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ETHNOGRAPHIES OF SOUND

Tom Rice

It is only comparatively recently that it has become possible to write about ‘ethnographies of sound’. Historically, sound has generally been somewhat overlooked in ethnographic work. There is, however, a developing consciousness among ethnographic researchers of the importance of attending to sound and an increasing awareness that listening is integral to their work. In addition, there has been growing recognition of the value of ethnographic research in approaching the study of sound worlds, and researchers in this area are acknowledging the benefits of using sound recordings and compositions as well as or instead of written text in the presentation of ethnographic material. More and more, ethnographic work is being produced ‘in’ as well as ‘on’ or ‘about’ sound.

What is meant by ‘ethnographies of sound’? Few researchers use ‘ethnography of sound’ or ‘sound ethnography’ to describe their work. ‘Ethnography’ and ‘sound’ are both also difficult terms to define in their own right, let alone in conjunction. Perhaps we can say that ‘ethnographies of sound’ set out to describe and reflect upon the sound world of a particular group of people who may share a space or who are linked through a set of shared practices. Researchers often gain direct experience of the sound world under study as part of their research process, adopting a position of participant observer or listener in relation to it. ‘Ethnographies of sound’ point to ways in which social, cultural, environmental, technological and historical context guides the creation, reception and interpretation of sound in a particular setting. They show sensitivity to local sonic forms and their interplay with sociality.

Ultimately it is perhaps not especially productive to try to create a definition of ‘ethnographies of sound’ and to list works that appear to conform to the definition, so in this chapter I take a different approach. After giving a perspective on the intellectual conditions under which sound has emerged as a concern in ethnography within the discipline of anthropology, I give four examples of sound-focused ethnographic studies, including my own. I describe the kinds of activities in which the researchers in question have engaged and explain some of the perspectives they have generated. I try to illustrate how an ethnographic approach can be helpful and valuable as a means of engaging with sound. Finally, I consider ethnographies *in* sound, and argue that they represent an important development in ethnographic work.

Sound in ethnography, from background to foreground

In traditional anthropological ethnographies, sounds are frequently mentioned as details or are used in evoking the atmosphere of a fieldwork site (for a good example see Mead 1928: 14). But while sounds may be notable presences in the research setting, they rarely form a focus of the research itself. This lack of direct and careful attention to sound might be attributed to a visualist bias at the heart of the ethnographic enterprise. As Clifford writes, traditionally, ethnography has involved techniques of observation and participant observation that appear to emphasise the importance of 'looking at... or, somewhat closer, "reading" a given reality' (Clifford 1986: 11). At the same time, ethnographic outputs have tended to take the form of written texts (and, to a lesser extent, photographs and films) that demand primarily visual attention. In more recent years, however, some researchers have called for recognition that attending to sound is in fact an integral aspect of ethnographic research. For instance, Cohen and Rapport point out that:

Geertz's famous answer to the question, 'What does the anthropologist do? He writes', is a curiously thin description of what actually happens. Before they write, they do all those things which we gloss in the cliché of participant observation. Above all, they listen... (1995: 12).

Forsey, too, argues that 'listening is at least as significant as observation to ethnographers. Ethnography is arguably more aural than ocular, the ethnographer more participant listener than observer' (Forsey 2010: 561). He points to the centrality of the interview and 'engaged listening' in ethnographic research and asserts that '[m]uch of what passes for ethnography... is based upon what we hear rather than what we see' (Forsey 2010: 566). Gallagher and Prior write that 'listening is a routine part of ethnography and interviews' (2014: 268). On this basis it could be argued that virtually all ethnographies are 'ethnographies of sound' at some level.

The move to correct or revise the notion that ethnography is an inherently visualist enterprise is part of a wider move in contemporary Western academia towards engagement with the senses. In anthropology, what is now known as the 'sensory turn' developed in the 1980s and 1990s out of an earlier wave of anthropological interest in embodiment (Howes 1991a: 3–4; Pink 2009: 11). A fundamental premise of 'sensorial anthropology' is that sensory perception is a cultural as well as a physical act (Howes 1991b: 167). That is, the senses are not only mechanistic receptors of information but are also mediators of social value. The value accorded to types of sensory experience varies historically and cross-culturally. The emergence of the anthropology of the senses represents an effort within the discipline to galvanise study of the non-visual senses in particular. It also calls for greater reflexivity and creativity in the use of the senses in ethnographic representation. Ethnographic engagement with sound, and appreciation of its role in the research process, can be understood as part of the turn towards what Stoller (1997) calls a 'sensuous scholarship'.

Some examples of 'ethnographies of sound'

Sound may have been largely overlooked in classic anthropological ethnography, but in the related field of ethnomusicology, where fieldwork has often involved the researcher residing with a community for a lengthy period, documenting, analysing and participating in local musical practices, ethnographic work is arguably inherently sound-focused. Here, though, instrumental and/or vocal performances have tended to be of primary interest, and little attention has been given to the wider sonic space within which musical activity unfolds. There have,

however, been important exceptions. For instance, in his book *The Forest People* (a work of both anthropological and ethnomusicological interest) Turnbull (1961) describes the lives of the Mbuti pygmies of the Ituri rainforest. He is sensitive to what, following Schafer (1977), we might call the local 'soundscape' or 'acoustic ecology', and suggests that understanding the sonic environment is necessary in order to gain a full comprehension of the indigenous musical practices he observes. His focus is the *molimo*, a complex notion, simultaneously a musical instrument (somewhat like a trumpet), a set of songs, a festival and a healing ritual. Turnbull describes how *molimo* playing and singing takes place within and in response to a rainforest setting animated and enriched by the sonic presences of animals and insects. Turnbull is sensitive to these sounds and the particular aural sensibilities the pygmies bring to them. But if Turnbull's ethnography is an ethnography of sound he does not explicitly describe it as such. He is not directly concerned with the intellectual implications of producing ethnography with a sonic focus and does not, for instance, explicitly discuss the centrality of listening to his methodology. *The Forest People* was, however, a strong influence on the anthropologist and ethnomusicologist Steven Feld, who was perhaps the first to consciously propose and deliberately construct what might be regarded as an academic ethnography of sound.

Feld's work on the Kaluli, a small group living in the densely rainforested area of Bosavi, Papua New Guinea, is seminal and has influenced many researchers who have subsequently produced works that might be regarded as 'ethnographies of sound' (Feld [1982] 1990). I touch on Feld's work below and explain some of his influence on my own research. I also use two examples, one from urban studies and another from social geography, to illustrate that ethnographic work on sound has been carried out in disciplines beyond anthropology. Indeed, ethnographic approaches to sound and auditory culture have been used in a wide variety of fields, including radio, radio art and sound art, media and communication studies, science and technology studies, sociology, musicology and social psychology.

An ethnography of rainforest sound

Feld first visited the Kaluli in 1976, when he began to conduct ethnographic fieldwork in the traditional anthropological mode, living for a year in one of their villages and learning their language. He returned to work with the Kaluli on several occasions up until 2000, studying their sophisticated understanding and appreciation of their sound-rich rainforest environment. Feld found that listening and sonic knowledge were of great value to the Kaluli in practical tasks such as navigation and hunting because vision was of limited use as a distance sense in the rainforest. At the same time, forest sounds had been woven in complex ways into Kaluli traditions of cosmology, poetry and song.

Willis suggests that ethnography involves seven methods of analysis: participant observation, observation, 'just being around', group discussions, recorded discussions, informal interviews and use of existing sources (1974: 12–14). Feld appears to have used all of these techniques in his efforts to develop an understanding of the significance of sound in Kaluli life. But it is particularly noticeable that an ethnographic approach gave Feld a means of 'being with people in sound' and created opportunities for sounds to act as elicitation devices (Feld and Brenneis 2004: 465). For instance, he describes an occasion when he was sitting with an interlocutor outside a hut, listening to the sounds of birds in the surrounding rainforest. Feld was keen to learn from the man which bird was producing the calls that could be heard. His interlocutor's insistence that the sounds were not simply the calls of birds but 'voices in the forest' was part of Feld's realisation of the importance of local ethno-ornithology in Kaluli systems of sonic interpretation (Feld [1982] 1990: 45).

Another interesting feature of Feld's methodology is that he positions himself as an apprentice in learning to hear like a Kaluli. For instance, he describes how, when making recordings of bird

sounds in the forest, children helped him to direct his microphone to the right point in the forest canopy, allowing him to develop his appreciation not only of their skill at tracking sonic sources but also their particular grasp of the spatiality of rainforest sound (Feld 2015: 17–18). He describes, too, how he would play multiple tracks of his forest soundscape recordings to his research participants, allowing them to twiddle the knobs of the cassette player, creating ‘an ethnoaesthetic negotiation’ through which he was able to begin to understand how the Kaluli hear ‘the dimensionality of forest sound, how they would balance a mix of birds, water, cicadas, voices and so forth’ (Feld & Brenneis 2004: 467).

An ethnographic approach, then, allowed Feld to recognise the importance of sound ‘to making sense, to knowing, to experiential truth’ in Kaluli lifeworlds and he describes his work as ‘an ethnographic study of sound as a cultural system’ among the Kaluli (Feld 1996: 97, [1982] 1990: 3). In one of his analyses, Feld combines the terms ‘acoustic’ and ‘epistemology’ to produce the neologism ‘acoustemology’, which he uses to describe the set of hearing, listening and sounding practices that he observed to have become consolidated as Kaluli culture (1996: 97). In particular, Feld asserts the importance of a sonic epistemology of emplacement in understanding the way in which the Kaluli relate to their environment, challenging an intellectual tradition that assumes vision to be the primary sensory mode in which people across cultures engage with place and landscape.

An ethnography of hospital sound

Feld’s work has been a strong influence on my own research on sound in the hospital context. This unfolded through two projects, one conducted at the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary in Scotland and the other at the Cardiothoracic Unit of St Thomas’s Hospital in London. Having established that, like rainforests, hospital wards could be spaces of real sonic intensity, I was interested to see if sonic epistemologies equivalent to those Feld had identified in the non-Western, deep rural and technologically comparatively unsophisticated setting of Bosavi could be uncovered in the Western, urban and technologically intensive environment of a modern hospital.

I first became interested in hospital sound in 1999 whilst volunteering at *Red Dot Radio*, the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary’s hospital radio station. My job at the station was to visit patients on the wards in order to collect song and music requests. Talking to patients it became apparent that one of the reasons they listened to the hospital radio was to escape temporarily from the sounds of the wards. This was before the time of personal MP3 players and smartphones. Privatised listening and the use of mediated sound to manage an external sonic environment was not ubiquitous and many of the patients I spoke to were elderly and did not use the tape-based personal stereos which were available. Patients described how the ward soundscape was characterised by the bodily sounds of other sick patients, by the talk and movement of nurses as they administered care, and by tones of medical technologies. Ward sounds disrupted patients’ sleep and woke them early, creating annoyance and agitation.

I lived within a few miles of my fieldwork site and visited the wards between 6 and 10 pm every day for three months. This sustained contact allowed me to build relationships with long-term patients over several weeks. Pink suggests that sensory ethnographers should ‘seek routes through which to develop experienced-based, empathetic understandings of what others might be experiencing and knowing’ (Pink 2009: 65). I found that immersion in the ward environment did enable me to acquire an empathetic understanding of patient experiences of hospital sounds. Like Feld, through ‘being with people in sound’ and practising situated listening I was able to have in-depth conversations with patients about the soundscape. It became apparent that ward sound was important to patients’ lives in other ways beyond its perception as ‘noise’.

Sounds could carry valuable information, indicating that meals were about to be served or that medicine would soon be dispensed. Sounds could also have a powerful bearing on patients' wider experiences of illness and hospitalisation. For instance, several people described how sounds such as the footsteps of nurses or the tones produced by monitoring machines reminded them of their being under continual surveillance in hospital and served to compound feelings of disempowerment and medical objectification that they already associated with hospitalisation. Sounds were closely bound up in patients' constitution of themselves as 'patient selves' (Rice 2003: 4, 2013: 35).

Situated listening also allowed me to appreciate that patients held just one set of sonic perspectives on hospital life. Nurses, too, used listening on the wards both to monitor the patients in their care and to make decisions about where and how to direct their attention. At the same time, doctors whom I observed using stethoscopes on the cardiology wards of Royal Infirmary were clearly directing their sense of hearing towards discovering and identifying anatomical and physiological changes in patients' bodies. This realisation of the co-existence of multiple layers of sonic knowledge and experience in the hospital setting led to the second ethnographic project at the Cardiothoracic Unit at St Thomas' Hospital in London in 2004. Over the course of a year I conducted participant observation in the hospital. I was given access to the wards to interview patients and nurses and was also allowed to sit in on doctors' consultations and accompany them on ward rounds. In addition, I was able to attend tuition sessions attended by medical students, and focused in particular on the classes in which the students were taught to listen to patients' bodies using the stethoscope. Through close ethnographic attention I was able to appreciate the variety of ways in which auditory capacities acquire direction and focus, and sounds become endowed with particular meanings and associations within the cultural environment that the hospital represents.

As had been the case in my initial study, situated listening was crucial to extending my appreciation of patient engagement with hospital sound. It was also important for grasping the ways in which nursing staff were responsive to ward sounds: how a degree of noise could be conceived of as an indicator of activity and sociability, but that above a certain threshold it became a sign of disorder and loss of control. Like Feld's work with the Kaluli, my participation in classes where students learned to use the stethoscope constituted an apprenticeship in listening, though in this case in a formal educational setting. An 'ears on' approach was essential to enabling me to understand how auditory knowledge was applied, reproduced and transmitted in the medical setting, and allowed me to grasp thoroughly the embodied nature of important medical skills (Lachmund 1999: 440). I could appreciate firsthand the challenges that teaching doctors faced when attempting to communicate sensory knowledge and was able to witness, for instance, the difficulties involved in establishing consensus on the character and significance of sounds as diagnostic signs. This ethnographic perspective gave me insight into how sensory minutiae could both underpin and undermine the production of medical knowledge.

An ethnography of slum settlement sound

Tripta Chandola is an urban researcher based in Delhi. She has conducted ethnographic research in a settlement in the south of the city known locally as the 'slums of Govindpuri', examining the soundscape of the area and the listening practices of its residents. Also influenced by Feld, Chandola explores the 'ways in which sound is central to making sense' within an economically deprived and socially marginalized community in a major metropolis (Feld 1996: 97). Chandola explains how the particular architecture and construction of the slum, as well as its extreme population density, create an acoustically intense environment. The scarcity of certain resources is also audible. Water, for instance, is somewhat sporadically piped into the slum and the thud of

both full and empty jerry cans is an almost constant accompaniment as residents move through the lanes to and from sites where the collection of water is possible (Chandola 2013: 7).

Chandola's ethnographic approach allows her to appreciate the local politics of sound in Govindpuri and the ways that sound often articulates social difference (for instance, along the lines of gender, caste and religion) in non-visible ways. She describes, for instance, how the expectation for women to be quiet and subdued in relation to men is performed and lived out in daily social interactions, but also witnesses loud verbal disputes and confrontations between women that often erupt and reverberate through the lanes of the slum during the day when many men are away at work. She explains how accents and musical styles associated with different areas of India index the tendency for communities of migrants from the same regions to occupy particular lanes of the settlement, and how particular caste groups can also be sonically identified through aspects of habitus such as accent, speech volume and style of expression. Religious tensions are also discernible in the soundscape. The diffusion of the Islamic call to prayer over the settlement has triggered complaints from some Hindu residents, while members of the Muslim community sometimes complain at what they see as the disrespectful noisiness of some of their Hindu neighbours.

Importantly, Chandola does not consider the settlement residents' understanding of their sonic environment to represent a particular skill or body of knowledge as is the case in Feld's work on the Kaluli and my own on the listening practices of hospital doctors, nurses and patients. She also does not see her fieldwork as an apprenticeship in learning to listen as her informants do. Chandola argues that as a middle-class outsider she cannot claim to truthfully inhabit the slum dwellers' sonic perspective. Instead she seeks to cultivate an understanding of how her informants' 'listensings' (the ways in which they listen, the things they are obliged to listen to, and the interpretations they bring to what they hear) are expressive of their low status and relative powerlessness both in relation to their middle-class neighbours and within wider Indian political discourse (Chandola 2012: 393–397, 2013: 4).

A long-term resident of Dehli herself, at the time of writing Chandola lives just a few miles from the slum settlement. Her extensive local knowledge has allowed her to gain an understanding of how the politics of sound in Govindpuri fits into wider political currents in the city. The slum residents are frequently described as being 'noisy' by their middle-class neighbours (Chandola 2012: 399). This description, Chandola argues, constitutes part of a broader effort on the part of middle-class residents to emphasize the physical, social and moral degeneracy of slum dwellers and to legitimise efforts to have them relocated. The framing of the slums dwellers as 'a problem' can in turn be linked both to wider government efforts to empower the middle classes and to collaborative efforts between the government and urban planners to remove slums in order to bring about the rapid development of Delhi into a 'world-class, clean, and green city' (Chandola 2014: 213). Chandola's ethnography of sound, then, allows her to show how the lived sonic realities of Govindpuri residents are enmeshed within wider social and political developments.

An ethnography of primary school sound

Michael Gallagher is a social geographer. One of his projects involved his undertaking ethnographic fieldwork in a suburban primary school in Scotland. While he initially intended to study how space was produced by teachers and pupils in the school, he describes being 'struck by the importance attached to quietness within the school culture' during his fieldwork period, so that sound became a focus of his research (Gallagher 2011: 51). Gallagher spent all of his research time working with just one class in order to develop a rapport with participants and to produce a detailed and in-depth account of the everyday dynamics of classroom life.

Gallagher does not appear to direct questions to the children and teachers with whom he is working or invite them to articulate or reflect on the ways in which sound becomes significant in the classroom. At the same time, although he was evidently a participant in some classroom activities, he adopts the position of a somewhat detached listener/observer. The fact that he produces rich ethnographic data on the sonic culture of the classroom independently of interview techniques is interesting because it demonstrates that sensory practice often occurs independently of verbalisation and below the level of conscious attention, but is nonetheless discernible to the fieldworker through its performance or enactment.

Taking a Foucaultian perspective, Gallagher explores how sound is used both as a subject and object of control in the primary school. He remarks that teachers seek to regulate noise levels by looking and listening out for children who are making noise, but he also points to the use of, for instance, spoken warnings and bells as signals for children to be quiet. He details occasions when surveillance is ineffective or incomplete and children get away with making noise. At other times they become participants in their own subjection, monitoring both their own noise and that of others in the classroom. Gallagher shows that 'the exercise of power through discipline and surveillance, whilst commonly thought of as taking place primarily through vision, may also rely heavily on sound and hearing' (Gallagher 2011: 47). He proposes 'panauralism' as a development of 'panopticism', illustrating how ethnographic work on sound can lead to an acoustic interrogation of key concepts within social theory, not necessarily discrediting them but augmenting their possibilities and potentials by considering them in what one might call a sonic light (Gallagher 2010: 268).

Ethnography 'in' sound

The vast majority of outputs produced by ethnographers including those mentioned above are 'texted endeavours' (Gershon 2013). However, as Brady's (1999) research on the use of the phonograph in anthropological work makes clear, sound recording has a long history in ethnographic research and sound recording devices have long been part of the ethnographer's toolkit. Responses to the emergence of the phonograph and views as to its suitability for ethnographic fieldwork were initially mixed, but most fieldworkers seized upon the technique as a valuable research aid. Brady details how, between 1890 and 1935, numerous American ethnographers applied it to what they saw as the urgent project of documenting the language and aesthetic expressions of cultures they perceived to be in danger of undergoing radical change or of succumbing altogether to the forces of the new world. Phonography promised a way to 'save the lore' (Brady 1999: 52). It was an efficient means of producing what were widely regarded as accurate and objective records of disappearing verbal and musical forms such as traditional folktales, epics, ballads and proverbs.

As sound recording technology evolved, ethnographers incorporated new devices into their data gathering processes. By 1933 early acetate recorders were appearing on the market and by 1945 tape recorders, which were lighter, easier to use, and which offered superior sound quality and recording capacity were widely adopted in ethnographic field research. Advances in analogue and later in digital audio technology also greatly enhanced the capacity of ethnographers to both record and edit sound. But though sound recording is thoroughly integrated into ethnographic work at the level of process, academic convention still emphasises text as the definitive ethnographic product. Sound recordings have obvious advantages over text when it comes to capturing the presence, complexity and experiential immediacy of sound. They can have great descriptive and illustrative power and can express sonic details and qualities that are difficult to convey in a written ethnography. Some academic publishers (particularly in the field of

ethnomusicology) have produced ethnographic books with accompanying records, and in more recent years, CDs or links to sound files that are available online. But as Feld points out, even where it is provided, audio rarely receives the same attention as the written text it is designed to accompany (Feld and Brenneis 2004: 470–71). Sound has, at most, played a supporting role in relation to written material in academic ethnography.

Despite cultural barriers to the recognition of sound works as legitimate academic products, ethnographers have experimented and continue to experiment with using sound in representing ‘the sonorous, enculturated worlds inhabited by people’ (Samuels et al. 2010: 330). Editing techniques allow sonic forms to be isolated and brought together in informative, expressive and thought-provoking ways, enabling the creation of ‘sonic ethnographies’ or ethnographic work that is ‘in’ as well as ‘on’ or ‘about’ sound. As part of his research among the Kaluli, for example, Feld produced a radio programme entitled *Voices in the Forest*. Tape recordings were layered on a multi-track recorder to construct a sonic portrait of daily life in a Kaluli village, with sounds from across a 24-hour period being condensed into a 25-minute programme. The forest soundscape at different phases of the day was interwoven with the sounds of corresponding village activities: waking, working, relaxing. These activities are accompanied at various points by sounds of conversation, laughter, crying, calls, whistling and songs. Feld seeks to give an ‘impression of the sound world as lived, condensing and intensifying the relationship of people to the time and space in the forest’ (Feld and Brenneis 2004: 465).

In 2014 I teamed up with Tripta Chandola, whose research is described above, to make a radio documentary for the BBC World service called *Govindpuri Sound* (Rice and Chandola 2014). This was very much an attempt to present some of the major themes of Tripta’s research in sound. The programme involved a two-week recording trip, with about 80 hours of material ultimately being edited into a 53-minute programme. *Govindpuri Sound* combines ambient sound recording, interview and narration in order to document the character of the sonic environment of the slum settlement. Like *Voices in the Forest*, it is narratively constructed to condense a day into a shorter time frame, beginning with the domestic sounds from houses in one alleyway of the slum as it comes to life in the early morning and ending in the same alleyway as it quietens down in the late evening. The documentary touches on some of the distinctive ‘soundmarks’ of the slum and explains how daily activities such as collecting water are acoustically distinctive (Schafer 1977: 274). It also contextualises the slum soundscape through comparison with other Delhi sounds and sonic environments: the honking of car horns on nearby roads (which constitute a kind of auditory horizon for the slum residents), the controlled ambience of a carriage on the new metro system with its near-constant safety and security announcements, the quiet of a neighbouring middle-class area. While the programme at times adopts a (Western) outsider’s auditory perspective on slum life (emphasising difference and unfamiliarity), *Govindpuri Sound* as a whole is produced through ‘extensive ethnographic knowledge and consultation with local people about the sounds recorded’ (Samuels et al. 2010: 336). The programme attempts to represent both the settlement sounds and residents’ ways of listening to them.

Anthropologist Rupert Cox and sound artist Angus Carlyle have used sound installation and audio in accompaniment with text and video in their collaborative ethnographic project *Air Pressure*, about two Japanese farming families whose land is almost entirely engulfed by Narita International airport. The farmers continue to work their land despite the intense noise and efforts by the authorities to relocate them. Cox and Carlyle record the soundscape of the farm: subtle, gentle sounds of birds, insects and other wildlife, as well as those of everyday working practices (some of which are traditional and possess a distinctively human cadence) are juxtaposed with the mechanical roar of jets as they pass sometimes just tens of metres overhead. As Gallagher and Prior point out: ‘had the researchers taken a more traditional ethnographic

approach using written field notes, the peculiar sonic geography of the site could not have been conveyed with such visceral, affective intensity' (2014: 271).

The balance between text and sound in cultural representation, then, appears to be shifting. There is a growing sense among ethnographers working on sonic culture that '...we should no longer accept "silent" publications on sound' and a corresponding movement towards producing work in which listening and recording are central to the ethnographic process and in which audio composition (often contextualised by text and images) is a key ethnographic product (Peek 1994: 488). Such work demands listening from its audience as a primary mode of engagement. In future, then, ethnographic representations will require listeners as well as, and even instead of, readers and viewers.

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