

(under)scoring the commons: Troubling the acoustics of urban renewal

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ABSTRACT

Since the 1990s, working-class regions in Australia's major cities have undergone profound urban and socio-economic development in the form of gentrifying processes that have fostered negative social implications such as housing scarcity, rising living costs, and the displacement of lower-income residents. Informed by broader artistic, activist, and research practices concerned with the sonics of gentrification, '(under)scoring the commons' is a creative research project I established in 2020 that aims to poetically and aurally understand how the changing soundscapes of urban environments, associated with working-class histories and memories, can index shifting social attitudes, perspectives and socialities. UTC's main output comprises a sonic counter-archive informed by a socially-engaged compositional approach predicated on conversation and collaboration with community-ensembles and residents – alongside adequately contextualised field-recordings. With a focus on a recent iteration entitled UTC:2250 (concerned with Gosford, a low-socioeconomic area in NSW) this paper will discuss the ethical implications and creative outcomes of 'working' with sound in a socially-situated way - framed by a critical reading of acoustic ecology.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the conceptual space irrupted by Cage's provocation 4' 33," which relocated the ambience of everyday soundscapes into the compositional hall, reconfiguring the "boundaries between 'music' and 'life'" [1, p.1] and the subsequent performative social agitations famously produced in the wake of post-Fluxus sonic practice, such practices have laid the foundation for the *social-activist* tendency within soundscape oriented, sound-art and composition. This conceptual orientation, reflected in the work of artists such as Heidi Fast, Raven Chacon, Julian Day, Janet Cardiff among others, has observably intensified in recent years, spurred on by a growing interdisciplinarity body of knowledge around sound, human geography, spatial politics and urban studies, and a broader desire to reimagine the politics of the urban soundscape as a central point of departure in diffuse ways, with respect to what Dorreen Massey [2] once described as the contested and constellatory manifold gendered, class and racialized construction of space. [2, p.1-3]. And whilst such activist-oriented projects might not always stringently

align with the criteria of what both Truax and Westerkamp classify as *soundscape* composition ("tape pieces that are created with recorded environment sound") [3, p.51], the praxis and discourse offered by such experimentations has undoubtedly expanded our thinking regarding the possibilities of composing with soundscapes into unexplored domains. As Westerkamp [3] reminds us, it was composers and artists who initially promoted a cognizance of the soundscape [3, p.52].

Informed by this rich lineage, *(under)scoring the commons* embarks on methods of archiving and re-broadcasting the sounds and practices of marginalized and precarious publics that populate low-income regions. Works by the Ultra Red group (founded by AIDS activists in 1994), for instance, provided significant aesthetic orientation for this project – particularly that of *Debt* [4] (wherein the collective worked for a year with the Dublin Ireland council housing estate of Ballymun to "compare and contrast experiences with regeneration of social housing", resulting in the creation of a CD compilation of "audio, textual and visual materials.") [4], and *Second Nature* (concerned with resistantly re-hearing and amplifying the historically criminalized sex lives of queer men) [5]. Ultra Red are unique in the sound-art world due to the ways in which they employ novel compositional methods via activist strategies to draw attention to marginalized individuals and groups via quasi-Situationist occupations of space.

When examining urban activist, acoustic activations, and considering the applicability of recurrent concepts such the 'soundscape' within post-ecological literature and discourse that saturates the sonic arts, one encounters conceptual and epistemic dissonance, particularly when attempting to articulate the practices of projects that specifically explore the sonic practices of urban residents. This is due to the fact that at the heart of Schaefer's (and his luminaries) acoustic-ecological taxonomy there belies an energetic dialectical conflict, between the preservation and "anti-urban" leanings [6, p.10] of 'soundscape' discourse – problematized by the ways in which Schaefer's ethical address for urban acoustic design risks re-performing the very 'development' discourses associated with gentrification. Ultimately, as Ouzounian summarizes: acoustic ecological studies, more broadly, can often neglect attending to how "diverse social and cultural groups [...] experience sound and noise very differently" [6, p.8-9]. In this capacity, the emergent sonic practices of those who live within cities – particularly working-class groups – are ultimately rendered mute within the world depicted within Schaefer's ecology. By exam-

ining this dissonance, the following section will unpack the continued conceptual relevance of the ‘soundscape’ (as part of a broader acoustic ecology) for the *(under)scoring the commons* project, by briefly examining the concept of the ‘acoustic community’, and in-turn vitalizing it within a renewed conceptual relevance for the contemporary, ethnographically-inclined composer enthralled by the nebulous hubbub of the urban.

1. ACOUSTIC COMMUNITIES

1.1 The Urban Din

The popularization of the aforementioned soundscape concept can be traced to the publishing of Schaefer’s seminal text *Tuning of the World* [7] which had a profound impact on the subsequent development of both the acoustic ecology and sound studies fields, and the scholarship of myriad researchers, archivist and artists – mostly, if not all, united by a central concern with preserving, archiving, and spreading awareness about the vulnerable and diminishing natural sonic environments of the world. Notably, Schaefer commences his thesis by anchoring the concept of the soundscape within a critique of urban modern industrialization and urbanism – factors that have contributed to the development of a polluted “lo-fi” urban soundscape, which is the antithesis of the “hi-fi” ‘aurally-niched’ natural environmental, due to an oversaturation of sounds that generate an unpleasant noise-to-signal ratio. Schaefer presents the case for this on the grounds that, within a ‘lo-fi’ listening environment, it is difficult to discern individuated, sound sources through the cacophonous noise [7, p.43-4] produced by industrial manufacturing, engines, traffic etc. among other factors [7, p.71-6], dominating all other sounds in the form of a so-called “acoustic imperialism.” [7, p.77]. To rectify this issue, Schaefer passionately advocates for novel approaches such as *ear-cleansing* pedagogy, whilst also emphasizing the benefits of acute spatial and acoustic redesign strategies to restore the original functions and fidelities of the ‘correct’ hi-fi soundscape.

Ultimately, through these civic reforms, Schaefer encourages individuals to become more aesthetically and socially cognizant of ecologically significant and beneficial sounds and in turn, skeptical of those which ought to be done away with, as to inhibit the ever-growing “sewer” of the lo-fi [7, p.237], towards actualizing specialized “soniferous garden” spaces that allow “nature to speak for itself” [7, p.246-7].

While the idealism of Schaefer and his contemporaries’ proposal to reconsider the impact of urban noise on environmental grounds elicits tacit sympathies, Schaefer’s acoustic ecology has attracted scrutiny since the initial publication of *Tuning of the World*, for its tendency towards polemical myopia and thin historical basis. For example, sound studies scholar, Johnathan Sterne characterizes Schaefer’s theory as betraying a “distinctly authoritarian preference for the voice of one over the noise of the many,” coupled with a “nostalgic elitism” of a pristine world before [8, p.217]. Comparatively, one of the most pertinent strains of critique questions Schaefer’s theoretical neglect of those populations who actu-

ally comprise, activate and compose the urban soundscape. For instance, within *Tuning of the World* Schaefer’s discussions pertaining to the nineteenth-century urban working-classes (factory workers, hawkers etc.) reveals significant historical and conceptual gaps – depicting a diffuse, complex proletariat population as a monolithic block; one that is alienated, ‘aurally’ damaged, and overdetermined by subjugating sonic histories wrought by state and private power; industrialisation; and machinic-noise. Indeed, a depiction of this nature positions this social stratum between a rock and a hard place, whose fragmented cultural musical activities (labour songs, street music etc.) have been displaced by all-consuming acoustic imperialism, muffled by the lo-fidelity soundscape – in tandem with being over-corrected by noise-regulation legislation designed to curb the din of mass culture [7, p.63-7, 72-7]. In other words, narratives of this variety tend to be reductive, particularly when considering Schaefer’s over-generalised repudiation of the aesthetic tendencies of the resultant lo-fidelity society that “consumes itself into cacophony” because it “does not comprehend the principles of decorum and balance in soundmaking” [7, p.237]. As Kelman perceptively explains, Schaefer’s historical summary of urban soundscapes “offers very little room for agency for those people who populate the “lo-fi soundscape,” a position “so totalizing, so deterministic, that it provides little hope for the ears of humanity against the din of his historiography” [9, p.217]. Concurrently, Sophie Arquette argues that by over-emphasizing the need for cleansing and regulating urban sonic pollutants, Schaefer neglects “whether sound can aid our understanding of social relationships between communities” [10, p.167]. Taking this into account, one suspects that Schaefer’s acoustic ecology is redolent of a Adornian-inflected top-down structuralist analysis that neglects to countenance the implicit, or explicit agencies possessed by marginalized cultural actors.

1.2 Acoustic Commons

Considering Arquette’s reservations [10], what then are the implications for composers and artists interested in the emergent and ongoing sonic practices who live in and amongst the hubbub? And how are we to approach that which Barry Truax terms “soundscape composition” as an electroacoustic and acousmatic practice that emerged out of the WSP, that foregrounds minimally altered ‘found’ soundscapes [11, p.105], if such an idiom is not cognizant of said urban communities? Is it worth devising a new taxonomy of spatial sonic practice? These are crucial questions, especially when we consider that throughout modernity, precarious, poor and working populations (and their localized soundscapes) within cities have been discursively constructed as part of the ‘social problem’, often rendered, in terms which Baumann posits as “collateral damage” [12] and thus displaced culturally, ontologically, and spiritually within so-called ‘advancements’ wrought by civic reform, infrastructural development, and urban design.

Yet, in approaching these questions we ought not be so quick to throw Schaefer’s entire acoustic ecology out with the proverbial water ourselves, for *Tuning of the World* offers another

concept that has the potential to mediate the ethical concerns attendant to the soundscape concept, i.e. that of the “acoustic community:” a social phenomenon explained by Truax as “a soundscape in which acoustic information plays a pervasive role in the lives of the inhabitants” [13, p.58].

The ‘acoustic community’ as a historically mediated predominantly *rural* phenomenon was once, socially, intrinsically bound by relations of the sonic, before allegedly being displaced by the atomized sprawl of the “spatial community” of urbanism and its attendant ‘noise abatement by-laws,’ and the exponential rise of globalized and delineated communication modes and media interfaces, etc. When substantiating the discussion of this cultural phenomenon, Schaefer provides examples of communities whose cultural rituals and activities have been traditionally oriented around the symbolic and temporal significance of specific geographic sonic signifiers, such as the placement of church bells at a town centre, whose sounds structure the ritual temporalities of daily life and shape the social boundaries of the town – or, say, the phenomenon of rural “sound farms” wherein houses were strategically positioned in close enough proximity so that workers could effectively communicate vital information by shouting to one another [7, p. 215-6]. Considering these examples, Truax’s conception of the acoustic community is likewise helpful; for as the author explains, acoustic communities depend on special “sound signals” enshrined over time as “sound marks” (examples include voices; the sounds of “work and play”; atmosphere sounds etc.) [13, p.58-9]. Through an enculturation process, particular signals garner semiotic significance as a result of their accumulative “acoustic richness and functionality” [13, p.61].

While both Schaefer and Truax’s descriptions of acoustic communities are limited by the paradigmatic examples provided by the authors (i.e., in terms of the emphasis they place on the soundscapes of pre-industrial, or rural village communities), nonetheless there is much scope to attend to this concept by exploring its creative application in contemporary soundscape projects. For instance, Jacqueline Waldock’s research and artistic project into a low socioeconomic Liverpool group offers one such example of an extended conception of an acoustic community. *Welsh Streets* focuses on a community who were displaced by a “compulsory purchase order [...] of an urban renewal scheme.” Through a comprehensive research process, *Welsh Streets* reveals how notions of urban noise can differ with respect to how the social attitudes within a community may index differing conceptions of noise than that of the “aesthetically moralistic” norms advocated by the broader public, and “city officials” regarding what constitutes a positive or negative home [14, p.160-1].¹ As the project survey ascertained, some community members expressed a comfort in the familiar *noisiness* of being able to “hear through the walls” to their neighbour’s vernacular sounds [14, p.151-62].² As one project re-

spondent testified: “I miss people calling their cats in, or shouting at each other or just talking to each other” [14, p.160].³

In this capacity, *Welsh Streets* shows how the “politics of noise can be used to empower or disempower communities” in tandem with the civic power dynamics perpetuated by classed social structures [6, p.10]. This insight is significant in that it reconfigures the priorities of soundscape discourse beyond an ecologically-reductive, overarching conceptual apparatus, towards a framework wherein we can learn from the manifold ways in which those who populate a given space reinterpret and produce the actual aesthetic parameters of a given soundscape – suggestive of a socially reflexive urban ontology of sound and noise. As Truax – following Bateson – expounds: whilst noise can be confronting, as “unpatterned” data, once information is coded within coherent structures, it provides a “source of new information that is open-ended and offers the promise of all that we may possibly experience” [13, p.88],⁴ an observation aligning with Schaefer’s recount of how noise-regulation legislation is contingent upon various “cultural differences” and perceptions of sound [7, p. 197].

Waldock’s project poses that if an acoustic community is bound by a ‘territory’ of symbolically significant sound(s), such a concept can extend to countenance minor, everyday ‘underheard’ sonic practices that occur outside of the dominant cultural paradigm of a given urban terrain, or normative “acoustic horizon,”⁵ urging us to contemplate a broader theoretical aperture that reframes the ‘unintelligible’ aesthetics and politics of noise via an interlocutory process that indexes patterned cultural significances of acoustic practice in given or even emergent situations. In other words, the precarious ambience of the spaces explored in *Welsh Streets* reveal the noise-structures that bind people together in deep meaningful cacophonies – a notion that resonates with what Arkette terms an “acoustic enclave,” with respect to how agents use sonic strategies as a means to foster privacy, “retreat” or comfort within soundscapes [10, p.174] or what Ola Stockfeld terms “sub-territories” of sound, such as the popular music played in supermarkets that is marketed and curated specifically for youthful ears [15].

Departing from these concepts, the following section will explore the applicability of the soundscape concept to (*un-der*)scoring the commons, regarding what I tentatively conceive of as an “extended transcription” as a means to compose through the received epistemic biases of acoustic ecological delimited soundscaping.

2. UNDERSCORING THE COMMONS

2.1 Praxis

Underscoring the commons is project that evolved out of ethnographic and compositional methods devised in two earlier projects: *cont. score* [16]; and *Danger/Dancer* [17]. Conceptually, UTC is concerned questions of urban equity with respect to how people (re)make place through socio-sonic practice in periods of accelerated income inequality and gentrification, the former displacing a “lower-income population by a higher-

^{1,2,3} quoted [6, p.10].

⁴ Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an ecology of mind* (New York: Ballantine, 1972), no page number given.

⁵ According to the author, this is indicated by “the farthest distance from which sound may be heard.” [13, p. 23].

income one” on account of “uppricing” “redevelopment” or “social upgrading i.e. ‘upscaling’” [18]. Gentrification entails not merely cultural and economic processes, but an acoustic one in that it “introduces a multitude of sounds” and fosters “ongoing contestations over urban cultural landscapes” [19] furthering urban sound imperialism through construction and traffic noises, and the attendant sounds of the introduction of new socialities, and inverse effects of such processes, such as the potential socio-sonic silencing of proximal communities residing within newly developed gentrified zones, often designed for middle-class visual aesthetics and acoustic sensibilities.

Fieldwork for the first iteration of UTC occurred in 2022 Gosford on the NSW Central Coast (a settlement on the unceded lands of the Darkinyung people) – a region characterized by “severe disadvantage” indicative of “significant coastal concentrations of low income private housing,” [20] and marked by *territorial stigmatization*, a phenomenon defined by Loïc Wacquant denoting how a negative social identity can be imposed on neighborhood populations, resulting in social ostracization,⁶ and a pervasive perception of the Central Coast as a culturally vapid, impoverished area. The extent to which gentrification has effected and negatively shaped the region of Gosford is under-researched, yet it is clear such a process is taking place, considering the mass private infrastructural developments that are being undertaken in the city by companies who currently developing large apartment complexes (such as the Lederer Group’s *Gosford Alive* \$345M five-tower development in the city center) [22]; and the introduction of gentrification markers such as art galleries and hipster cafes – alongside the rising costs living in the area.

When exploring what a changing city might sound like, I collaborated with working-class individuals and community members involved with ensembles and social groups including the Gosford City Brass Band, whose group of amateur musicians were forced to relocate their concert hall formerly located on the site of the Central Coast Stadium; Ken, a retired, social-housing resident who couldn’t afford private rent and who endearingly played an old, out-of-tune guitar; The Troubadour Folk Club, comprised of retirees, and workers; a group of community volunteers who worked in social and community services; and interviews with several youth in the area. During this process, I discovered that the city of Gosford is comprised of myriad smaller, acoustic communities which each determine their own micro-territories of sound marks, wherein alternative forms of relation and sociality are sedimented in and beyond the everyday via various approaches to sound making.

For a period of 12-months in 2022, my ethnographic process entailed undertaking archival and contextual research about the specific groups; conducting interviews at homes and rehearsal spaces; learning about the participants’ histories, musical interests, and sonic preferences; and developing a sense of reciprocal trust with the groups and individuals. After this stage of the project, I then conducted audio and video field-recordings of the participants and their environments (Ken’s social-housing block; the Brass band rehearsal room; multiple vernacular sounds in

Gosford CBD; shopping centres, as well as natural mangroves, and wetlands). The recordings of the musicians mostly comprised the collaborators performing musical material that they would usually rehearse anyway. During the compositional stage, I focused on poetic associations and meanings arising from juxtaposing video and audio recordings in an extended score format – somewhat evocative of the audio-led documentaries of Phillip Niblock – in that I arranged the blocks of material according to a type of emergent narrative to create a sense of sounds blending and bleeding into one another, thus contributing to a depiction of a virtualized soundscape of a city in flux, where public space is diminishing, indicative of communities bound and shaped by broader, disproportionate flows of capital, finance, geography and architecture. The final outcome of this method resulted in the development of a sonic-anarchive (underscoringthecommons.com), digitally available in perpetuity online.

2.2 Extended Transcriptions

During the fieldwork phase a type of social indeterminacy arose, inevitably impacting the final creative outcome – not merely due to arranging compositional material in aurally compelling ways; but as a result of learning and reflecting on conversations with collaborators, working with the timelines/schedules and acute demands of participants’ personal and health needs. This was heightened by including ongoing creative insights generated by revisiting materials collected throughout the process (such as fieldnotes, photographs and preliminary recordings) and feedback offered by collaborators during the project’s exhibition within the local regional gallery as a co-composition made with the community for the community. This method has a strong affinity with what Koutsomichalis terms a “do-it-with-others” research-driven, context-dependent compositional procedure that lends itself to “explore the way humans (and non-humans) interact with one another within very concrete social contexts and production hybrids” – emphasizing “hybrid synergies, agency and affect” oriented “around, particular kinds of materials, technologies, methodologies and broader social hybrids” [23, p.12-13], challenging the prevalence of inherited “hylomorphic” (form imposed on matter) compositional strategies that pervade art-music compositional praxis. In attempting to signify, or (re)sound a complex socio-silent process regarding the lack of accurate cultural portrayals of working-class communities within dominant public narratives of Gosford, a context-dependent approach (via the incorporation of additional media, interviews) can restore a sense of representational agency to those who populate the soundscapes of a city, however fragmented or aesthetically ambiguous. A do-it-with others paradigm offers a way for the soundscape composer to move beyond “touristic” and “superficial” acoustic ecological field-recording activities that fail to engage “with the cultural, social and political undercurrents and subtleties of a place or a situation” [3, p. 55-56]. This is sometimes an unavoidable risk, exacerbated by the ‘semantically open’ nature of music; and the tendency of the institution of so-called soundscape composition to emphasise a quasi-scientific preoccupation with the ways in which field recordings can ‘replicate’ reality i.e. “an irrational reverence” for that of “recorded and reproduced sound” [24]. All

⁶ For a more in-depth examination of this term see [21].

of this can contribute to replicating that which Kim-Cohen refers to as a “sound-in-itself” contextually sterilized ontology that pervades the field of sound-art – inherited from Cage’s aesthetics [25, p.222].

The do-it-with-others approach can also mitigate the socially-weak theoretical orientation of Schaefer’s soundscape, which tends to privilege the acoustic over the social, encouraging us to countenance a deeper conception of the living realities of acoustic communities. As one participant remarked, “it’s as if we’re making an archive of a changing city.” There are always broader social demands at play when thinking about how cities are ‘sounded’ in terms of the broader social and economic conditions of a given soundscape – and thus it is up to us to decide the stories, or songs we amplify. Drever posits an ‘ethnographic’ approach to soundscapes modelled on Stephen Feld’s concept of acoustemology as a means to countenance “engaging in a collaborative process, facilitating [...] local inhabitants to speak for themselves in ‘an interplay of voices, of positioned utterances’” [24, p.25].

As ‘soundscape composers’ in the broadest sense, we can become more than documentarians under the spell of a positivist objectivism, striving to advocate for a ‘pristine listening environment,’ to instead consider, more wholistically, how we might expand our audition to better listen to those who (re)make, individuate, and generate meaning out of the hubbub of the urban soundscape, and their attendant cultural processes “to reorient the demarcation of the heard and the underheard, and the properly sounded” [26, p.159]. An extended transcription has the potential to foreground how communities employ sound in different ways to represent affects, experiences, and interests, be it through membership to a certain community music group; via improvised creative and ad hoc processes delimited by socioeconomic circumstances, or through a particular communicative relation to a given locality, virtually or actuality.

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