

Learning from Sonic Encounters: Listening Emplacement and Belonging in Osaka

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Abstract

This research presents the relationship between soundscapes, learning, and belonging in the Konohana ward of Osaka, Japan. Konohana's soundscape affords various modalities of intersensorial listening: from inside one's home, it is possible to hear neighbors' TVs and conversations, cars and motorbikes passing by, children playing in the street, trash collector vehicle jingles, the local noodle-cart's whistle and the tofu seller's passing bell. Belonging is constituted through these "sonic encounters" within the soundscape of everyday Konohana life. Yet these encounters hinge on learning how to appropriate perceptual, cultural and performative affordances of those sounds. The result is a multi-temporal, multi-sited assemblage of soundscape that affords an experience of a neighborhood through local, city, country and memorial emplacement.

Through ethnographic interviews, participant observation, and multisensory ethnographic methods of neighborhoods in Konohana the paper aims to contribute an analytical model of learning in soundscapes that interrogates how sonic affordances constitute belonging. By doing so, the ongoing research aims to interrogate the sociology and anthropology of sound and the manner in which sounds emplace listeners thereby facilitating learning, modes of knowing, feelings of belonging, aesthetic valuing and forms of practice.

Keywords: sonic encounter, mediation, emplacement, learning, listening, intersensorial

1. Introduction

Sound in ethnographic research and writing has been pursued by anthropologists and sociologists calling attention to the auditory culture of social life through soundscapes (Feld 1984, Feld and Brenneis 2004), mediating technology (Bradey 1999), situated learning (Rice 2008, 2013), political implications of listening (Hagen 2013; Hagen and DeNora 2011), and how sound and sound technology order urban experience (Bull 2000; Atkinson 2007). This paper aims to develop the literature addressing the “ethnographer’s ear” (Clifford 1986) within the sociology and anthropology of sound by taking the case of the Konohana neighbourhood in Osaka, Japan.

Konohana’s soundscape allows for a marked sense of ‘nearness’ due to the construction planning and material of many of its houses and buildings; from inside one’s home, it is possible to hear neighbors’ TVs and conversations, cars and motorbikes passing by, children playing in the street, trash collector vehicle jingles, the local noodle-cart’s whistle and the tofu seller’s passing bell. Various modalities of intersensorial listening present themselves through “sonic encounters” within the soundscape of everyday Konohana life that subsequently constitute belonging. Yet these encounters hinge on learning how to appropriate perceptual, cultural and performative affordances of those sounds. The result is a multi-layered assemblage of soundscape that affords an experience of Konohana through local, city, country and memorial emplacement.

In what follows, I outline a theoretical context and model of learning in soundscapes and then move on to discuss the specific sonic encounters in Konohana that aid in how one feels belonging to a place, what are the invisible traces of the place’s boundaries and how one learns these through listening.

2. Sound in Sensory Ethnography

The Konohana case study research sought to engage hearing and listening by examining site-specific contexts of how people configure their listening attention and their experi-

ences of those places. The objective was to pursue how sounds have come to be valued by social groups and what social practices came to be shaped and constituted via listening. In this sense, multisensory ethnographic fieldwork was crucial to understanding sounds' relationship to belonging in contemporary urban publics. Multisensory methods situated the research within a larger sensory framework that is not based on lexical description but rather on experience of place. Embodied perception, instead of semantically articulated meaning, looks toward how the senses organize the world, considering comprehensive, global dimensions of spatiality, experience and emplacement (Pink 2009).

The data presented here was collected over a ten-month period with six months living in the Konohana neighborhood. Crucial to the study was participant observation, both participating in sound making as a sonic participant and observing the soundscape, as it were, through guided walks and simply day-to-day habituation to Konohana's soundscape. To support the observation numerous phonographic and visual recordings were made, along with conducting nineteen ethnographic interviews with residents of Konohana. These interviews considered people's interaction with and in sonic environments and their relation to belonging. Within the techniques of conducting ethnographic fieldwork, interviewing is a primary means for revealing how people create meaning. Ethnographic interviewing relies not on the researcher's categorization of phenomena, but rather elicits information from the interviewee in order to arrive at better understanding of the subject's worldview (Spradley 1979, 48-49). The intent was not to focus on the sounds themselves per se, but rather people's relation and categorization of sounds, focusing on activity, practice and events.

3. Learning, Meaning, Sounds and Place

From Schaefer's initial prescription of soundscape's analytic features, its conceptual descriptive development has been widely employed. In many cases, this has reduced its use to a sensitizing variable or has rendered 'soundscape' as slippery in its interdisciplinarity (Kelman 2010, 214). This is even more the case when human and non-human activity is incorporated rather than excluded as background noise, showing the soundscape-listeners' amorphous relationship. Soundscape-as-context has thus been described as a multimodal experience

(Raimbault and Dubois 2005, 342), rhizomatic in its non-linear change (Koutsomichalis 2013), a process of 'becoming' (Fors, Bäckström, and Pink 2013), which occurs through a "constellation of relationships" (Kelman 2010, 213), and could be more comparable to the fluidity of a seascape than landscape (Shelemay 2006, xxxiv). Each of these definitions attributes value, in terms of analysis and interpretation, to dimensions of space, time and framing discourse in a constant process of negotiation and constitution between sound and listener. In other words, the soundscape is indexical in its meaning (Garfinkel 1967)—in addition to being perceptually communicative it furnishes material to which meaning is articulated, used and adapted contingent upon the emplaced listener. This indexical approach attributes power to sound, its social value and how it is used as a resource in learning. Learning how to hear and listen in specific soundscapes, then, is a socially distributed practice that mediates relationships between people, places and spaces.

Wenger's (1998) "community of practice" analyses learning as an on-going, collective project based on participating in and therefore learning from activity in context. Learning in this focus is situated (Brown et al 1989) and occurs at tacit levels of attention. Wenger's focus reveals two points: [1] learning happens in situ through teacher-apprentice activity, such as imitation and training; [2] from these relationships, dispositions emerge socially. The notion of sonic dispositions—how one orientates themselves toward a sound—is thus a political question when considering how, why and in what ways collectives, city councils, property developers and transnational organizations attribute different aesthetic value to 'quiet areas' or 'noise'. Moreover, learned dispositions are a critical building block in belonging.

In his study on social learning of dispositions in relation to becoming a marijuana smoker, Becker (1953, 237) notes that without social learning, "marihuana [sic] was considered meaningless"; not only is a "presence" of an object necessary for effects to happen, but one also needs "recognition". Therefore, to experience marijuana, one must be aware or conscious, which, as Becker argues (ibid, 240), emerges from interaction with others, particularly with "experienced users", or teachers. Recognition speaks to the complex, entangled process of how an object is mediated or discursively encountered within group cultures; yet this learned orientation is not always consciously articulated as Becker states. It also occurs at tacit, unconscious or even 'instinctive' levels of knowing; or to put it more simply: what 'naturally' feels good and what doesn't.

While sociological literature on social learning, as that of Wenger and Becker, has helped ground how objects' socially and culturally constituted meaning affects practice within situated clusters of people interacting, we are left wondering if this can be accurately applied to sounds: is the sound a honking car meaningless if we do not recognize it? Do we need a

teacher in this case? Is the listener of one urban soundscape alien to that of another? Interactionist approaches can therefore rely too heavily on socially constructed meaning and thereby ignore properties of an environment. It is here that music sociologists have contributed to our understanding of practice by examining objects (such as music and sound) and their properties (volume, intensity, pitch, frequency, real-time) within social environments and how these properties 'afford' various forms of activity (DeNora 2000). Growing out of perceptual psychology (Gibson 1977, 1979; Greeno 1994), DeNora outlines how people appropriate 'musical affordances', for example using a musical beat to help one concentrate, revealing how this activity is co-configured between environment and peoples' abilities. Similarly, Antoine Hennion (2005, 141) has addressed environmental learning in his pragmatic theory of reflexive taste through an ecological perspective of exposure, identification and attunement: "to train one's faculties and perceptions (both collectively and individually), to learn tricks and ways of doing things, to have a repertory, classifications, and techniques that reveal the differences between objects." Affordances and abilities contribute to an ecological understanding of how people articulate meaning to activity, learn from it and use it, often at tacit levels of knowing.

In Becker, DeNora and Hennion's studies, the process of meaning configuration via objects and with others who 'show the way' is one that is revealed through gradual, habitual, achieved and "built up" actions in an environment of use and learning. Tom Rice (2013), in his ethnography of sound in hospitals, ties together both situated learning, community of practice with an affordance perspective, shows the cultural categories of listening and learning in auscultation, detailing the learning process of listening attention, enskillment and use of auscultation by medical students. Rice concludes that listening is key skill in the transitional process of "becoming" a doctor.

This process of becoming is not dissimilar to the process of belonging through how one negotiates meaningful sounds in soundscapes that contributes to knowledge production. Within the anthropology of the senses, Howes (2003) and Pink (2009) have broached this question through the notion of emplacement as considering mind, body and environment. Fors, Bäckström, and Pink(2013) have developed an emplaced approach to sensory learning, where they draw on Massey's (2005) scholarship of 'place-events'. 'Place-events' are described as a flexible site that is not bound by materiality but can also mediate global frames and meta-local discourses, much like an archeology site is multi-temporal in its materials. Situated learning in a place-event, then, takes on a sensory dimension, that is not always bound by a teacher-apprentice relationship, and one in which learning similarly constitutes

the place-event with meaning. Thus, learning in context is a “sensory-emplaced” project (Fors et al 2013).

For example, a person growing up in the northern part of the globe might be used to walking on snowy and icy roads—certain snow requires certain ways of walking, and some ice affords different actions (sliding or cracking) that coordinated how one distributes body weight, how far one lifts their feet from the ground, or how long are their strides. This type of knowledge—or knowing—is not something taught as much as it is learned by doing through sensory emplacement as a patterned context along with imitation in situated learning, such as watching how an older brother might slide further on an icy patch or make a better a snowball. Such a description is similar to how Marcell Mauss ([1935] 1979) has described tacit knowledge of the body as a ‘body technique’. However, as Rice (2013, 94-96) has pointed out, Mauss’s conception of ‘body techniques’ assumes a unity of the body, rather than an intersensorial, “relational focus” between the senses in contexts (Bull 2006, 6).

Weaving together these theoretical strands, we arrive at a form of knowing that emerges not just through perceptual transmission of sensory data but by engagement, enactment and appropriation of sensory material affordances, like touching snow and ice or listening to sounds, as described in the presented soundscape below. These sounds are contingent upon the relationship between mind, body and environment and a person’s abilities (however tacit those may be) that are configured, and attuned to a soundscape. The importance here for the study of sounds and soundscapes is the way in which sound is co-constituted through listeners, environments and practices and the meaning that subsequently emerges. To zoom in on this process of meaning emergence that occurs within soundscapes, I look toward a mechanism of encounter.

4. Learning from Sonic Encounters

Soundscapes are operationalized as environments of learning, one in which hearing and listening take on distinct localized practices. Learning these practices occurs when people participate in a framework of a sonic encounter, which facilitates learning how to appropriate sonic affordances. A sonic encounter can be identified as: [1] perceptual, addressing

the material affordances and sonic information of the neighborhood (e.g., lack of private acoustic space); [2] socio-cultural, interrogating a patterned system in which sounds are embedded and articulated with meaning (e.g., contrast structures to other neighborhoods); and [3] performative, exploring how these meaningful sounds are used, deployed and displayed that constitute self and collective identity (e.g., a style or way of life associated with a neighborhood). I argue that these three levels of a sonic encounter emplace individuals and collectives, which thereby provides material for belonging to multi-sited and multi-temporal places.

Within these encounters we have points of exchange between different types of sonic-based material and sonic participants: information (e.g., the jingle of a trash collection vehicle), emotions (e.g., relief from ‘hustle and bustle’ of a city centre) and consciousness (e.g., memory of childhood). These points of exchange show us two types of knowledge production: sonic literacy and auditory knowing. The former indicates explicit knowledge (I take out the trash when I hear a sound) whereas the latter suggests a tacit dimension to knowledge (a sense of calm when returning to Konohana). In either case we have an interplay and movement between the ‘known’ and the ‘unknown’, the familiar and unfamiliar. Using the case of sonic encounters in the Konohana neighborhood, I analyze this movement of learning and its relationship to emplacement.

4.1. Local Emplacement

Konohana is surrounded by a canal on three sides and Osaka Bay on one side and is characterized by buildings no taller than three to four stories. When crossing over a main bridge into Konohana, “it is possible to see the sky and smell the salty water,” as a resident observed (H., 39). The experience of smaller building heights to afford vision of the sky combined with a nearness to the sea is a primary differential marker of Konohana in the city of Osaka. After crossing this bridge into Konohana, you arrive to the Baika neighbourhood. Several distinct sounds are particular to this neighbourhood, two of which I present through field note vignettes are related to mobile food:

Tofu Hand Bell (1 April 2013):

Around 4.30pm everyday, I hear the sound of a single bell, which must be a hand bell, ringing and moving throughout the neighbourhood. Since December [the first three months I was living here], I was unable to identify from which direction the sound was coming from and what was its purpose. Today I waited

outside [my flat] for the bell at its normal time. Only until I was on the street at this time did I see a man (~65 years old) on a bicycle selling fresh tofu. Attached to his bicycle in the front is a hand-held bell and a cooler full of fresh, cold tofu strapped down on the rear rack. The next day I waited inside until I heard his bell, hoping to buy some tofu, yet I was unable to catch him: how close he is to [my] house is masked by the way the bell disperses sound and the fact that I can hear street sounds from all directions. I'll try again tomorrow.

Ramen Cart Flute (20 February 2013):

Late every evening, there is a sound I have not encountered before [in other places I have lived in Japan]... it sounds like a 'call' from a reed instrument. It is a short 'call'; only 2-3 notes played every 3-5 minutes. I first heard it in December [2012] and thought it might be from the local shrine, but I've now heard it nearly every evening since I moved into Konohana. Last week I found out that the reed flute call was played by a man (~70 years old) selling ramen noodles from a large red cart that he pulls behind him. I had followed the sound around the neighbourhood at night until I saw him in the street preparing a bowl full of ramen [noodles] for a neighbour. After ordering a bowl for myself, he told me that he's been selling ramen from the cart nearly every evening for the past fifty years. I've heard his 'call' just now again (9.30pm).

We can assess these sonic encounters as primarily communicative in function wherein one's abilities are attuned to the environment. This ability can be described as the practice of 'seeking out', which rests on the appropriation of the communicative nature of the sonic affordances. Yet to distil this sonic encounter down to its communicative function is to miss further inscriptions of meaning.

These sounds involve the human activity of engaging simple musical technology (bell and flute). In particular, though, it is the timbral experience of these technologies and their performance that attribute distinctive qualities to a Konohana soundscape: the wooden flute and steel bell have most commonly been replaced in other neighborhoods with automated sounds that represent the bell and flute. These automated sounds are consistent in their repetition and performance unlike the tofu and ramen seller in Konohana, where false starts and uneven jingles contribute to the 'humanness' of these sounds. Their presence is thus 'special' in Konohana articulating a 'local' meaning to the sounds. These brief examples show

listening is a coordinated intersensorially: seeing (the sky), smelling (the saltwater), hearing (the bell and reed flute) and tasting (ramen and tofu). These affordances then appropriated to experience Konohana as a 'local place'.

Particularly this 'local' feeling occurs by sensing together through 'nearness' as a form of spatially. Nearness is then distinct to Baika's culture (e.g., patterned activity such as the ramen and tofu seller), its material environment (e.g., simple building construction that allows for hearing outside), and its geographical location in the city (e.g., an island made from reclaimed land). Konohana's nearness, then, is singular when compared to other urban areas of Osaka. Thus Konohana as a local place with a local identity is experienced intersensorially through contrast to other Osaka neighbourhoods and revealed through sonic encounters with mobile food sellers' calls.

For Konohana, 'local' rests on the sonic fluidity between public-private spaces. A lack of sonic control over one's material environment and public-private space anticipates happenstance encounters. Thus the appropriation of affordances here takes shape in practice as a psychosocial 'letting in' (acceptance of the neighbourhood sounds) and 'seeking out' (pursuing the activity-tofu and ramen) which underpin the feeling of belonging. These practices, letting in and seeking out, help to constitute a particular way of life, one that is simultaneously situated within a city.

4.2. City Emplacement

Mondays and Thursdays are trash collection days in Konohana. The trash lorry plays an automated, continuous, repeating jingle, not dissimilar to a children's cartoon theme song. Although automated, it maintains a humanized sound with soft tonalities, which is pleasant when you encounter it. The jingle informs you of the truck's approach, allowing you to estimate its nearness to your house and how much time you have to deliver the trash to the street side. This sonic encounter is a point of exchange between perception, environment and participant: one's ability to hear is predicated on hearing outside sounds inside your house, which comes to underpin private-public interaction. While not entirely overwhelming, there is a distinct change in the smell in the air on Monday and Thursday mornings due to the piles of refuse on the street corners.

The trash lorry jingle is uniform across the city of Osaka yet does not exist in other Japanese cities. The jingle has two socio-cultural integration mechanisms of place:

1. City identity: Konohana is part of the Osaka life, governance, history and imaginary (thus it is not Tokyo, it is not Kyoto, it is not Nagoya).

2. Public-private integration: your actions as a municipal resident are coordinated and patterned by sound, which is dependent on hearing the lorry from within your house.

Again we see the practice of 'letting in' and 'seeking out' via sonic encounters, which emplaces a listener in a city place-event thereby affording a multi-sited belonging to both local and city.

4.3. Country Emplacement

So far we have considered emplacement via the appropriation of local and city sonic affordances. These above examples are communicative functions of sound in that they trigger a response but also contribute to patterning of time, contact points with neighbors and city, and participating in taste culture (cooking tofu).

To look at a further sonic encounter, which emplaces a listener within further spatiality, I examine the natural phenomena of earthquakes. Japan's natural disasters are not necessarily linked to a national-political-cultural identity but to the geographic experience of 'country' on a particular place on the globe, specifically, the Pacific Rim. One resident of Konohana describes the sonic encounter of an earthquake that emplaces the listener in the country of Japan:

When I'm falling asleep, I often feel my windows shake and rattle. I listen for a bit and feel how much the building trembles. I wait nervously and wonder if it is an earthquake. It is only until after I hear a large truck go by that I know it is not time to take cover or run for high ground [in case of tsunami]. Of course in April [13, 2013] it actually was an earthquake. (J., 48)

Here the feeling of sound, the vibrations, along with the rattle of windows is attributed to emplacement in Japan, a country habituated to earthquakes. Hearing and feeling an earthquake is a skill one learns to develop over time as a form of tacit knowledge that coordinates action, such as running for cover, running for high ground; these activities of safety again develop the practice of 'seeking out'. This tacit knowledge is not necessarily related to an emplacement in Konohana or Osaka, but rather to being in the country of Japan.

Drawing together these intersensorial listening practices, we have an experience of place at different sites—local, city and country. This multi-spatiality within the soundscape integrate and connect the inhabitant through the practices of letting in and seeking out that rest on competencies (anticipating disaster) and activities (taking out trash, eating) coordinated to the material environment (house, street) thereby affording explicit and tacit knowl-

edge production. In short, emplacement frames the relationship between listening, knowing and belonging.

4.4. Memory emplacement

In addition to the multi-sited sonic construction of a place-event, the material environment also affords multi-temporality. In particular, cultural memory plays a role in shaping acceptance and the letting in of Konohana's soundscape in that it may be considered enjoyable or attractive. For many who live in Konohana, it is desirable not only because of low rental cost but also because of childhood nostalgia. On a walking tour of the Baika neighbourhood, a Konohana resident described how the neighbourhood provided material for nostalgia:

[Pointing] If you look up you can see the old [fishbone] TV antennae. Everywhere else [in Osaka], everyone has [satellite] dishes now. Here [Konohana] is very nostalgic for me, the neighbourhood reminds me of my childhood, where I grew up. There are very few cars, kids playing baseball in the street, these buildings [gesturing toward a row of houses]. It is very rare to find this [1950s] old-style in Japan nowadays. It's the Konohana style (laughing). (H., 39)

Similarly, others have commented on childhood nostalgia in Konohana, specifically in relation to the narrow alleys between houses:

I suppose [the alleys] are a waste of space, very poor planning. But I have very fond memories of running through alleys like this when I was growing up. Playing games like hide-and-seek with other kids. I guess I never realized how special these alleys¹ are. You can't do that in [contemporary] apartment blocks. (K., 37)

These above memories are revealed through lived past experiences: both 'H' and 'K' are from different districts of Osaka, which had at one time been similar to contemporary Konohana 'local' life. In relation to sounds, a Japanese visitor [from the Kanto district] to Konohana showed surprise at the sound of the ramen flute, illustrating a mediated memory:

1. Less than one meter in width.

Oh, I've only seen this old movies....Nowadays most people who sell ramen have a recording. This is an exceptional thing to have in your neighbourhood. (S., 40)

These sonic encounters trigger memory that are all contingent on the contrast to modern Japanese living, technological development and disappearing cultural practices. Old antennae, the ability to hear a reed flute from inside your home, to play between what is considered 'wasted space' in urban planning are all functions of residential non-development yet allow for feelings of nostalgia and thus and acceptance and aesthetic valuing of the non-development. The material environment of Konohana therefore affords a nearness to the past that has disappeared from other environments in Osaka and is situated in both lived and mediated memory work.

5. Conclusion

The soundscape of Konohana consists of a series of sonic encounters wherein people appropriate sonic affordances for learning. As the reed flute, hand bell, trash lorry jingle, and window rattles reveal, sonic encounters are perceptual, cultural and symbolic paths to knowing a multi-temporal, multi-sited Konohana that emplaces individuals and collectives. This learning through emplacement, in turn, provides material for belonging.

Yet this may be belonging to only one or all sites within Konohana. From these examples of intersensorial encounters, we see that place is multi-temporal and occurring at non-mutually exclusive sites; in other words, one is at once 'local' in the neighbourhood, as they are in a city (Osaka), country (Japan) and existing at different points in time (both the lived and mediated past and present). These encounters are constituted by their related practices, letting in and seeking out, which are learned through emplacement and negotiated by individuals and groups. The place-event contextualizes the sounds, therefore context is the activity of emplacement.

Nearness is a dimension of spatiality that contributes to forming of place-related knowing and belonging via the sensory experience, facilitating commitment, investment and valuing of a place. The paper shows how people coordinate competencies and abilities to certain

environments with different materials. Such an intersensorial affordance perspective allows for an understanding of how individuals are reconfigured through sensory emplaced learning as ‘together’ in neighbourhood, in city and in country.

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