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# Ethnographies Sounded on What? Methodologies, Sounds, and Experiences in Cairo

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# The Bloomsbury Handbook of **SONIC METHODOLOGIES**

Edited by Michael Bull and Marcel Cobussen

## **Ethnographies Sounded on What? Methodologies, Sounds and Experiences in Cairo**

Vincent Battesti

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The last decade has seen an increase in academic literature in the humanities and social sciences on the sonic dimension of our world. This chapter asks ‘what’ sounds are of interest to ethnography, ‘why’, and consequently ‘how?’

This chapter, like the rest of this Handbook, is dedicated to the thorny issue of methodologies. From a heuristic point of view, a method (i.e. ‘how’) is only worthwhile if it is based on the answers given to the first two questions, ‘what’ and ‘why’. It is important to draw clear distinctions between these three questions, although they often overlap in the complex and varied context of ethnography (at least for ethnographies that are not fettered upstream of the fieldwork by theory and programmatic approach).

Therefore, it goes without saying that I cannot suggest a ‘good’ and sound methodology to be used in doing ethnographic research, as it depends on the purposes and the context of the fieldwork; and also, as I think of the senses as interconnected and perceive the environment as a whole, an exclusive sonic modality or category will be avoided.

I will give a quick and partial overview of ethnographies that are concerned with sound in order to present my own questions in a more precise and informed way. The journey I propose here does not quite illustrate a categorization that I would come to terms with, it is too incoherent as such, but it is rather a way of bringing about the different methodologies that are, or could be, used in sonic ethnography (Figure 49.1).

### **Ethnomusicologists and their music**

Anthropology has inherited a great deal from a long tradition of Western musicology. Scholars of this field forged a range of tools and concepts to grapple with music. Music is a highly diverse social practice understood as organized and performed sounds which



**Figure 49.1** This chapter is dedicated to Ahmed Wahdan, my master of the Cairo night, who died in 2018, far too early. Giza, Cairo, Egypt, 30 November 2016, 11.00 p.m. Photograph by Vincent Battesti.

usually express or communicate ideas or feelings. But music also represents a minute part of the audible world for human beings, whatever the time or place. Ethnographers have every right to be interested in music as a part of social life, but the entirety of social life, in its audible dimension, exceeds that of music. Ethnomusicologists today are scarcely interested in working on music extracted from its performance conditions, its social and cultural context of real practice. From this perspective two attitudes prevail towards music, which are not necessarily in conflict: to deepen the relationship between the production of music and its environment; and to focus on an aural ethnography that investigates the ways music is used, diffused, and plays a role at the heart of a society.

A renewed approach towards music phenomenon among ethnomusicologists, coupled with a greater awareness of sound, has emphasized the social context of music production (for instance, see Christine Guillebaud [2008] on the Kerala travelling musicians in India), as well as the natural environment, which refers to the work of Steven Feld (1982), who described the highly developed practices of listening, hearing, and sounding that characterized Kaluli engagement with their rainforest environment in New Guinea (and especially through ethno-ornithology). Methodologically, long-term participant observation (usual amongst ethnologists and anthropologists) is used together with field recordings for this approach. Steven Feld's work was a turning point for ethnomusicology. Along with classical ethnography methodology, Feld explained,

[I used] extensive playback of the recordings as soon as I made them [with stereo Nagra and AKG studio microphones] and over long periods of time as a key methodology. I felt that

not just being with people in sound but listening and talking about the recordings was an important way to gain a sense of how to be an ethnographic listener.

(Feld and Brenneis 2004: 465)

I should mention also other prominent ethnographers, such as Ellen B. Basso (1985) working on the Brazilian Kalapalo Amerindians, or Marina Roseman (1991) on the Senoi of the Malaysian rainforest, connecting music and medicine, and Nicole Revel (1992) on the Palawan (in the Philippines) on songs and birds, etc. Again, among Suyá in Amazonia, Anthony Seeger (1987) reveals the centrality of the music phenomenon in a society and how Suy singing creates euphoria out of silence, a village community out of a collection of houses, a socialized adult out of a boy, and contributes to the formation of ideas about time, space, and social identity.

Ethnomusicologists are not the only ones to practice field recording for the purpose of analysing sonic data, but they are the ones who have the expertise and social legitimacy to edit music – often marketed as world music and sold to the public. Many specialized labels have been created to distribute these albums. Before that, field recordings were used to analyse musical systems. Due to the existence of different schools of thought, no universal or objective analytical system has been established (using the Western system of notation or one fitting the local system, for example, is a dilemma); see, for instance, the criticism of Alan Lomax's method of cantometrics (1968) – intended for universal comparison – by Steven Feld (1984), who rather insists on the local context of performance.

## Music phenomena beyond ethnomusicology

Working out methodologies deployed for the second option – which does not focus on 'the study of people making music' (Titon 1992: xiv) but on people playing back and listening to music – is uneasy as such works suffer from a common flaw when it comes to writing, the usual lack of an explicit description of the methodology used: it is assumed (and not necessarily erroneously) that the method, if not described, is the 'regular' one, that of a participating and floating observation and semi-structured along a majority of non-structured interviews conducted with an indefinite number of informants over a long period of time during the fieldwork, with, in general, a command of the language used by the social group in question (Figure 49.2). The intention here is obviously not to lay the blame on the habits of a discipline; in fact, most of the time, I do not do otherwise and often end up omitting the 'materials and methods' part of my research. Ethnology and anthropology do not apply the most prominent norm for the organizational structure of a scientific journal article, IMRaD (Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion), for valid reasons that will not be discussed here. Regarding the fields we are talking about, for



**Figure 49.2** Workshop open on the street, al-Gamaliyya, Cairo, Egypt, 28 November 2016, 3.30 p.m. Photograph by Vincent Battesti.

instance, Nahid Siamdoust in ‘Tehran’s Soundscape as a Contested Public Sphere’ (2015) deals with music (and not sound despite using the notion of soundscape): not the making of music but the music consumption diffused in the public space through a small shop, a taxi’s window, or new media technologies.

Most of the work on music, beyond ethnomusicology, uses classical field data collection tools in which we cannot discern a methodology specific to the sound dimension, because it is not necessarily the sound materials and sensory perceptions that are important to the study. For example, the work of anthropologist Nicolas Puig (2010) on Egyptian wedding musicians in Cairo deals with the social group of these relegated musicians and their performance in street weddings.

## Forgetting music for other sonic phenomena

But what if we forget about music as a practice and keep it only as one tiny part of the myriad of sonic experiences that inform everyday life? What if we are interested in the broader spectrum of sounds that bathe our lives in order to expand beyond the notion of ‘worldviews’ and address sensoria? Canonical ethnographic methodologies do not yet exist, because these academic works that aim to cover the whole sonic dimension of a social group remain scarce.

However, some works focus, in a very relevant way, on specific sonic phenomena (other than music) or sonic devices. For instance, Patrick Eisenlohr (2018) provides an

account of the sonic dimensions of Islam in Mauritius, exploring how the voice, as a site of divine manifestation, becomes refracted in media practices that have become integral parts of religious traditions. For once, we have an explicit, though classic, account of the methodology for addressing ‘the sonic incitement of sensations’ in Mauritian Islam:

In addition to recording these interviews and semi structured and open-ended conversations, many of which took place in several sessions, I audio-recorded the performances I attended and video-recorded some of them. I also collected a corpus of cassette and CD *na't* recordings that were sold or otherwise distributed in Mauritius. And I participated in the regular social life of several of my interlocutors and made visits to the homes of many others far beyond the context of *na't* performances and other events connected to the genre.

(Eisenlohr 2018: 19–20)<sup>1</sup>

Eisenlohr’s audio recordings (which were either recorded by the author or acquired on the market) do not seem to have been processed in any way other than by listening to them with care through a linguistic analysis (and trying too to understand the desired qualities of the voice). Charles Hirschkind (2006), before him, conducted a similar approach in Cairo by focusing on the sermon tapes that circulate in the city and more importantly are played in shops, taxis, etc. to offer an understanding of the ethics of listening and an analysis of rhetorical styles. These are studies that focus on particular sonic phenomena. The methodologies remain fairly classic, while at times resorting to sound recording and listening to their own recordings and marketed tapes. To my knowledge, sounds are not analysed from an acoustic angle either but, rather, the moral, political, and competitive dimensions of public space are analysed from the perspective of the humanities. In a way, sociologist Iman Farag’s work on the wide public debate in the press over the governmental decision to replace the thousands of amplified muezzins by an automatic, synchronous, and centralized broadcasting of recorded *adhān*, call to prayer, is not far from this kind of research (Farag 2009).

Voice, both as a sonic phenomenon and a sonic device, has been an issue for sonic researchers, beyond calling in linguistic expertise. Olivier Féraud (2010) (discussed below in more detail), for instance, produced a noteworthy work on the local economy of sounds, the voice on the one hand and firecrackers on the other hand, in a popular neighbourhood of Naples, Italy. Jean-Jacques Luthi (1985) inventoried and transcribed and translated the calls from street vendors in Cairo, Egypt. Noha Gamal Said (2014) did the same in Cairo recently, extending the description beyond street vendors to all professions making calls in public space. She used a classical methodology of observation in this work, illustrating it with sonograms of the street (actually, just time and decibels).

Spectrograms, the visual representation of the spectrum of sound frequencies and volume changing through time, are notably used by Julien Meyer (2015) in his complete worldwide study of human whistled languages to demonstrate that whistled speech ‘is adapted to the structure of each language, to specific traditional rural activities such as hunting or shepherding, and to specific ecological milieus’. Paul-Louis Colon (2013) has produced a precise ethnography of professional and amateur ornithologists and their listening skills when observing birds in their environment. In this context as well, the sonic phenomenon

studied is narrow, the song of birds and its approach by humans, and the methodology classical, but it allows him to access relevant parts of the mutual dependencies of the senses and their ambiguities in our sensory models. The same can be said of Nicolas Puig's (2017) work on sound techniques (amplification, electro-acoustic effects, etc.) of urban rituals in Cairo, or Vincent Andrisani's (2010) on the 'electrified soundscapes' of Havana, Cuba, and Vancouver, Canada, two distinct environments with differences in the social uses of technology.

Another device that has interested researchers working on sound is the Walkman or the mobile phone, which allow an urban, mobile person to build their own sound/musical permeable bubble and to create a unique relationship with the city: for instance, the work of Jean-Paul Thibaud (1994), Michael Bull (2004), and Anthony Pecqueux (2009a, b). Bull and Pecqueux acknowledged the difficulty of such an ethnography of a sonic practice. Bull's methodology consisted primarily of in-depth, qualitative interviews with over one hundred personal stereo users living in large British cities. Pecqueux deployed a sophisticated methodology to circumvent the problem, based on the 'commented walk method' (Thibaud 2001), which I discuss more fully below. The solution chosen in order to follow the daily musical journeys made by individuals belonging to a previously constituted sample is described as the 'method of (post-)commented journeys': on a settled sample, the observer conducts a micro-ethnography throughout the journey (as in a close tailing, he remains about three metres behind the subject) mainly by taking notes and collecting in situ and regular verbalizations of the respondents during 'interview breaks' about their listening and their journey. These interruptions are infrequent, in order to minimize disruption to the continuity of the route. In situ, the gestures are observed, then confirmed by the respondent during the interview break; the music listened to is known, listed; the things seen, heard, and felt are both observed by the researcher and revealed by the respondent (Pecqueux 2009b: 57–58). While the observations made were able to highlight most of the ordinary, routine reactions to sudden noise in the urban environment, verbalizations were essential to account for the more complex interactions, and in particular to highlight the operations of auditory selection of relevant sounds to be heard (Pecqueux 2009a).

We note, at this stage, that holistic approaches to all sound phenomena remain insufficiently addressed. Sound has remained unexplored, because it has not been thought of, or forgotten and excluded within the construction of modern humanities where sight and visuals have until recently clearly prevailed (Figure 49.3).

## No discipline for sound studies

If we deviate from ethnology and disciplinary approaches in general, suddenly, ethnologists are not alone anymore. Today, a huge panel of researchers offer their multidisciplinary approaches of the sonic dimension of our world, with urban planning, architectural, psychological, geographical, historical, sociological (and so on) backgrounds. This multidisciplinary galaxy focused on the sonic object is often labelled as sound studies. Their





**Figure 49.3** In the street of Gamaliyya, Cairo, Egypt, 28 November 2016, 3.00 p.m. Photograph by Vincent Battesti.

approach is radically different to disciplinary ones as they usually start with a question requiring them to find their methodology rather than the other way around.

Jean-François Augoyard is a leading figure in the pioneering spirit of research in the field of sound. Summarizing the work of this sociologist (and of the multidisciplinary lab, the CRESSON, which he created) would be a difficult task: he has produced considerable innovative work on the sonic issues of the urban world. He inscribed his work within an architectural and urban planning school problematic. Inspired by micro-sociology, he developed theories based on the difference between the space designed by urban planners and the space experienced by city dwellers, and worked out notions and methods on the everyday sonic phenomena. ‘In the research, when you’re stuck, you’re forced to innovate’ (Augoyard interviewed by Sevin and Voilmy 2009). First, he fully reversed the canonical method of sociological inquiries in his field by letting people tell him what they wanted to about urban spaces rather than by asking people to answer a questionnaire: ‘I’m not asking you anything, I’ll come back in 15 days, in 15 days you’ll tell me where you walked [oral account or diary]. What interests me most is how you walk. How is the city for you?’ (Sevin and Voilmy 2009).

Augoyard coined an innovative methodology he called ‘reactivated listening’ (*écoute réactivée*). It is a semi-in situ technique to collect data (even if Augoyard insists on its innovative in situ feature in the field of urban development). ‘In short, it is about collecting the reactions of residents or users who are made to hear the sounds of their own environment’ (Augoyard 2001). A sound recordist (possibly the researcher or a technician) records various auditory scenes of the urban space under investigation and then makes a montage. ‘The objective is not to render with absolute fidelity the sound experience of others – which

is impossible – but to awaken it’ (Augoyard 2001). Two types of soundtracks proposed for reactivated listening are distinguished. ‘The first is the local track, i.e. the one that evokes an identifiable concrete place. The second, typologies of objects, spaces, or situations, is composed of various forms chosen for their evocative capacity; such as a typical southern market, a Lyon street, a Haussmannian building courtyard, a household vacuum cleaner’ (Augoyard 2001). ‘The important thing is what people would tell me in retrospect about the journey or the sound sequences [...]. It is not possible to render exactly one lived experience, but with this method, we get closer to it because the respondents reactivate all their experience’ (Augoyard interviewed by Sevin and Voilmy 2009). Augoyard fully developed the possibilities of this survey methodology in ‘Entretien sur écoute réactivée’ (2001). His school has developed, along with interesting notions and tools such as the ‘sonic effects’ (*effets sonores*) (Augoyard and Torgue 2006) – which can be seen as the coupling of hard-acoustic with phenomenology – other methodologies that address a range of urban sonic issues, such as the commented-walk method (Thibaud 2001). In short, the commented-walk is an urban walk sound-recorded by the investigator and performed alongside a respondent describing (while walking) the sound as well as their impressions in situ.

Acknowledging that contemporary epistemology constantly affirms the impossibility of a dominant position of the researcher vis-à-vis his object of study, on the one hand, and certain that we can overcome a long tradition of Western philosophy that tends to oppose the sensitive and the intelligible (in other words, certain that the sensible can be a driving force for speech and the grounds for verbalization of local ambiances), on the other hand, Jean-Paul Thibaud considers, with reference to phenomenology (Maurice Merleau-Ponty) and to the ecology of perception (James J. Gibson), that it is now illusory to dissociate perception from movement (personally, I am receptive to this idea of ‘movement as the foundations of perception’). In concrete terms, multiple variations of this technique exist and were already pointed out by Thibaud (2001). Sound studies practitioners took up the idea and adapted it in their research (sometimes under the label ‘soundwalk’). Thibaud presented this commented-walk method as an ‘open method’ (Thibaud 2001: 98), but there is a definite general trend towards closure: closing the method and granting privilege to an objectivist approach to data on phenomenology.

In this objectivist logic, Catherine Semidor (2006, 2007) suggests that methods of ‘soundwalks’ can do without informants: she records herself and analyses herself in her urban journeys. Her soundwalks, inspired by *The Image of the City* by Kevin Lynch (1960), are

sound recordings made with a binaural system (SEB) and a DAT recorder, on walks along a route with different urban forms. The different data (commented analysis of each track, recordings, photos, map, etc.) extracted from the soundwalks are examined in order to gather information about the relationship between the urban characteristics, urban activities and the sound environment. The acoustical images (time versus frequency graphs) of the sound signals can be seen as a representation of the soundscapes. The purpose of this approach is to enable us to evaluate what is pleasant and relevant in an urban sound environment in accordance with activities in the area.

(Semidor 2006)

Like many in this field of urban sound studies, Semidor also supports the usefulness of this soundwalk method 'to help urban planners and other town designers to improve the outside acoustics in cities' (Semidor 2006).

I will not review here all research work committed to improving (sonic) urban planning using the 'soundwalk' as a method, but I will mention two or three articles that give an overview of the state-of-the-art of the method and offer to further improve, not only its technical efficiency but also its reproducibility, starting with Jin Yong Jeon, Joo Young Hong, and Pyoung Jik Lee's paper, to which reference can be made for a review of these approaches (Jeon, Hong, and Lee 2013).

Soundwalks were developed starting in the 1970s by several pioneers in soundscape research [They] have been conducted individually as well as in groups, [but] even when soundwalks are performed individually, researchers accompany participants to mark evaluation locations and audio-visual scenes on maps. [...] Recent studies have mainly focused on urban contexts including urban streets, residential areas, parks, and urban squares [and] several [of them] planned soundwalk routes to include various types of urban spaces and elements that contribute to the urban environment.

(Jeon, Hong, and Lee 2013: 803–804)

Jeon, Hong, and Lee's study 'proposes a soundwalk procedure that is applicable to the evaluation of urban soundscapes' in order to narrow the variability of factors that may influence the results of soundwalks (Jeon, Hong, and Lee 2013: 804).

This whole article deals with acoustic studies or sound studies, not ethnographies. It means that the sonic dimension revealed has a poor connection with the culture of the studied social group. Moreover, these soundwalk methods are used in urban and architecture studies to assess the soundscape qualities of the environment. This is not the usual programme of ethnographies by anthropologists, more interested in understanding how local people of the targeted social group deal with the sonic dimension in their everyday lives. The nuance may appear slight, but it explains why a soundwalk, sometimes determined by the researcher, based on a listening at 'evaluation positions' and survey using a questionnaire to fill out (when respondents noticed any positive or negative characteristics of the urban soundscape during that walk), remains disconnected from their mundane experience of the sonic environment. To complete the survey, structured or semi-structured interviews concerning soundscape elements such as soundmarks, keynote sounds, preferred sound sources, contexts affecting soundscape perception, expectations, and impressions of sites may be administered to participants (inspired of course by Raymond Murray Schafer's [(1977) 1994] work). Along the same lines, we can refer to the 'Positive Soundscape Project' of the interdisciplinary team of William J. Davies et al. (2013).

In the same vein as the methods developed for urban sound engineering, Julien Tardieu and colleagues (2015) proposes a method to improve the method used by others, much as Jeon, Hong, and Lee (2013) do for soundwalks. This time, the focus is on *ex situ* (laboratory) listening tests to facilitate and improve or make less 'subjective' the choice of sound samples that are played back to subjects. The samples mentioned are the soundtracks proposed for

reactivated listening by Augoyard (2001), to name but one. ‘A typical first step of most studies involves collecting soundscape samples, which has one major limitation: it is a selection from the scientist’s own representation of the urban soundscape being studied’ (Tardieu et al. 2015: 1). The tool is being improved, so that the protocol is worthwhile in all situations, a tool detached from sociocultural contexts and their in-depth studies. Three questions/situations are offered to online respondents: ‘imagine what you hear in the city in this situation x’. This is followed by an analysis that groups words according to semantic categories (‘deduced from the semantic links between the forms, grouped in two macro categories: sound sources and human activities’) set *ex post* by the researchers. ‘These different distributions of sound sources and human activities can be used to guide future soundscape recordings in the field [...]. These results can also be used to guide the selection of soundscapes samples either from a database [...] or from a soundscape design tool’ (5). To summarize, it is about making a sound recording (real or mounted) that most closely resembles what should sound like an urban sound environment for respondents. I am not further developing an exhaustive inventory of this type of work here, as the degree of technical refinement and, above all, the objectives of which are of no real interest to the questions raised by ethnological and anthropological research.

Psycholinguists finally took over Schafer’s work by revisiting the notions of sound categories (Schafer forged and used *etic* categories whilst ethnologists are interested in *emic* categories). These categorization issues are of great interest to ethnologists, and particularly to ethno-ecologists (part of my own work pertains to ethnoecology, which is interested in ‘ecology, perceived, experienced, practiced, by others’). Danièle Dubois, Catherine Guastavino, and Manon Raimbault (2006) propose to ‘bridge the gap between individual sensory experiences and sociological representations of soundscapes’, using the psycholinguistic analysis which mediates between individual experiences and collective representations shared in language and elaborated as knowledge. For that purpose, these psycholinguists apply an *ex situ* methodology: they give subjects pre-recorded sounds to hear.

In the following experiments, the acoustic stimuli were acoustic recordings of complex and meaningful everyday sounds and environments, rather than *a priori* parameterised stimuli as the ones involved in studying perceptual categories. We first present results of experiments using recordings of isolated domestic sounds and recordings of actual urban soundscapes. We then discuss the findings in terms of cognitive representations of environmental sounds.  
(Dubois, Guastavino, and Raimbault 2006: 867)

This cognitive (but non-cognitivist) approach to urban soundscapes uses verbal data to access everyday life auditory categories. Puig and I didn’t know about this study when we published our paper presenting our methodology ‘Mics in the ear’ (see below). My ‘sound postcards experiment’ differs, as I was offering informants pieces of the recorded urban sonic environment to listen to. The different approach here has noteworthy results which suggest ‘that the meaning attributed to sounds act as a determinant for sound quality evaluations’ (Dubois, Guastavino, and Raimbault 2006: 865). Heuristically speaking, the proposal deserves to be deepened and above all tested in real, ethnographic fieldwork. In any case, this highlights the value of interdisciplinary avenues.



**Figure 49.4** Part of a loud sound system unpacked for a birth celebration (*subu'*), Bashtl, Cairo, Egypt, 18 November 2016, 4.30 p.m. Photograph by Vincent Battesti.

My criticism of those sound studies, as an anthropologist concerns the failure to take into account the social and cultural dimension of experience. Many of these studies may not mention the social space in which they are conducted (Figure 49.4): urban informants are subjects of experience, in Taiwan, Los Angeles, Berlin, or Nairobi, it is the universality of their psychological processes towards the sonic world that is the focus of the methodologies deployed.

## The global approach of the World Soundscape Project

This chapter does not follow a chronological logic. I proceed by discussing the World Soundscape Project and Raymond Murray Schafer's work dealing with 'soundscapes' (Schafer [1977] 1994). Its history is well known, but I cannot afford not to mention some of these fundamentals in order to position our own approach as ethnographers. These works inevitably seduce us with their holistic approach to the sound environment. The concept of 'soundscape' is intended to conceive of the sound environment by integrating the listener's relationship (conscious or not) and the symbolic significance of sounds, especially those of nature. Musician and environmentalist, Schafer's pioneering work – contemporaneous with Steven Feld's – has had a considerable impact yet contains a range of ethnocentric assumptions: natural sounds, for example, are presumed to be the object of a harmonious

orchestration ('the harmony of the world') that is superior to industrial sounds. His musical analysis of a landscape structured by tonic and dynamic perspectives (keynote sounds, signals sounds, soundmarks, etc.) drove him to propose 'sound design,' understood as the way 'to improve the acoustic environment.' His melioristic perspective aims to reduce 'unhealthy' sounds or attempts to preserve others that are deemed characteristic of a place or community (the famous Vancouver foghorn, for instance, see Schafer and World Soundscape Project 1978). 'Acoustic ecology' (Truax 1978) is a direct result of Murray Schafer's World Soundscape Project.

An educational ambition to raise public awareness of the sound environment also led Schafer to propose the first of the soundwalks. 'Schafer's method is often still used today and typically involves a group of people being led around an area or along a route. Silence is maintained for the duration – which may be as long as an hour – and impressions of the entire soundscape discussed only at the end' (Davies et al. 2013: 226). This is an experiment that voluntarily places the subjects in a state of heightened sensibility to their sound environment. In many respects, the work initiated in Vancouver by Schafer in the early days of sound studies promotes a positive approach in the analysis of our sound environments and analytical tools aimed at an unrecognized cultural universality.

Schafer and sound studies seem to represent a mix of disciplines: history, psychology, acoustic, ecology, etc. My own approach is equally interdisciplinary; therefore, it is not an issue I want to criticize. I believe cross-disciplinary analysis opens up new science frontiers. In a chapter on ethnographic methodologies, however, I am hard put to acknowledge sound studies to be ethnographic. These approaches are undoubtedly stimulating, and in recent years there have been many attempts to address the issue of sound, especially in urban contexts, to overcome the work on 'noise' when they were just broaching it in terms of one-dimensional sound maps; that of decibels.

## Methodologies for sonic ethnographies?

Anthropologists have the advantage over other researchers in that, through long-term participant in situ observation, they have first-hand experience of the sensory lives of the peoples they study. Participant observation also requires long-term training or apprenticeship, which they should not play down or forget. The use of ethnographic observation permits, on the one hand, the acquisition of background knowledge essential for an understanding and analysis of the practices of daily life of a social group. On the other hand, it represents a commitment by the researcher, an embodied apprenticeship of the sensitivities at work, to the practice of decentring their sensory universe to learn that of others, a new balance of the senses, the always arbitrary (I mean social and cultural) local division of the senses and their practices, the meaning and emphasis attached to each of the modalities of perception (Howes 1991: 3) and so forth.

With their fieldwork-proven methodology, do ethnologists explore all dimensions of existence? Ethnographic works that focus clearly on – or seriously consider – the sonic

dimensions of existence with ad hoc methodologies are (still) rare. This does not mean that no one is working on it. Many researchers are committed to an anthropology of the senses – or a sensory anthropology as promoted by Sarah Pink (2009). For the time being, it is the plurality of approaches that dominates this aspect of anthropology in fieldwork: cognitivist approaches, use of empathy and the researcher's body, field recordings.

I will not dwell at length on the many articles and books with *pro-domo* pleas that state the importance of the ethnographies of the sensible: the methodologies invented and/or used to ethnograph the sound dimension of existence are what interests me here.

Some anthropologists argue in favour of a quite radical shift in anthropology: a cognitivist perspective (for instance, Wathelet and Candau 2013). This represents a return to the laboratory to conduct experiments and collect data. I regard this, perhaps mistakenly, as the consequence of a crisis of confidence in ethnographic data and/or an overconfidence in the supposedly 'objective' and often quantitative data provided by a laboratory experiment governed by positive science. David Howes's criticism of Sarah Pink's position in a debate in the journal *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie sociale* seems appropriate here:

By stating that anthropologists should look to neurology for 'essential understandings of sensory perception and experience', Pink makes it clear that any indigenous ideas about perception must play second fiddle to the 'essential' pronouncements of the neurologists. While I think that dialogue between anthropologists and neurologists can be informative for both sides (indeed, anthropologists might be able to tell neurologists something about how culture tunes the neurons), it is important to keep in mind that neuroscience is itself a product of culture in its particular research aims, methods and interpretations, and therefore cannot provide an a-cultural, a-historical paradigm for understanding cultural phenomena.

(David Howes in Pink and Howes 2010: 335)

Even advocates of cognitive approaches such as Dubois, Guastavino, and Raimbault cool their ardour stating that 'the recent cognitivist approach to audition has remained within the same experimental paradigm, focusing mainly on low-level perceptual features rather than semantic features resulting from identification and categorisation processes' (Dubois, Guastavino, and Raimbault 2006).

Sarah Pink, in attempting to reformulate the anthropology of senses (founded by David Howes), argues for a sensuous ethnography. In the great debates that anthropology has been experiencing in recent years, this is one of the issues up in the air, and many people are trying to operationalize it (but, let us be clear, not necessarily on sound issues). For instance, Paul Stoller speaks highly of fieldwork through sensuous experience and the 'importance of understanding the "sensuous epistemologies" of many non-Western societies so that we can better understand the societies themselves and what their epistemologies have to teach us about human experience in general' (Stoller 1997).

Indeed, original approaches have been proposed to deepen the classic ethnographic methodology: among others, through empathy (Sayeux 2010) and the body (Jackson 2006). In the field on music and dance, a fieldworker's body can very voluntarily become

a tool of knowledge (this is always the case in the field, but not always in a conscious and claimed fashion). Evangelos Chrysagis and Panas Karampampas emphasize

the sheer physicality of the ethnographic encounter and the forms of sociality that gradually emerge between self and other. Researchers' immersion in sonic events and the flow of movement induces bodily responses that render fieldwork an intensely visceral experience. By employing their bodies as tools of research, ethnographers find themselves in spaces of sonic and kinetic intimacy and reciprocity with their informants, which articulate what Rouch called 'shared anthropology' (*anthropologie partagée*) (2003).

(Chrysagis and Karampampas 2017: 3)

It is the case, for instance, of Phil Jackson, who offers a 'sensual ethnography' of the clubbing world:

I started with the notion of 'presence' specific to the methodology of participant observation, but I modified this methodology a little bit so that it sounds more like a 'participant sensation'. The first step was to let my feelings run free in order to situate myself in the social space under investigation. So, I danced, flirted, used drugs and alcohol, spent nights with friends and strangers. For the first three months, I didn't ask any questions; I just learned to practice clubbing.

(Jackson 2006: 95–96)

The basis of Jackson's 'sensual anthropology' represents: 'the ability to feel, share and understand with empathy the sensations and feelings of the people around us without imposing a pre-existing theoretical framework' (Jackson 2006: 96). The word is out: empathy. I mentioned above the usual difficult issue of reflexivity that ethnographers encounter when collecting data during fieldwork, the real 'black box' of the discipline (Battesti and Puig 2006). Pink expresses the same assessment:

I was often disappointed to find how little other ethnographers (whose work demonstrates so well the significance of the senses in culture and society) have written about the processes through which they came to these understandings. In this vein, I would urge contemporary ethnographers of the senses to be more explicit about the ways of experiencing and knowing that become central to their ethnographies, [...] to acknowledge the processes through which their sensory knowing has become academic knowledge.

(Pink 2009: 2)

I have previously tried to explain the general use of empathy, always in use, consciously or not (except for hardliner ethno-methodologists) (Battesti 2006: 168). Similar to Phil Jackson, Anne-Sophie Sayeux made use of her body experience to understand how one is feeling about electronic music, developing the idea of the 'body-ear' (*corps-oreille*) (Sayeux 2010: 230).

If I have advocated to take into account the use of empathy, use we make anyway, and finally frame it methodologically, I retain a certain mistrust on its heuristic qualities if empathy is to become the phenomenological alpha and omega of a fieldwork methodology, on the sensory as on other fields. As Howes pointed out, 'by universalising the subjective sensations of the individual, phenomenology ignores the extent to which perception is a cultural construct' (Howes in Pink and Howes 2010: 335).



Whatever the methodology used in ethnographies, the aim is always the same: approaching as much as possible an adequate description of how people live, experience, practice, in our case, the sonic dimension of (a part of) their lives. Agata Stanisz, through 'audioethnography', opens up a new perspective to do fieldwork. She puts into practice audioethnography with truck drivers working for Western European freight companies who inhabit the cabs of their tractor units. It is field recording as a tool, her goal being to describe through sound the daily life of this occupational group: 'In the case of my studies, doing ethnographic research through sound means listening, recording, editing registered sounds and, with their help, developing acoustic representations of not so much the drivers' community, but rather their activities, events which they co-created and took part in' (Stanisz 2017b: 58–59). In my opinion, this method is particularly well suited to research on an occupational group.

Field recording must be understood as one of the research methods of sonic ethnography and a way to create alternative representations of fieldwork knowledge. Application of field recording in ethnographic research makes it possible [to] track down social patterns, connections between collective emotions, auditory practices and social structures, which usually remain hidden and faded out in textual representations. Doing field recordings also allows the researcher to experience anthropological fieldwork in a more sensuous and immersive way. Field recording as an ethnographic practice focuses on extra-musical and extra-verbal sounds. It is a sort of deep listening: listening with particular attention.

(Stanisz 2017a: 1)

'What about ethnography in and through sound?', the question that Steven Feld has constantly repeated (Feld and Brenneis 2004). Feld not only worked to understand the sound and aural universe of the Kaluli, but used and edited his field recordings of Kaluli daily life on LPs (and actually on radio programmes on National Public Radio [NPR], using multitrack recording and *musique concrète* compositional techniques) to continue his ethnological reflection, documentation, and demonstration, since his first LP *Music of the Kaluli* in 1982. Inspired by Jean Rouch, Feld introduced what he called 'dialogic editing', playback and feedback with the local community. The continuators of his approach – 'to have the sound raise the question about the indexicality of voice and place, to provoke you to hear sound making as place making' (Feld in Feld and Brenneis 2004: 465) – can be found in quite different fields of ethnography. Nadja Monnet and Maribel Tovar, for instance, depict an ethnological portrait of an urban space, the central square of Barcelona (the square of Catalonia), through photographs and sound recordings. Photographs and sound ambiances have been 'truly converted into working tools and sources of reflection, which have enabled us to build the ethnography of this square' (Monnet and Tovar 2006: 5). This is done through a distancing from the sound material itself: it is no longer the devotion to the most faithful sound recording of the reality, nor a calculation of the best sampling to submit it to a panel of experimental subjects: 'The photographic and sound registers that we have created have not been considered as mimetic productions of the reality, but rather as traces thereof. Like ethnographic text, they are constructed objects' (5).

Olivier Féraud's ethnography on the sonic environments in a popular neighbourhood of Naples expresses a clear statement:

Field recording was a central practice during the case study, the whole methodology developed around it. Field recording is not only justified by the fact that we are interested in sound, it is not only a 'sampling' tool. It constitutes the methodological pivot of sonic anthropology [...] because it allows, by considering the positioning of the sound recordist, to reflect the relationships that are established in a sonic dimension between individuals in their environment.

(Féraud 2010: 243–244)

It is to his credit that he dedicated an entire chapter of his PhD thesis to his methodology. Along with participant observation, he placed, for his own work documentation, his microphones at particular 'points of listening' (as we have particular 'points of view', see Chion 1985), the actors' point of auditory reception: from the window of a building where women hear the call of the street vendor, for example. For the collection of discourses, which is the third level of his ethnographic methodology, he used field recordings and played them back to people from the very same neighbourhood or from other neighbourhoods, allowing for socially situated feedback and to develop his research problematic. He also used the commented-walk methodology together with 'situated interviews', interviews in a context of listening with the inhabitants.

In those cases, working on sound with sound, a challenging but effective project, makes perfect sense. It should be mentioned that there are cases of ethnographies whose fieldwork dictates the default method: Mohamad Hafeda used the pretext of exploring sonic material to examine notions of division, connection, and negotiation between and within contested sectarian communities in Beirut, and especially on the borderline between two adjacent neighbourhoods divided along the Sunni–Shiite sectarian. He collected the street sounds from inside taxis he used to get around and from walking journeys in the two neighbourhoods, including voices and sounds overheard from inside shops as well as those collected outside and on pavements and streets. 'This research method responds to the previously found site sensitivities defined by the prohibition of photography and the difficulty of site accessibility due to security and surveillance performed by formal political/militia groups in both neighborhoods' (Hafeda 2011: 32).

## Tentative ethnographic research in Cairo for a comprehensive sonic dimension

For the methodological overview of possible approaches to the sonic dimensions of existence, this chapter does not aim to list exhaustively ethnographies on sonic dimensions but, rather, to display some notes on part of my readings that can contribute to explain the methodologies I chose and tested (while sometimes they were then unknown to me) and their a-historic phylogeny.

Perhaps I need to clarify why it is necessary to use alternative methodologies to the canons of ethnography to examine this relationship to the sonic dimensions of existence, beyond that congenital deafness of the discipline. In our field, in a word: verbalization. For those who are not familiar with the working methods of fieldwork anthropologists, let us keep in mind that the customary method is, in addition to – or through – participant observation, interviewing (clearly distinguished from the questionnaire). The purpose of the experimental procedure I undertook in Cairo (Figure 49.5) was to obtain verbal descriptions of the acoustic experiences of city dwellers of diverse social and residential backgrounds. This endeavour poses a particular methodological challenge in the field of sensory studies. An ethnography of local acoustic ambiances, received and produced in Cairo, becomes possible when these are treated as ‘social productions’ (Battesti 2009). Research in sensory studies and sound studies has demonstrated the need for precise observations of this neglected dimension of our relationship – which is always first sensory – to our social and ecological environment. While an analytical grid has been proposed (Battesti 2009, 2013) for understanding the different ways of relating to this sound matter – deliberately repeating and modifying the framework proposed by Steven Feld (1984) – no satisfactory tools have yet been devised or perfected that would allow us to overcome the obstacle that the weak verbalization that most of our sensory activities represent. Without a discourse to build on, ethnographers find themselves at a loss. Even keeping my distance from linguistic determinism (the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis) which assumes that ‘we conceive a universe that the language has already patterned’ (Benveniste 1966: 6), the fact remains that I have to consider semantic distinctions and inbuilt ontologies within the language: obviously, language affects the ways we conceptualize our world, our worldview, or world hearing as it may be. We need verbalization.



**Figure 49.5** Promenade on a bridge over the Nile, Downtown, Cairo, Egypt, 3 November 2016, 5.00 p.m. Photograph by Vincent Battesti.

Studies on sound perception suggest that this mechanism most often operates almost unconsciously. This is widely verified in the sensory domain: the retroactive loops between perception and sensation, very fast (almost synchronous), are most often unconscious, probably avoiding a cognitive overload. Is it the unconscious nature of the mechanism of sound perceptions that explains why they are weakly able to be voiced? This may not always be the case. At any rate, in Cairo, the few words spontaneously used to talk about this sonic dimension give it its evanescent quality: sonic ambiances are a central dimension of urban life – they teach us about long-term and situated participant observation, a ‘thickly-textured thorough’, in the few but central words of David Howes. To say more than ‘the ambiance is good’ (*al-gaw halū*) is rare and difficult for urban actors in public spaces; the judgements tend to be summed up in mere polarized hedonistic terms. The difficulty is real to verbalize. ‘The atmosphere is good. There you go.’ This relationship between urbanites and the sonic dimensions of their city, one of the objectives of this research, is largely unspeakable for the actors themselves, which is not the least of the difficulties of this ethnographic study.

How to work on the sound dimension? How to design the ‘satisfactory tool’ to make people talk? These ‘how’ questions depend of course, once again, on the ‘what’ and the ‘why’. The ‘what’ and ‘why’ said in few words is the everyday relationship Cairo people have with an essential but scholarly underestimated sonic dimension of the city, varying with the neighbourhoods, received and produced, highlighting also the relationships between the inhabitants of Cairo. The overall sonic dimension of the city – that was thick and present to the outsiders we were – rather than the effects of a sonic device or a special situation: the everyday life. I, and when the ethnologist Nicolas Puig fortunately supported me in this project, we aimed to get as close as possible to the local daily experience. I confessed at the beginning of this chapter that I had unfortunately not established the complete methodological state of the art in the field of sound studies, a quick overview in ethnology had not revealed many things to me. So, everything was to be invented. Let’s evoke two of these trial and error experiments with ethnographic methods.

## The aural postcard experiment

To bypass the apparent difficulty of verbalization, I first tried the ‘aural postcard experiment’, a kind of ‘reactivated listening’ (Augoyard 2001). I used sound ambiances that I had recorded in different neighbourhoods and situations. The informants had to comment on the recordings while listening to them on headphones. The experience showed that the inhabitants of Cairo are able to determine – if not always specific to the neighbourhood – the type (and therefore a categorization) of neighbourhoods offered for listening based on the sonic ambiances I had recorded for playback. However, to objectify their answer, I made them justify themselves, the subjects of the experiment highlighted some characteristic sounds, some ‘soundmarks’. Listening to a lively evening in the city centre, towards Azbakiyya, it was the density of repeated hits from the horn of car traffic or the cry of newspaper merchants (*‘al-Ahram, al-Akhbar, al-Gumhuriyya!’*); listening to a

shopping street (*sūq*) in the popular Fatimid district of Darb al-Ahmar, it was the rubbing in the dust of the *šibšib* (sandals) and the familiar address of the merchants or greetings between acquaintances (which sign territories where mutual acquaintance prevails, unlike the places of anonymous walks downtown). Some sounds can clearly signal an urban space: the cry of merchants, for example. Nonetheless, this ‘aural postcard experiment’ remained steeped in my culture, as I choose what to record selecting the orientation of the mic (and therefore the ‘frame’), I choose the sounding object or situation recorded, I choose when to press the ‘record’ and ‘stop’ buttons of my minidisc and then my Zoom H4n (a digital portable recording device), the day and the moment, and so on. This means that I was creating a kind of sound montage of the sounds I was giving to hear, a montage embedded in my culture. And the difficulty of capturing the other’s intimate experience of a sonic city persists: it has to be seized in situ and by the people concerned.

## The mics in the ears experiment

To get at least a set of local descriptors and local, emic categorizations of this sonic material in which Cairo is immersed, a terminological survey seems unavoidable. It was the first purpose of this procedure, the ‘mics in the ears’ Nicolas Puig and I set up. We opted for field recording made in situ by the people of Cairo (Battesti and Puig 2016). So, we opted for informants walking in the street through their neighbourhood with a sound recorder. Our approach, nonetheless, was radically different from the soundwalks previously mentioned and different too from the commented-walk method (Thibaud 2001). We asked local people we chose to perform one of their very daily walks, interacting as usual with their environment, but equipped with binaural mics: they were to forget they were wearing mics and not to focus on the recording aspect but on their usual business. A commented-walk method – an informant walking and the investigator recording the sounds and the informant’s impressions – would have been too artificial and would have missed the very everyday interactions of the informant with their socioecological environment. Binaural mics in an informant’s ears record the most possible intimate exposure to sound ambience during a routine alone trip. We used stereo binaural microphones/earphones (Roland), small enough to fit inside the ears (like intra-aural headphones), along with a digital recorder and a GPS device. We asked the respondents to take a daily walk route in their neighbourhood – during their commute from home to work, or while shopping in local stores, etc. – for a duration of 20–30 minutes, alone (without us anthropologists) with this non-intrusive equipment. This method does not record a ‘soundscape’. This technique is a unique and personal experiment and gives unique and personal results, specific to an informant and a space-time: not an objective or unbiased recording, as even the shape of the informant’s head plays a role (the shape of the nose and ears, or the use or not of a veil by women, etc.), the informant’s attitude in public space, whether they bend their head, greet people, turn their head to talk or to react to sound, smell, contact, and visual stimuli – especially because while walking, their environment is changing. But still, only sounds reaching the informant’s ears are recorded, not what this informant is listening to.

The soundtrack was then replayed on the headphones by the informant, with us, and the binaural's 3D sound reproduction (and its spatial of psychoacoustic quality) used to trigger off verbalization, the precious data all anthropologists are looking for. 'Re-immersed', informants are brought back into their own actions, movements, and displacements in their neighbourhood. They relive their routine trip in the city, and we record their comments: 'Please, tell us what do you hear?' Within this approach, what participants perceived as negative or positive acoustic elements is not an end in itself (to build a better city, etc.). What motivates anthropologists performing such an ethnography is not noise mapping, or 'to enhance and design urban soundscapes from urban planning levels' (Jeon, Hong, and Lee 2013: 806) – actually a kind of hygienist paradigm or agenda – but to increase their knowledge of how social groups or a society works, deals with its environment, or participates in it.

The GPS device that the informant was equipped with on their walk helped us to check the route the informant took afterward, and accompanying the transcribed comments, it helped us to spot the threshold effects, when 'entering' a *hāra* (sub-neighbourhood, alley), entering a shopping street, home, a new ambiance, etc. After listening to the recording, we had a further brief talk with the informant to deepen some topics.<sup>2</sup>

## Conclusion

To conclude, we have explored other possibilities in our tentative ethnographic methodologies, such as work with blind people in Cairo, which took place while Florian Grond and Piet Devos (2016) were exploring the same path (but with a slightly different purpose) in Canada. Furthermore, other researchers have highlighted the heuristics of sensory impairment (Keating and Hadder 2010). I would like to emphasize the necessity to not forget that working on the sonic dimension of the world and of our existence is an arbitrary cut-out: in Western sensorium, we tie 'sonic' to 'auditory', but the 'auditory' modality is surely embedded in multisensory practices and competences. To go back to an uneasy multisensory ethnography that explores the multiplicity of sensorialities, as Puig did along with his team in Beirut (Kassatly et al. 2016), seems to me unavoidable.

## Notes

1. The word *naʿt* is a Urdu term referring to poetry in praise of the prophet Muhammad, which is usually said in Arab-speaking contexts as *madhī* or *madhī nabawī*.
2. This chapter devoted to methodologies is not the place to provide our results – they are stimulating, by the way. The methodology and initial results (Battesti and Puig 2016) and then the main part of the analysis have been published along with the raw and analysed data (Battesti and Puig 2020).

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