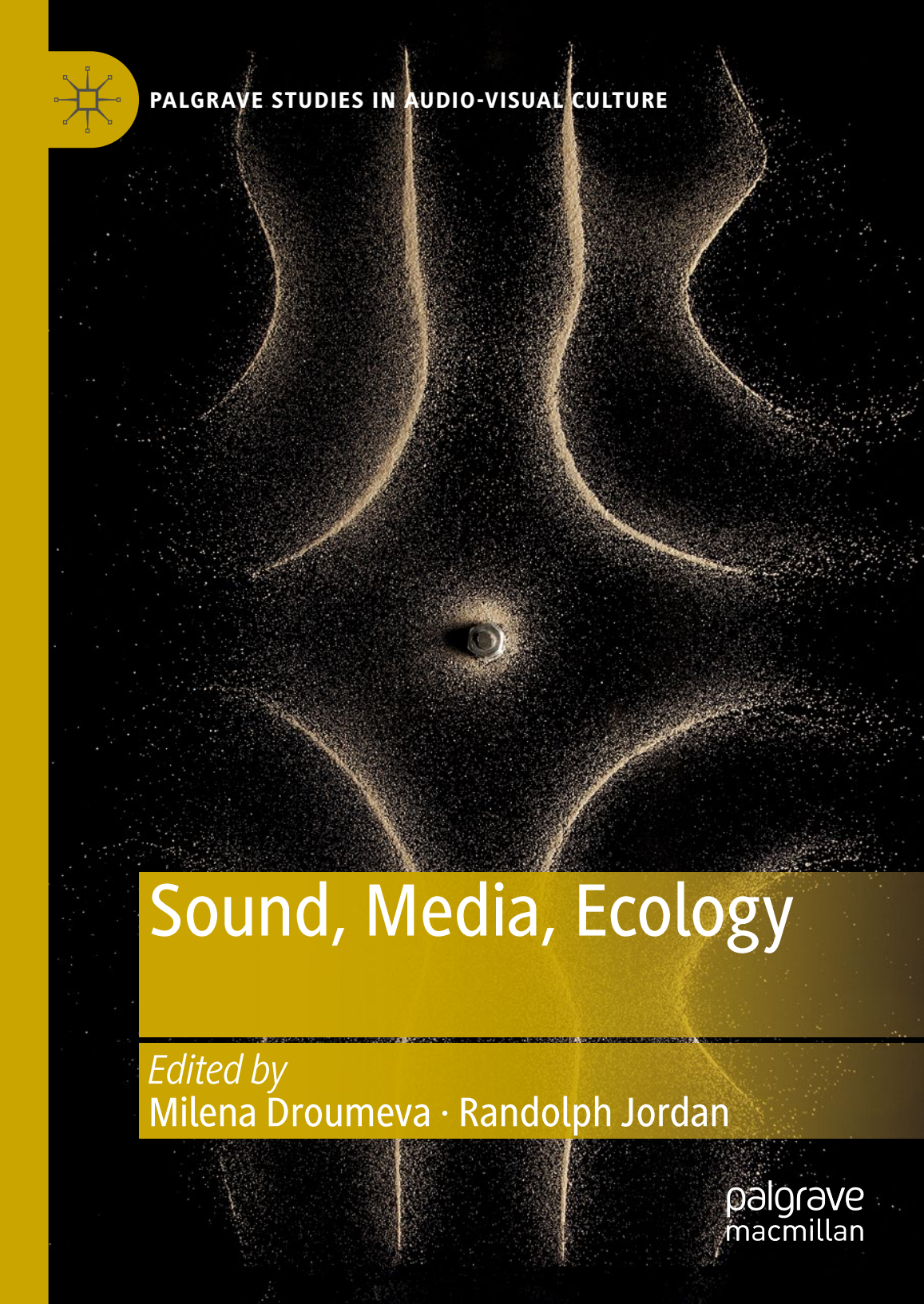
PALGRAVE STUDIES IN AUDIO-VISUAL CULTURE
Sound, Media, Ecology
Edited by
Milena Droumeva · Randolph Jordan
palgrave
macmillan

Palgrave Studies in Audio-Visual Culture

Series Editor
K.J. Donnelly
School of Humanities
University of Southampton
Southampton, UK

The aesthetic union of sound and image has become a cultural dominant. A junction for aesthetics, technology and theorisation, film's relationship with music remains the crucial nexus point of two of the most popular arts and richest cultural industries. Arguably, the most interesting area of culture is the interface of audio and video aspects, and that film is the flagship cultural industry remains the fount and crucible of both industrial developments and critical ideas.

Palgrave Studies in Audio-Visual Culture has an agenda-setting aspiration. By acknowledging that radical technological changes allow for rethinking existing relationships, as well as existing histories and the efficacy of conventional theories, it provides a platform for innovative scholarship pertaining to the audio-visual. While film is the keystone of the audio visual continuum, the series aims to address blind spots such as video game sound, soundscapes and sound ecology, sound psychology, art installations, sound art, mobile telephony and stealth remote viewing cultures.

More information about this series at
http://www.palgrave.com/gp/series/14647

Milena Droumeva • Randolph Jordan
Editors

Sound, Media, Ecology

palgrave
macmillan

Editors
Milena Droumeva
Simon Fraser University
Burnaby, BC, Canada

Randolph Jordan
Concordia University
Montréal, QC, Canada

Palgrave Studies in Audio-Visual Culture
ISBN 978-3-030-16568-0 ISBN 978-3-030-16569-7 (eBook)
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-16569-7

Cover illustration: Gary James Joynes Photo Title: 12 Tones Edition: 434.97 Hz
Cover Design: eStudio Calamar

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

Contents

SECTION II

Environment and Community

CHAPTER 6

Nothing Connects Us but Imagined Sound

Mitchell Akiyama

Step through your door and close your eyes. Listen. How do you know you are home? Are there any unmistakable sonic events or textures that ground you in this place? The electronic chime of a school bell at recess? The seasonal swish of a stand of poplar trees? The low hum of an electrical transformer? How singular is your sonic environment? Now step inside. What sounds fill your home? A radio? A podcast beamed via Bluetooth to a nearby speaker? The murmur of the neighbor's television? What worlds do these mediated, electrical sounds connect you to? Do these transmissions link you with local spaces or concerns? Or, is their reach national? Global? How does sound—acoustic or electronic—contribute to your sense of place, your sense of belonging?

In his 1977 book, *The Tuning of the World*, R. Murray Schafer made the emphatic case that sound fundamentally shapes community. Prior to the advent of electrical technologies capable of amplifying, storing, and transmitting sound, communities were defined by the unique sounds and acoustics of their immediate environments. Schafer invoked, for example, Plato's ideal community, which (as the apocryphal claim goes) should be limited to 5040 individuals—this apparently being the precise number of

M. Akiyama (✉)
University of Toronto, Toronto, ON, Canada
e-mail: mitchell.akiyama@daniels.utoronto.ca

M. Droumeva, R. Jordan (eds.), *Sound, Media, Ecology*,
Palgrave Studies in Audio-Visual Culture,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-16569-7_6

souls an unamplified orator might comfortably address.[1] The sound of a church bell or the song of the local muezzin intoning the call to prayer; the geography of community was laid out along sonic lines. But the rise of industrial noise, Schafer argued, had come to drown out these sounds and sonic reproduction technologies had confused matters further by separating "original" sounds from their sources. Schafer blamed the industrial revolution for degrading the soundscape into a condition of low fidelity. In his terms, a "lo-fi" soundscape was characterized by consistent, loud noises emanating from industrial machinery, combustion engines, and myriad other mechanical drones. He contrasted this with the "hi-fi" soundscape—the quiet rural backdrop in which even relatively quiet sounds had space to assert themselves (1977b, p. 43).

In the late 1960s, at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, Schafer founded the World Soundscape Project (WSP) to address these issues. The WSP emerged as a collective of young composers whose goal was the elimination of noise pollution and the engineering of a healthy, balanced soundscape. The WSP developed an array of pedagogical methods for teaching people to open their ears to a world of sound, a world to which they had become troublingly inured. These techniques included exercises such as guided soundwalks and writing detailed description of sonic events as they unfolded.[2] A key part of the repertoire they called "ear cleaning" was an engagement with sound recording. Working with recording was essential in that, according to Schafer, the development and misuse of recording technologies was a problematic contributor to the increasing noisiness of soundscape. Recording engendered a condition of psychic distress that Schafer dubbed "schizophonia" because it separated sounds from their sources (1977b, p. 90). But, paradoxically, Schafer also had faith that schizophonic media could help repair the social damage they had caused by reconnecting people to significant sounds that they stood to lose.[3]

This possibility, that a schizophonic medium might reimmerse people in a shared aural heritage, underpinned the WSP's ambitious, sprawling radio program, *Soundscapes of Canada*, a ten-part series that aired in 1974 on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's (CBC) venerable program, *Ideas*. Consisting of material gathered on a cross-country trip that spanned the nation's distant coasts, *Soundscapes of Canada* was an eclectic work that ranged from instructional lectures by Schafer on how to become a more sensitive, critical listener to extended and unedited environmental recordings to catalogs of significant Canadian sounds to experimental tape

pieces. It was a revolutionary work of composition, but the social and political positions that the series promoted were, in contrast to the its aesthetics, tacitly conservative. The soundscapes they included in the broadcast overwhelmingly represented the nation's settler colonial past—simpler, quieter times they seemingly wished to restore. However, created at a time when Canada's immigrant populations were exploding, when indigenous activists were making important strides toward state recognition, *Soundscapes of Canada* was perhaps most notable for whom and what it left out.

Twenty years after Schafer's first efforts to draw attention to the fraught relationship between sound and community, a collective of activist-artists, known as Ultra-red, mounted their own effort to turn sound recording toward political ends. Equally unflinching and polemical, Ultra-red's approach to sound and politics was radically different from that of the WSP. The collective was composed of community organizers and members of the Los Angeles chapter of ACT UP who, beginning in the mid-1990s, began to sonically document the fallout of the AIDS crisis and its intersection with the social pressures of discriminatory housing policies, migration, and addiction. While the WSP was committed to a politics of media predicated on preservation, Ultra-red treated sound recording as an epiphenomenon of class struggle. While the WSP sought to capture the world as it was in order to use its recordings to help compose and construct its ideal soundscape, Ultra-red proposed an inversion of this formula, arguing that sonic media could not be relied on to provide stable or unproblematic representations. Instead, they dealt with microphones and recorders as tools that might help produce social spaces radically different from the ones they found oppressive. For Ultra-red, the content of a recording was never nearly as important as the very effect that the act of extending a microphone might engender:

> The microphone does not have a perspective on the site of struggle. It does not stand apart from the struggle. Rather, it is a site for the production of the conditions of struggle. Inquiry is conditioned by the collective organizing of demands. In a militant sound investigation, we take time to organize the social field to be recorded. (2008c)

Organizing the field in advance of the recording fundamentally alters the status quo of causality; the object of the recording is no longer the world as it is but the world as the recordists require want it to be. By not only recognizing themselves as intervening in, but also constructing the terms of representation, the recording would lose its value as a window onto events-as-they-occurred. For Ultra-red, the schizophonic

rupture between sound and source offered an *opening* for new social formations and political possibilities: "Only by artifice can we even conceptualize urban space as distinguishable from its ambience. Separating sound from context produces the most artificial results: a utopia so to speak" (2008b). Ultra-red saw the slipperiness of sonic mediation as an opportunity to amplify difference, to admit marginalized voices into the contested, fractured spaces of political action. The WSP's *Soundscapes of Canada*, on the other hand, evinced concern for a perceived erosion of national identity at a time of intense social upheaval and took on the task of reversing, or at least slowing, the disappearance of the Canadian, settler soundscape.

But here we should press pause to note that these projects, conceived and received twenty years apart, were the products of very different social and technological moments. Both groups used microphones and portable recording equipment to capture sound in situ, but they both had very different senses of what those recordings contained and to what ends they might be used. These different approaches to recording remind us that technology, mediation, and representation are always politically resonant; they are always profoundly entangled with the social forces and debates they capture and represent. The WSP's output of the 1970s hewed to a logic of analog storage and transmission, a tacit ontology that subtended the tape recordings and radio transmissions they believed held the power to repair the soundscape. "Analog," as we have come to understand the term, denotes the process of a continuous signal being inscribed to a medium that registers the infinite subtleties and modulations of things such as they are (Robinson, 2008). The WSP was concerned with the ways in which something truthful, meaningful, and specific abided in their tape recordings—even if tape made radical transformations possible, even if sounds were fundamentally corrupted by their removal from their origins. While two episodes of *Soundscapes of Canada* included compositions that featured radical transformations of the source material (episode IX: "A Radio Programme About Radio," for example, was a lysergic, almost Dada-esque meta-commentary on mediation), the majority of the broadcast eschewed any significant manipulation of the recordings made by members Peter Huse and Bruce Davis on their epic cross-country field trip. The WSP's choice to leave the majority of their recordings as they were suggests that they understood that there was something important about the connection between a sonic reproduction and its source—in spite of their anxieties about the medium's fundamentally schizophonic

nature. It bears remembering that *Soundscapes of Canada* was created at a moment when the tide of postmodernism was barely lapping at the shores of culture, a moment in which modernist edifices were starting to quake, but had not yet collapsed. Grand narratives still held, and media storage still captured the stream of the real whose flow would eventually be fragmented by digital encoding.[4]

Ultra-red was no less tethered to the social and technological contingencies of the 1990s. In its fragmented, agonistic approach to politics and aesthetics, their work is emblematic of a digital postmodernity defined just as much by the arbitrariness of numerical encoding as it is by the slipperiness of language and narrative. Media, in their various regimes, fundamentally affect how we represent the world and marshal political agency within it. Yet also, at the same time, the culture and discourse of a moment will always inform technological possibility. Listening in on two distinct networks of technology and networks of discourse that open, close, and bleed between the 1970s and the 1990s, we will hear the echoes of a world roiling and shifting between modes of mediation and political desire.

The comedown following the national giddiness of Expo 67 in Montreal was harsh. Political assassinations and the threat of separation in Quebec, economic collapse, northern lakes left lifeless on account of acid rain. Canada's perennial grandfather-historian, Pierre Berton, would later longingly describe 1967 as "the last good year" (1997). The cultural climate of the early 1970s crackled with charge and change. But it wasn't only the political landscape that rippled with turbulence; the soundscape had also become a mess. The WSP, whether in response to the zeitgeist or not, took up the challenge of shoring up the country's troubled, shifting identity by recording its people and places, by playing the nation back to itself.[5] Their first foray into composing with recordings came in the 1973 work, *The Vancouver Soundscape*. But it was *Soundscapes of Canada*, which aired the following year, that articulated the group's ambitious goal of restoring the integrity of the nation's sonic environment. One episode in particular, "Soundmarks," stands out for its attempt to both define and foster sonic community. In the program's introduction, Schafer defined the soundmark as "a special feature of a community that helps to give it its unique character" (Schafer, 1974). Schafer (1974) introduced the "Soundmarks" episode as the result of "an extensive tour across the country, from Newfoundland to British Columbia." But "extensive," in this case, did not necessarily mean thorough or complete.

Created at a time when Canada was coming into its own as one of the most multicultural nations in the world, "Soundmarks"—and the entire series more broadly—was significantly lacking in representations of the country's exploding diversity. The sixth episode in the series offered an hour-long aural catalog of church bells, foghorns, train whistles—all symbols of the nation's settler colonialist heritage. For representations of the myriad non-white, non-settler soundmarks, Canada's Others would have to listen elsewhere. This is not to suggest that this occlusion was deliberate or the premeditated enactment of a specific political ideology. Four decades later, Bruce Davis (who, along with Peter Huse, made the recordings that were the basis of *Soundscapes of Canada*) admitted that their methodology for selecting subjects and locations was based largely on instinct.[6] It never occurred to them to use quotas to guide their fieldwork. Their motivations seemed to be based on good faith and a curiosity about the national soundscape, but we cannot lose track of the always-real discrepancy between the creators' objectives and an audience's reception of their work. Imagining back to 1974, giving these young composers some benefit of some doubt as to their good intentions, it is still important to ask: what did these broadcasts mean to a Japanese-Canadian woman whose family had been interned in the interior of British Columbia during WWII, whose possessions had been seized by the government only thirty years earlier? To a Trinidadian-Canadian, just arrived in Toronto, trying to settle herself in a settler's landscape, her skin and her accent both dead giveaways of otherness. To a Cree boy in Churchill, Manitoba, whose grandparents had spirited just enough of their language into his ear for their endangered tongue to endure. It is important to ask these questions, because, in 1974, Canada contained ever more multitudes, and it was at this very moment that it was becoming less and less tenable to ignore the nation's swelling, multicultural population.

While the WSP had not fully worked through the political implications of environmental recording in the 1970s, their output of this era palpated with the social concerns of the day. Although he certainly did not always speak for the entire group, R. Murray Schafer's writings about race and Canadian identity offer important insights into the ideological underpinnings of the WSP's work. Schafer's writings, particularly those that deal with Canada, invariably circle back to the role that nature plays in forming a national identity. For Schafer, Canada's climate and its landscape were its richest cultural resources, the sources of its people's strength and identity. In the program notes to his 1973 composition, *North/White*, he submitted

that "the Canadian climate and geography…is our best unifier, transcending ethnic extraction or allegiance of any other kind. We are all Northerners, sharing a million acres of wildness in the imagination. That is our only uncounterfeit resource, and we should seek to draw more directly from it" (1984, p. x). But, ever since the country's founding, the national identity that Schafer believed superseded ethnicity has never been anything more than an idealized composite. He was certainly not alone in assuming that rugged northern climate would eventually chisel a hearty Nordic subject out of even the most unfit prospects; this was indeed the very crux of the one-hundred years of discourse that preceded him (1984, p. 64). "The idea of North," wrote Schafer (1984) in his notes to *North/White*, "is a Canadian Myth. Without a myth a nation dies" (p. 64). This last sentence would be recycled, nearly verbatim, a year later in *Soundscapes of Canada*. Schafer's idea of North would not figure prominently in the radio series, but it would tacitly form the basis of a racial politics underpinned by a deeply troubled and troubling colonial legacy.

Since the very emergence of the modern nation-state, media have profoundly influenced national conversations about identity and belonging. Benedict Anderson famously argued that the rise of mass-produced broadsheet newspapers, maps, and censuses prompted people separated by sometimes vast geographic distances to imagine themselves as participating in a common political project. Anderson proposed that community has also historically been imagined and ratified through sound. In his consideration of national anthems, Anderson (2006) coined the term "unisonance" to describe the power that sound can have to seemingly erode the boundaries between self and other: "How selfless this unisonance feels! If we are aware that others are singing these songs precisely when and as we are, we have no idea who they may be, or even where, out of earshot, they are singing. Nothing connects us all but imagined sound" (p. 145). While Anderson was specifically addressing the power of song to marshal nationalist affects, we can certainly extend unisonance to other forms of sonic identification. The soundmark is a particular and concrete instance of this phenomenon, one whose immediate ties to nationalism are not quite so transparent. Soundmarks are local by definition, but in broadcasting them to the nation over state radio, the WSP called on sound recording to serve as a receptacle for an imagined, shared, national identity.

This gesture could only be effective if the listener trusted that a recording is truthful and *contains* a real trace of a specific place captured at a specific moment in time. In a sense, this is the case for all recordings, but

there is an aesthetic of authenticity and truth that is amplified when recordings are understood as having been captured in the field. There is no obvious or metaphysical difference between a field recording and its antipode, a recording made in a studio. The difference—which is fundamentally rhetorical—is in the way that space is framed by the recording. The studio recording is meant to sound as though it is emerging directly from your speakers. It is a sonic event seemingly divorced from the site of its creation. A field recording, in contrast, seems to fully capture and represent a space in its plenitude at a particular moment in time. Listening to a field recording feels like passing through a window into another time and place. But it is a condition of genre, not ontology, that inflects how we receive a recording. It is a matter that has important consequences for what we understand a recording to "contain" and, consequently, helps to determine what one might do with it. Field recording is effectively a genre of practice that, while always subject to arbitrary decision-making and technical limitation, has been accorded a documentary and preservationist function.

While the term "field recording" had been in use for decades by the 1970s, the phrase is notably absent, save for a few passing references, from the WSP's writings from that period.[7] Perhaps this was because the members of the WSP came primarily from musical backgrounds and not from the social sciences, from disciplines such as anthropology and ethnology, where the term circulated as a matter of convention. In a sense, the WSP's use of the word "environment" stood in for what practitioners in other areas called "the field." And while they gave very little explicit attention to the idea of location—an omission that is surprising considering their rigorous (albeit unorthodox) documentation practices—questions concerning the veracity and authenticity of certain situations crop up again and again. It seems that they almost took it for granted that their listeners would understand what these recordings were and how they were made—that they *were* field recordings, plain and simple. The site-specificity of their recordings was underwritten by the narrative conceit of the field trip, of journeying to other places in order to represent them as they actually are. Given that the WSP never really articulated an approach to field recording in any cogent way, we're left to cobble a philosophy together out of scraps, such as this telling dialogue between Bruce Davis and Peter Huse. In Davis's words, "Whenever you record a sound, you're ripping it out of its social, historical, and general acoustic context, so that the difference, for instance, between our recordings and a sound effects recording is that the

sound effects recording is just the sound, and our recordings are not only the sound, but also the related background material to that sound" (Davis & Huse, 1974, p. 32). For Davis, the difference between a field recording and a sound effect was a width of context, a responsibility toward the totality of a sonic environment.

They apparently wanted to have things both ways, to capture the world both as it was *and* as they wanted it to be. They were explicit about this, even in spite of their concern for letting recorded sounds be themselves, making no apology for intervening in a recording or choosing an opportune or token moment. Describing the WSP's pedagogical approach to sound recording, Schafer (1977b) wrote, "We train students in soundscape recording by giving them specific sounds to record…It is not easy if the result is to be 'clean,' without distracting interferences" (p. 210). This essentially reads as a coded protocol for omission. To be fair, the goal of this assignment was to capture specific sounds in isolation, but the lingering and concomitant insinuation remains that some sounds are more valuable than others. Schafer gave an example of such interference, describing a scenario in which a young boy ruined a recording of a noon whistle by asking the crew if the sound he hears is the one they were after (1977b, p. 210). The takeaway?. "One of the recordist's biggest problems," Schafer grumbled, "is to devise ways of recording social settings without interrupting them" (p. 210). But what of the social dynamics established by the recording apparatus itself? Paradoxically, it seems that "reality" could only ever be approached through the *artifice* of framing, if not outright staging. If capturing the related background material was what differentiated a soundscape recording from a sound effect, then it bears asking just which sounds were extraneous? And, if context was so important, then what are we to make of their mandate to record singular, historically important sounds in isolation? Schafer hoped that a future cohort trained by the WSP would embark on a mission to record rapidly vanishing sound objects—kerosene lamps, school hand bells, water pumps, leather saddle bags (1977b, p. 209), for example—before their extinction. But would this not amount to a catalog of sound effects ripped from their context of use? Every act of recording is an act of framing; every act of framing is an act of omission. The question is, how are these conditions acknowledged by the recordist?

It's important to pause again to note that the WSP's approach to the act of capturing sound and working with recordings developed over the following decades to include different methods and concerns.[8] In his 1984

book, *Acoustic Communication*, Barry Truax attempted to formalize the practice that he now called "soundscape composition" that had emerged from the WSP's work of the early 1970s. In "soundscape composition…it is precisely the environmental context that is preserved, enhanced, and exploited by the composer" (Truax, 1984, p. 207). Soundscape composition, for Truax, was more than a formalist exercise. As with other ear cleaning techniques, it was meant to change the ways in which people related to the acoustic environment: "...the successful soundscape composition has the effect of changing the listener's awareness and attitudes toward the soundscape, and thereby changing the listener's relationship to it. The aim of the composition is therefore social and political, as well as artistic" (Truax, 1984, p. 207). In order for a change to take place in the listener, it was crucial that the listener identify with the sound source, recognizing and identifying its naturalistic and referential properties. Hildegard Westerkamp would propose a similar definition, suggesting that soundscape composition held the power to change listeners' attitudes toward the environment. Perhaps more than any other WSP member, Westerkamp was sensitive to the paradoxes of schizophonia. She proposed that, on the one hand, "In soundscape composition the artist seeks to discover the sonic/musical essence contained within the recordings and thus within the place and time where it was recorded" (2002, p. 52). But she was also skeptical that recording could ever have any claim to objectivity insofar as she was mindful that soundscape recordings needed to be shaped and transformed by the composer for them to realize their full, affective potential (Westerkamp, 2002).

Soundscapes of Canada was produced at a pivotal cultural moment, but it also arrived right as the inexorable wave of digital media was gathering force. As with just about all the WSP's positions on recording technologies, their views on both analog tape and digital recording were deeply ambivalent. In *The Tuning of the World*, Schafer flip-flopped on the value of analog media, noting that, on the one hand, records and tape recordings not only disrupted the natural order by separating sounds from sources, but they also sowed cultural confusion: "A record or tape collection may contain items from widely diverse cultures and historical periods in what would seem, to a person from any century but our own, a meaningless and surrealistic juxtaposition" (p. 90). However, the tape recorder could also serve as "a useful adjunct to the ear," a supplement to hearing capable of capturing sonic events that the human auditory apparatus was liable to miss (Schafer, 1977a, p. 208). There was a similar ambivalence

regarding digital recording in Barry Truax's writings from the years immediately following the publication of *The Tuning of the World*. In his 1978 publication, *Handbook for Acoustic Ecology*, Truax extolled then nascent digital recording technology for its ability to produce copies without the introduction of noise. Twenty years on, in a 1996 article revisiting the work of the WSP at a moment in which digital recording and production had become commonplace, Truax lobbied to restore an ethic of indexicality or transparency to composition. Truax argued that composers had squandered the potential of digital technologies by using them to simply appropriate the richness of recorded sonic environments back into a formalist, musical language—a lost opportunity to harness the timbral complexities of environmental sound, along with its referential properties (Truax, 1996, p. 49). What was at stake in achieving such a balance was "the re-integration of the listener with the environment in a balanced ecological relationship" (p. 63). But just who was this listener, and into which environment she or he might be reintegrated? These are important questions to ask, especially given the tacit prioritization of settler colonial identities in *Soundscapes of Canada*. By the mid-1990s, Truax's thinking seemed to shift significantly, and the answer to this question was no longer clear. Truax (1996) imagined prying open the previously sovereign, asignifying space of the composition so that it might admit including details that would connect it to the social world in which it would be received, details such as the age, gender, race, or class of the performer or composer.

Around the same time that Truax was trying to reconcile the contradictions of digital media, Ultra-red set out, a Digital Audio Tape (DAT) recorder in hand, to record marginalized members of their community—intravenous drug users, immigrants, the queer cruisers of Los Angeles parks. They would then transform these field recordings through digital processes, sometimes altering them beyond recognition. Ultra-red's compositions of the mid-late 1990s oscillate dizzyingly between naturalistic documentation and digital fragmentation. They might establish a scene only to tear the whole thing to glitchy pieces. Take, for example, the track, "Public Address (C. B.)," from their 1999 album, *Second Nature*. A voice, ostensibly recorded in a studio, describes the persecution faced by gay men for engaging in public sex in Los Angeles's Griffith Park. A few seconds in, the recorded voice is shattered into shards of digital sound, only to be reconstituted in what seems to be an outdoor locale. But the recorded voice continues to change; it becomes apparent that it is now emerging from a speaker that is being moved around what we'd assume is Griffith

Park itself. Spaces nested within other spaces, each of which could be shredded beyond recognition at any moment. There is no trusting in the truth of a document that can so easily be degraded, whose material and numerical fragility are so easily exposed.[9]

However, even this focus on the (non)veracity of recording misses the point. Ultra-red has consistently maintained that their recordings are not meant to function as documents; they are only useful to the extent that they make things happen. In a 2004 interview, Dont Rhine explained, "Personally, I'm quite skeptical about the potential for someone's consciousness to be raised by simply listening to a song, reading a book, or watching a movie…Consciousness is radicalized in the direct participation in struggle" (Macdonald, 2004, p. 16). Put another way, a recording, like a concept (to transpose a phrase from Brian Massumi) is a brick. Build a wall or lob it through a window; its power lies in its use (Massumi, 1987, p. xii). Ultra-red has been unequivocal about taking matters into its own hands, treating sound recording as a tactical fulcrum for prying open spaces of engagement. "A political aesthetic of field recordings, as we've come to understand it," Rhine noted, "is not organized around the truth of the record…Instead, the field recording tests our memories against the truth of our desires…The political site takes shape the moment those actors involved in the event listen to the recording and reflect on it in relation to their memories and desires. The record is never the same as we remember it to be" (Macdonald, 2004, p. 16). Electronically mediated sound gains its power not through representation, but through the ways in which it defamiliarizes, constitutes, and creates public spaces that sound and feel different from those envisioned by the experts—the architects, the planners, and technocrats—who have the mandate to build. Concrete architecture and *musique concrète*—each consolidates, reduces a manifold to a singular, material encounter. The question, then, is how does one open both built space and the sound object to the world in all of its complexity? And how does one bend the world away from what it is toward what it might be?

There is a self-avowed, utopian striving implicit in this understanding of mediation. The recording does not capture and contain a given time and place; it is a non-space shot through with ontological uncertainty. Politics, like nature, abhors a vacuum and something new will always rush in to fill the void. Fredric Jameson describes this motive, oscillating force as "the dialectic of Identity and Difference…a politics [that] aims at imagining, and sometimes even at realizing, a system radically different

from this one" (Jameson, 2005, p. xii). Radical difference, not teleological striving; utopianism does not necessarily have to have a blueprint for the future. Ultra-red's utopian strategy explicitly leverages this flicker between identity and difference, between realism and artifice, that recording cracks open: "Only by artifice can we even conceptualize urban space as distinguishable from its ambience. Separating sound from context produces the most artificial results: a utopia so to speak…the artifice we construct gives shape to our own position in public space" (Ultra-red, 2008b). The separation of sound from source does not degrade some presumably integral and pure original; rather, it creates new experiences and affects that can remake the field itself.

This concern with identity and difference is always roiling within in Ultra-red's work in terms of both politics and mediation. But even this tension implies or upholds an ontological distinction between recording technologies and politics. Is it sufficient to simply say that media are always charged with political energy while politics are always affected by media? Maybe it is more accurate to say that they in fact constitute each other, that the technological possibilities of a moment actually afford particular social manifestations, just as the emergent discourses of a moment subtend our conceptions as to the political potential of media. An injunction, then, is to think media and politics not as a dyad or a dialectic, but as an entanglement of co-constituting material, social, conceptual, and metaphorical elements. Let us consider our givens: a collective of activists/artists stepping out onto the shaky, postmodern ground of 1990s; finding their footing amidst the tumult and vibration of identity politics; steeped in Deleuze, Attali, and Mouffe; straddling a tectonic shift hastened by digital media. In the 1990s, identity has become increasingly understood as a set of intersectional variables, all of which are, to some extent, effects of history and performance.[10] A similar characteristic is, of course, accorded to the logic of digital media as well. Digital information no longer seems to have any important ontological ties to its material substrate; our encounter with the digital always involves a transcoding from bits to electricity to light or acoustic vibration (Manovich, 2001). Any of these manifestations could just as easily be expressed in another physical register. As such, information has come to be understood as subject to the violent glitches and ruptures that make media and identity irreconcilable and recalcitrant.

Another twenty years on. We are more digital than ever, digital to the point that we require physical or natural metaphors just to keep our heads

in the Cloud. It seems fitting, maybe more than coincidence, that in 2016, "fake news" swayed an election, while at the same time MIT researchers were developing an algorithm capable of analyzing video and then producing audio realistic enough to fool humans into believing both sound and image were captured simultaneously (Conner-Simons, 2016). Moving into a future of convincing, digitally simulated media production, we will likely find it harder and harder to trust the veracity of recordings. The advent of digital storage and processing has made it possible to alter and produce audio in ways that were unimaginable in the analog era.

One proposal for a temporary and imperfect fix for this crisis of fragmentation has been the careful deployment of what Gayatri Spivak, in the 1980s, presciently named "strategic essentialism" (1996, p. 204). Spivak, ever-always distrustful of essences, submitted that it might be politically expedient for oppressed peoples to rally around a common cause, a mission anchored by a shared but provisional identity. This notion has been resurgent in recent years, touted by no less a critic of essences than Bruno Latour, who sees this as a problematic but necessary move for combatting the idea that facts, such as those relating to climate change, are open to interpretation.[11] What, then, would a strategically essentialist approach to our fractured political situation *sound* like? Politics and media are now far too complicated and mistrusted to imagine that a sound recording could ever unify a people under the sign of a shared history such as the one offered by the WSP in the 1970s. And yet, their work can still offer important and productive insights into the powerful affects that shared sonic experience can afford. We might organize around the "content" of a recording as long as we are attentive to whom or what might be missing and remember all the while that a recording can never be anything more than a placeholder for the concerns it draws together. Given the looming likelihood that real-seeming sound will soon stream into all corners of our mediascape, it is critical that we understand that digital audio can never be trusted to deliver a "true" representation of the world to us. This does not mean that what seems to be there, enunciating itself audibly—a voice, the wind whispering through a stand of oak, the din of a construction site—is necessarily nothing more than a digital fiction or fabrication, nor is it without value to attend to the content of the recording. However, the meaning of a recording can only ever be articulated by the texts and discourses through which it is interpreted. What seems to be there might never even have been. But, then, the future will certainly come to be; better to organize around what a recording proposes than what it purportedly contains.

Notes

1. I call this claim apocryphal given that Plato's *Laws*—the apparent source of the figure, 5040—makes no mention of orators or the limits of spoken address. For Plato, the number 5040 was mathematically sacred for its versatility as a divisor, and for its frequent appearance in real-world and mathematically ideal phenomena. It is possible that Schafer was pointing to an uncited reference made by Lewis Mumford in *The Story of Utopias*. See Plato, *Laws*, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1926); Lewis Mumford, *The Story of Utopias* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1922), 39; R. Murray Schafer, *The Tuning of the World* (New York: Knopf, 1977b), 215.
2. See *Ear Cleaning: Notes for an Experimental Music Course* (Toronto: Clark & Cruickshank, 1967).
3. Bernard Stiegler describes this tension in media between danger and redemption by invoking the *pharmakon*, or, that which is simultaneously destructive and curative (Stiegler, 2013, p. 4).
4. This is not to suggest that there was an identifiable rupture between the analog and digital eras. Andrea Bohlman and Peter McMurray remind of the overlaps between the two represented by Digital Audio Tape (DAT), as well as the usage of analog audio tape for data storage. Andrea F. Bohlman and Peter McMurray, "Tape: Or, Rewinding the Phonographic Regime," *Twentieth-Century Music* 14, no. 1 (2017).
5. According to Bruce Davis, the WSP had no explicit political agenda or intention of responding to the current cultural moment. Personal communication with Bruce Davis, August 2017.
6. Personal communications with Barry Truax and Bruce Davis, August 2017.
7. One WSP text contains a sort of appendix listing the "field recording equipment" used on a given project. However, it does not discuss the idea of field recording in any overt way. R. Murray Schafer, *Five Village Soundscapes* (Vancouver: A.R.C. Publications, 1977a), 331.
8. Randolph Jordan offers a nuanced reading of the WSP's approach to location recording from the early 1970s to the post-Schafer era of the late 1970s and beyond. Randolph Jordan, "Unsettling the Soundtrack: Acoustic Profiling and Documentation of Community and Place," in *The Routledge Companion to Screen Music and Sound*, ed. Miguel Mera, Ronald Sadoff, and Ben Winters (New York: Routledge, 2017). See also Jan Marontate, Megan Robertson, and Nathan Clarkson, "Soundscapes as Commemoration and Imagination of the Acoustic Past," in *Rouledge International Handbook of Memory Studies*, ed. Anna Lisa Tota and Trevor Hagen (New York: Routledge, 2015).

9. On the material substrate that makes digital technology possible, see Matthew Kirschenbaum, *Mechanisms: New Media and the Forensic Imagination* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008).
10. The obvious touchstone for this line of thought is Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999).
11. Bruno Latour, "Telling Friends from Foes in the Time of the Anthropocene," in *The Anthropocene and the Global Environment Crisis – Rethinking Modernity in a New Epoch*, ed. Clive Hamilton, Christophe Bonneuil, and François Gemenne (London: Routledge, 2015).

References

Anderson, B. (2006). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.

Berton, P. (1997). *1967: The Last Good Year*. Toronto, Canada: Doubleday.

Bohlman, A. F., & McMurray, P. (2017). Tape: Or, Rewinding the Phonographic Regime. *Twentieth-Century Music, 14*(1), 3–24.

Butler, J. (1999). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.

Conner-Simons, A. (2016, June). Artificial Intelligence Produces Realistic Sounds That Fool Humans. *MIT News*. Retrieved from http://news.mit.edu/2016/artificial-intelligence-produces-realistic-sounds-0613

Davis, B., & Huse, P. (1974). Cross-Canada Soundscape Tour 1973. *Sound Heritage, III*(4), 28–48.

Jameson, F. (2005). *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*. London: Verso.

Jordan, R. (2017). Unsettling the Soundtrack: Acoustic Profiling and Documentation of Community and Place. In M. Mera, R. Sadoff, & B. Winters (Eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Screen Music and Sound* (pp. 590–602). New York: Routledge.

Kirschenbaum, M. (2008). *Mechanisms: New Media and the Forensic Imagination*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Latour, B. (2015). Telling Friends from Foes in the Time of the Anthropocene. In C. Hamilton, C. Bonneuil, & F. Gemenne (Eds.), *The Anthropocene and the Global Environment Crisis – Rethinking Modernity in a New Epoch* (pp. 145–155). London: Routledge.

Macdonald, C. (2004). Ultra-Red. *Grooves Magazine*, p. 16.

Manovich, L. (2001). *The Language of New Media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Marontate, J., Robertson, M., & Clarkson, N. (2015). Soundscapes as Commemoration and Imagination of the Acoustic Past. In A. L. Tota & T. Hagen (Eds.), *Rouledge International Handbook of Memory Studies* (pp. 519–532). New York: Routledge.

Massumi, B. (1987). Translator's Forward. In *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (pp. ix–xv). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
Mumford, L. (1922). *The Story of Utopias*. New York: Boni and Liveright.
Plato. (1926). *Laws* (The Loeb Classical Library). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Robinson, D. (2008). Analog. In M. Fuller (Ed.), *Software Studies: A Lexicon* (pp. 21–31). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
Schafer, R. M. (1967). *Ear Cleaning: Notes for an Experimental Music Course*. Toronto, Canada: Clark & Cruickshank.
Schafer, R. M. (1974). Soundmarks. On *Soundscapes of Canada*, Programme III [Radio Program, CD]. Vancouver, Canada.
Schafer, R. M. (1977a). *Five Village Soundscapes*. Vancouver, Canada: ARC Publications.
Schafer, R. M. (1977b). *The Tuning of the World*. New York, NY: Knopf. Reprinted as *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*. Rochester, VT: Destiny Books, 1994.
Schafer, R. M. (1984). *On Canadian Music*. Bancroft, Canada: Arcana Editions.
Spivak, G. C. (1996). *The Spivak Reader*. New York: Routledge.
Stiegler, B. (2013). *What Makes Life Worth Living: On Pharmacology*. Cambridge, MA: Polity.
Truax, B. (1978). *Handbook for Acoustic Ecology*. Vancouver, Canada: ARC Publications.
Truax, B. (1984). *Acoustic Communication*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corporation.
Truax, B. (1996). Soundscape, Acoustic Communication and Environmental Sound Composition. *Contemporary Music Review, 15*(1), 49–65.
Ultra-red. (2008a). *10 Preliminary Theses on Militant Sound Investigation*. New York: Printed Matter.
Ultra-red. (2008b). *Constitutive Utopias: Sound, Public Space and Urban Ambience*. http://www.temporaryservices.org/ultratext.html
Ultra-red. (2008c). *Some Theses on Militant Sound Investigation, or, Listening for a Change*. https://inthemiddleofthewhirlwind.wordpress.com/some-theses-on-militant-sound-investigationor-listening-for-a-change/
Westerkamp, H. (2002). Linking Soundscape Composition and Acoustic Ecology. *Organised Sound, VII*(1), 54.