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Kathryn Allyn

Roza Tchoukaleyska

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## **Soundscaping the archives: disrupting boundaries through sensory research**

Kathryn Allyn  
York University

Roza Tchoukaleyska  
Memorial University of Newfoundland

**Abstract:** Through this paper we seek to re-imagine and challenge the meaning of archival spaces. While archival spaces are repositories of information, they are also sites where cultural values and public memory are shaped, and forms of power enacted. Drawing on sensory ethnography research in the Le Corbusier archives in Paris, France, we consider how boundaries are disrupted through noise, echo, reverberations, buzzing, and other ‘sounds’. Our work is presented in two overlapping textures: a soundtrack, with recordings from the Le Corbusier archives; and the text written out below. Alongside tracing archival soundscapes, a secondary function of this paper is to find our way with voice. In our experiences, ethnography is an embodied method, personal and context-specific. This made engaging with the two sets of ‘I’s’ within our work, ultimately, a reflexive and collective process that happened over many conversations (Ellis, 2004; Hawkins et al., 2016; Kohl and McCutcheon, 2015). We have chosen to keep ‘I’ and clarify, as much as possible, whose experience is being shared.

**Key words:** soundscape, archives, sensory ethnography.

**Introduction:** Through this paper we seek to re-imagine and challenge the meaning of archival spaces. While archival spaces are repositories of information, they are also sites where cultural values and public memory are shaped, and forms of power enacted. Drawing on sensory ethnography research in the Le Corbusier archives in Paris, France, we consider how boundaries

are disrupted through noise, echo, reverberations, buzzing, and other ‘sounds’. Our work is presented in two overlapping textures: a soundtrack, with recordings from the Le Corbusier archives; and the text written out below. Alongside tracing archival soundscapes, a secondary function of this paper is to find our way with voice. In our experiences, ethnography is an embodied method, personal and context-specific. This made engaging with the two sets of ‘I’s’ within our work, ultimately, a reflexive and collective process that happened over many conversations (Ellis, 2004; Hawkins et al., 2016; Kohl and McCutcheon, 2015). We have chosen to keep ‘I’ and clarify, as much as possible, whose experience is being shared.

\* Note to the reader: There are four recordings placed throughout this article. While there is no prescribed method for how you need to interact with these, there are connective threads that run between the recording and the text. One key thread is that of place; the sounds of academic bustle, like that of scholarly gatherings, and the specific inside and outside place of the Fondation le Corbusier archives. Please engage as best suits your own process: read, press play, and continue to read with the soundtrack; read and pause to listen as you come across a recording; read the text first and listen afterwards; listen first and read afterwards. The combinations are many, and you set the pace. Our hope is that, in placing each recording, the moments of connection that you create between sound and word will add additional layers of experience to this story. \*

How are archival experiences disciplined by soundscapes? [**Recording 1:** The rhythm of academic gatherings] This was Kathryn’s first time working at an archive. Roza, on the other hand, was well versed in archival document work and felt ‘institutionalized’ in the sensory and

behavioural experience of such repositories. Before the Fondation Le Corbusier, research was the closest to archival work that Kathryn had experienced: article searches, gathering newspaper clippings, combing through visual data and other media forms. People shared stories about what it was like to work at archives. Experiences ranged from immense and exciting, routine and quiet, to mundane. These stories shared common points: security checks and restrictions on what can enter facilities, time frames to respect and explanations to prepare, and boxes and boxes of paper documents. There were stories about archives that were thick with administrative procedure. So much so that waiting became a central theme, observing the comings and goings of people needing to ask, confirm, and verify. The build-up to being permitted into where records were held seemed particularly daunting. Archives housed in libraries that allowed visitors to handle documents for set time periods required coming prepared with file numbers. Acquiring documents meant standing before the archivist, telling them what you needed, and then waiting for items to be found. These stories led us to think about the texture of archival practice, of being attuned to, and listening for, the complex dynamics that are lived out in place. Place is porous - as Doreen Massey (1994) reminds us - and as such, archival sites are fluid. As stories gleaned from documents and carried to conferences, the archives spill out of the walls that contain them, and are in turn permeated by sounds, and light, and scents from the city outside (Hill 2015).

In our case, the archive is a private repository: the Le Corbusier archives, which hold the documents, personal papers, architectural designs, and many other materials related to the work and life of the renown architect. This repository also has a specific lineage. At the end of his life, Le Corbusier worked towards securing his legacy, and thereby established his own archive. This was achieved when Raoul La Roche (a Swiss banker, art collector and friend of Le Corbusier

who lived in the Le Corbusier-commissioned house at 10, square du Docteur Blanche) donated his half of the Parisian structure to the Le Corbusier foundation. Thus, a venue was created - an apartment and a gallery - that was open to the public. Later, the Fondation Le Corbusier acquired the adjoined Jeanneret Maison (through the sale of a painting from La Roche's collection of Cubist artwork), which now houses the administrative offices of the Fondation, the library, and archives (Fondation Le Corbusier). While the Fondation Le Corbusier is a private institution, it also receives funding through the French Ministry of Culture. State funding is usually allocated to locations and services of significance to French cultural history and identity, suggesting that the Fondation Le Corbusier is of national importance. This valuation was further cemented in 1996 when the Maison La Roche-Jeanneret was classified as a historical monument, and in 2016 when UNESCO added 17 Le Corbusier buildings to the World Heritage List.

Having had to call ahead and schedule an appointment at the Fondation Le Corbusier, the last thing I - Kathryn - wanted was to be late. There was a rhythm to preparing: ensuring that all supplies (and enough supplies) are packed, including materials and any documentation required to make a productive first visit to the archives. The route was mapped and re-checked, taking care that there was enough time to get there. I did my best to look professional and, walking quickly, my nervousness about this first experience felt palpably obvious. The archives opened to pre-booked appointments at 1:30 pm. Arriving 15 minutes early, sitting on the ground across from the Maison Jeanneret, a moment presented to collect my thoughts and start recording.

**[Recording 2:** Early arrivals = the chance to sit outside]

Sound recordings are a central method of our fieldwork practice. They are an occasion to sit down and listen, to absorb the auditory texture of a place, and feel how echoes, hums, or a subtle buzz can shape our response to a site. Making sure that the microphones are unimpeded and pointed outwards, pressing the \*record\* button on the voice recorder creates a moment of hyper awareness, of your own presence, and of the many nearly-silent shuffles of paper and people. In the beginning this process encouraged a slowing down, of tuning into the surroundings, and moments of trying to imagine what the recorder might be hearing. Kathryn began to consider sound as a vocabulary, as the words that help to express, describe and create connections; as tone and volume, as collective and personalized ways that place leaves an imprint. Sound also leads to discussion, and to confusion. What Roza heard as the clicking of a retractable ball-point pen in one of the recordings was actually the clicking of a computer mouse. Speaking to experience, Roza usually deals with pencils, paper, and the specific rhythm of municipal repositories that have not been digitized. Listening back to recordings, we debated the difference between noise (unpleasant associations) and sound (more neutral sensations), and our subjective valuation of what is labelled as annoying (hammering, drilling) and that which is pleasant (birds chirping) (Gallagher et al 2017). We wondered about sensory intersections: sound, light, motion, fragrance, texture, temperature. What is the difference between listening and feeling? You can hear a snap change in weather. The outdoor recordings carry a steady background buzz, the sound of air rushing past the microphone, which is felt in the moment but perceived by our ears in playback at higher volumes. The indoor recordings pick up on some of these auditory traces, blurring the boundary between inside and outside, between the archives and the city. Recordings transform how we understand place, adding new information, and focusing our attention on experiences that in the moment of recording did not register in our conscious memory (Gallagher

and Prior, 2014). In playback we hear texture and pitches, echoes and shuffles, that give an audible volume to these archives, intersecting with written notes and research conversations to create a sensory reading of the site (Pink, 2007; Lewis, 2020).

We sought a definition of ‘sound’. In the introduction to *The Theory of Sound, Volume 1*, John William Strutt opens by stating that “the sensation of sound is a thing *sui generis*, not comparable with any of our other sensations” (1894, 1). It is a vibration that you must feel to experience, through your eardrums when hearing, through your body as waves of treble and bass spill over in a concert, as an all-encompassing hum when encountering the irritant of a faulty fluorescent light (e.g., Gunderlach 2007). Turning to the Miriam Webster Dictionary, sound is “the sensation perceived by the sense of hearing” (Miriam Webster 2019); an auditory impression created when radiant energy is carried along waves through a material medium (like air); a way to describe musical style. As an adjective, it is also “logically valid and having true premises” (Miriam Webster 2019), a way to communicate reliability, a sense of things being solid, stable and secure. As verb, to cause, make and convey; the act of pronouncing, of putting into words, sound resounds an impression, especially when heard. A last angle, this time in the Urban Dictionary (2019), defines sound as a state of existence, genuinely nice or cool. How we hear and what we distinguish depends on our own histories and experiences, which extends to how archives are experienced (Burton, 2006). Over time and experience, my - Kathryn’s - concern about being present in the recordings faded. A sign of growing familiarity and comfort with the recording process. Researchers’ presence and perspective is always part of the research process and the ideas being considered (Hawkins et al., 2016).

*[Recording 3: The quiet of the space inside]* The quiet of the Fondation Le Corbusier archival room can be striking when you enter. Sitting down to work, to begin combing through the documents, the room felt next to sound-less. Voices hushed when spoken, the clacks of shoes on concrete floors, chairs scrape and the sonar - one for the phone and the other for the entrance - of people moving around the building. Sound from the outside neighbourhood was amplified when the windows were open, but muted at other times when everything was closed. What I imagined working at an archive might be like – a hive of activity with a corresponding bustle of sounds – instead felt like being in an airtight container. As the document searches began, the rhythmic clicks of the mouse, fingers dancing on keyboards and pens singing out ideas found, the experiences captured in the archived material buzzed with stories to be told. A temporal in-between zone, living out the past while caught in the present. The way that sound is understood – in terms of volumes, tones, qualities, and affects – reveals much about the listener’s culturally situated understanding of such characteristics, a process that Kannenberg (2016) terms “listening as an exploration of experience” (7). With very small and repetitive gestures, the sounds of Le Corbusier’s building sites, the streets, the neighbourhoods and the people captured in his plans and proposals flooded through the screen. I tried my best to piece together the parts of the stories that were found.

No matter the time spent preparing and writing down folder numbers, going on short descriptions of what documents the folders held, there was a constant sense of feeling lost. Over the course of research at the Le Corbusier archives, lost became a way of moving through the “too many” documents (Kaplan, 1990, 103) and being open to the material unfolding in unforeseen ways. In hindsight, ‘lost’ became the ground upon which this archival method was situated. It could be



rather uncomfortable and stressful at times, at mid-process there was not yet a clear sense of how everything fit together. Beginning from a place of feeling lost, I looked everywhere: I skim read documents, jumped across and moved between, experimenting with where to go. While moving through the material in each folder held a kind of methodic determination to find out as much as possible about each page, it also fell away, curiosity leading to another folder and beginning the methodic determination again. It was in these jumps and changes that surprising and intriguing documents were found, for the most part, unplanned and unknown from the pre-stage of research.

The more that Kathryn searched, combing and listening through material, a sense of the kind of details being documented started to emerge. This included: construction order forms, sketches, drawings and designs; edits of articles for publication and presentations; secretarial responses to requests for Le Corbusier's attendance to conferences, events and consultations; personal and private correspondence. Paper, now scanned, yellowed with age and weathered with stains of experience. The various handwriting styles and the tones of typewritten responses were as engrossing as the information they contained. Newspaper clippings, critiques, and accolades; glimmers of Le Corbusier's personal life filtering into the professional; notes on aspirations, feelings, and expectations for a more efficient modern life. The archival imagination is rich with the weight of time, the texture of silence, and the anticipation of discovery. Time pauses with the delve into a new document. The rhythmic click-click-click of the computer mouse soundtrack ties together this experience of reading about Le Corbusier while sitting in the reading room of a building he designed. In these comments, we are guided by the work of Stoler (2002) who has called on us to treat the 'archives-as-subject', capable of producing knowledge (rather than

simply acting as repository), and the work of Cram (2016) who argues that attention to the materiality of archival documents and archival spaces is as relevant as the so-termed ‘information’ collected from them.

[**Recording 4:** Liminal boundaries] The process also reveals the subjective nature of research, with the connections found and information gleaned shifting depending on the positionality of the person doing the work. What we chose to discard and that which we followed, both as individual researchers and collectively in the writing up of findings, is a reflection of what we find curious, interesting, and enticing. This process revealed what tended to stick in memory (Hawkins et al., 2016). Inside the archive and afterwards, outside moments are brought into the space of the archive: experiences, information, ideas, relationships, energies, and affects.

Archive-as-process, as epistemological experiment (Stoler 2002), becomes released from the dead weight of absolute truth, and is instead nudged towards shared expressions. For example, those practiced through collective biography (Hawkins et al., 2016). The hope is that sharing creates an openness to connecting, and that the stories being told remain plural, un-hierarchically so. While the availability of documents (of material more generally) does not guarantee that a story will be gleaned from the archives, the experience of the person searching creates the opportunity to tell other stories. Such stories that are present but not necessarily materially represented in the documents. The presence of people to hear such stories is deeply important because stories live on through listeners.

Listening in the Le Corbusier archives also emerged from another set of interactions. The Fondation Le Corbusier offers tours of their site, inserting an auditory richness into the buildings.

These tours are filled with second-hand stories: of Le Corbusier and La Roche's relationship; the team of Le Corbusier, Pierre Jeanneret, and Charlotte Perriand who together, for a time, were 'Le Corbusier'; the dynamics between the two Maisons when privately owned; the formation of the foundation. Kathryn joined two tours. The first was personalized, as she was the only person to participate that day. During this tour, the guide switched between French and English, and shared very personal and intimate details about the Le Corbusier story. The animated conversation flowed around questions, which the guide engaged openly. The second tour was delivered to a group of teachers and was much more formal. Delivered in French, the tour moved its way from the ground floor, through the library, and up towards the rooftop terrace. In a relatively quiet and calm speaking tone, the guide delivered a presentation of Le Corbusier's architectural theories interwoven with facts about his life and French society at the time.

While sitting at the desk in the reading room, looking through the window to Maison la Roche, Kathryn watched other tours filter into the archive, and heard pieces of the textured stories that guides told. Connected by a shared thread of information, the tenor of the story became familiar, while differences in style and tone created a richness of interpretations. These stories sat alongside the document search, becoming part of the ideas and words on the page, and continued forward the many stories already and always existing in the archive. Meshed with the scrapes of chairs and the hum of the printer, the tales inside wove together with sounds of the city outside.

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**List of recordings:**

Recording 1: The rhythm of academic gatherings

Recording 2: Early arrivals = the chance to sit outside

Recording 3: The quiet of the space inside

Recording 4: Liminal boundaries

**Correspondence information for authors:**

Kathryn Allyn is the Coordinator and Instructor of the Bethune College Writing Centre at York University, and is PhD ABD in Gender, Feminist and Women's Studies from York University, Canada, email: [travis10@yorku.ca](mailto:travis10@yorku.ca) . Process and methodologies were integral components of her scholarly studies, and she has continued to grow her process artistically to express ideas about the world around her.

Roza Tchoukaleyska is Assistant Professor at the School of Science and the Environment, Grenfell Campus, Memorial University of Newfoundland in Corner Brook, Canada, email: [rozat@grenfell.mun.ca](mailto:rozat@grenfell.mun.ca) . Her research examines the cultural texture of communities and draws on public space as an analytic lens to ask questions about how plazas, sidewalks, and parks are used, and how these uses intersect with broader debates about governance, the expression of diverse identities, and the right to participate in civic life.