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Sounds of survival, weaponization of sounds: Exploring sonic *lieux de mémoire*

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Abstract

In this article, we argue that sonic experiences in contexts of organized violence can be understood as sonic *lieux de mémoire* (sonic sites of memory). Exploring how these sonic sites are indissociable from the individual and collective experience of places, we show how they form networks of relationships within which the memory of silences and sounds is constructed and actualized. We also argue that these sonic *lieux de mémoire* can be seen from two perspectives, representing the dark and bright sides of the same phenomenon. On one hand, sound, music, and silence are used as weapons in organized violence, for example, in detention facilities or during wars or political conflicts. On the other hand, they constitute symbolic resources, positive tools that contribute to the (re)construction of subjectivities and thus can serve as tools for survival and resistance. In both cases, sound and musical practices are essential facets of what makes us human.

Keywords

lieux de mémoire, music, organized violence, silence, sonic *lieux de mémoire*, sonic sites of memory, sound, sound memory

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The growth of sound studies and the anthropology of sound have changed how we think about the interrelationship between politics and what might be called “the aural.” This shift of attention toward the forms, locations, and processes of listening has revealed the ways people use what is audible and inaudible, sounds and silences, to make sense of their experiences (DeNora, 2000). In parallel, studies in the political anthropology of music have shown the extent to which

music is sound but also a place: a place of tension and release; a place of encounter with the self and with the other; a place of production, staging, and consumption; a place of reproduction but also of transformation. In short, a place of power, a place of politics. (Pandolfi and McFalls, 2018: 7)¹

But what should we make of sound and musical practices in contexts of organized violence? How should we conceptualize the dynamic relationship between sound and the tangible experience of places, people, and events?

This article centers on two ideas. The first is that sonic experiences in contexts of organized violence can be understood not just as political events but also as *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory) to use Pierre Nora’s (1997) memorable term and more precisely what we propose to call “sonic lieux de mémoire.” Far from being fixed or canonized, these sonic *lieux de mémoire* are in constant flux, allowing traces of the past to be retained and actualized at the heart of the constitution of subjectivity. Indissociable from the individual and collective experience of places, they form networks of non-predetermined relationships (Solomos, 2018: 95) within which the memory of silences and sounds is constructed and actualized.

The second idea is that these sonic *lieux de mémoire* can be seen from two perspectives, representing the dark and bright sides of the same phenomenon. On one hand, sound, music—a sub-category of sound ordered by certain aesthetic and cultural rules—and silence are used as weapons in organized violence, for example, in detention facilities, or during wars or political conflicts. On the other hand, they constitute symbolic resources that contribute to the (re)construction of subjectivities, particularly in the aftermath of forced displacements or extreme violence. In both cases, sound and musical practices are intangible resources that are essential facets of what makes us human. These resources can be mobilized as survival tools or as devices for surveillance, torture, and the destruction of subjectivity.

Weaponization of sounds and silence

A significant number of recent studies have looked at the development of technologies of sound control and the ways sound is used by the police and the military. This research has shown that the goal of such practices and technologies, which are usually the product of military research programs, is to destroy subjectivities and control bodies (Volcler, 2013).

Some studies have interrogated the links between sonic practices and torture (Chornik, 2018; Grant, 2014; Ochoa Gautier, 2017; Papaeti, 2013b), while others investigated the experience of silence among victims of organized violence (Atlani-Duault, 1997, 2007; Atlani-Duault and Rousseau, 2000) or the sonic experience of war, for combatants as

well as civilians (Daughtry, 2015; Goodman, 2010; Hartford, 2017; Nuxoll, 2014; Pilzer, 2015; Sykes, 2018; Velasco-Pufleau, 2018, 2019; Williams, 2019).

Adding to this field of research, in this issue Maria Ristani analyzes the weaponization of sounds and silence using accounts by former prisoners in Syria's Saydnaya prison, located a few kilometers from Damascus. Particularly since the second half of the 20th century, the use of silence and sound as means of torture has been documented in numerous places of incarceration around the world. One of the most important landmarks in the development of this field of research is Suzanne Cusick's pioneering work on the network of secret prisons established abroad by the United States as part of its "war on terror" (Cusick, 2006, 2008, 2013). Similar strategies have also been identified in prisons in the United States and Latin America (Ochoa Gautier, 2017), in certain Greek prisons during the civil war and the military junta of 1967–1974 (Papaeti, 2013a, 2013b), in Chilean detention facilities during the Pinochet dictatorship (Chornik, 2013), and in Portuguese prisons during the Estado Novo (Duarte, 2015).

In Saydnaya, however, sound is completely forbidden: no noise, no speech, no whispers, not even cries of pain when being tortured. This extreme sensory deprivation is part of the system of control. One hears nothing, day or night, except the voices of those who have just arrived and are not yet familiar with the rule of absolute silence, which is soon beaten into them—nothing but the last gasps of people being beaten to death. Sound is the only reference point for the blindfolded prisoners, and it is reduced to the absolute minimum. Forced to live in silence and without the use of their eyes, the prisoners describe how their auditory perception becomes sharper and they gradually piece together a geography of the prison and their collective life thanks to variations in the types of silence and bursts of sound—doors, punches, electric cables, screams. The ability to listen to silence and its nuances becomes a means of survival.

At the same time, the rare noises in the midst of this silence, mostly the screams of people being tortured, are likened to "sonic attack[s]." This is a form of torture in itself, heightened greatly by the cocoon of total silence that surrounds the prisoners. At the margins of silence and deliberately amplified by it, any sound, and especially the few unrestrained sounds of Saydnaya prison—in other words the sounds of violence—can cause hyperstimulation and so becomes another form of "sonic torture" (Hill, 2012). For those who were released from the prison and can talk about it, it also serves as a sonic *lieu de mémoire* that marks them in their innermost being.

In a completely different context, Nicolas Puig's study reverses this perspective. He is interested in how the "sound culture" of everyday life in one neighborhood of a Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon functions as a marker of identity and resistance to political violence among people who have been living "on the margins of citizenship" for over 70 years. He looks at three types of data: song lyrics about life in refugee camps, day-to-day sound practices in the Shatila camp and the Sabra neighborhood, and residents' perceptions of these places in the form of a compilation of "sonic journeys." Puig describes an acoustic community that has grown up around the camp's unique "soundmarks" (Schafer, 1994: 10). He analyzes how sensory production and perception reflect "the existence of sensory politics." From this perspective, manipulation of the acoustic environment of the camp "represent[s] the refugees' many attempts to control their environment in a context of limited possibilities." Sound practices offer residents a way "to

act upon and in their living space” and “give the refugee camp, which over time has become a poverty-stricken cosmopolitan district, a specific identity.”

Music constitutes indeed a place of resistance to the forgetting and historical erasing of memories, particularly in post-conflict contexts. In the third article, Kathy Nguyen revisits a corpus of pre-1975 Vietnamese music and songs, focusing especially on pieces that deal with war and soldiers (*người lính*) in a country that has recently experienced a bloody conflict and then the dramatic triumph of one side over the other. Vietnamese music from before 1975 becomes a sonic *lieu de mémoire* of the experience of the war and the exile that followed it for those who were defeated. It offers the opportunity to articulate stories and openly express experiences of erasure that are too often ignored by historians and histories of the Vietnam War. Based on discussions with a South Vietnamese veteran, Nguyen’s exploration of the sounds and silences in a sonic *lieu de mémoire* shows how pre-1975 Vietnamese music has been used as a survival tool. Music materiality can reconfigure individual memories and the nostalgia they evoke, while giving resonance to the silences and absences of the past.

Listening experiences and survival processes

Sound and music can also serve as vital symbolic resources for individuals facing existential ruptures triggered by their experience of organized violence. These ruptures necessitate the reconfiguration and renegotiation “of taken-for-granted meanings and routine situations” (Kadianaki and Zittoun, 2014: 192). People’s experience of the world is mediated corporeally, symbolically, and materially through sound and musical practices with which they can construct narratives about themselves and their experiences (Born, 2011; Manabe, 2019; Velasco-Puffleau, 2020). In contexts of forced displacement or exile, for example, sound and musical practices are ways of giving meaning to “new experiences of place” (Agier, 2008: 85), whether in order to demarcate spaces and temporalities or to inhabit them. Music enables the re-actualization of political aspects of private memories that may conflict with or contradict official narratives of the experience of migration.

Nevertheless, studies into the trajectories of people whose lives were shattered by war and exile have only recently started to take the sound dimension of survival into account. For a long time, the starting point for exploring this topic was predominantly music-based research into political aspects of the large-scale humanitarian concerts that emerged on the media scene in the 1970s (Chouliaraki, 2013; Garofalo, 1999; Velasco-Puffleau, 2013). From the 1971 Concert for Bangladesh organized by George Harrison in Madison Square Garden, New York, to Live Aid in 1985 and Live 8 in 2005, these concerts featured world-famous pop stars performing to raise money for the victims of famines, often triggered by civil wars or so-called “natural” disasters. While the spotlights were on the stars, the people affected by these crises were paradoxically silent, limited to their roles as walk-on parts.

More recently, ethnomusicologists have analyzed the appropriation by or for refugees of musical ventures that have long been the preserve of pop stars and the entertainment industry. The *Refugees for Refugees* project in Belgium is one example of this phenomenon (Secheyaye and Martiniello, 2019). Likewise, musical practices in migration

contexts have been studied at several Franco-German summer schools organized by the Basque Anthropological Research Institute on Music (ARI) in Bayonne and the Center for World Music at the University of Hildesheim since 2017 (Laborde, 2019, 2020). Sound, music, and listening practices have become popular starting points for studying the negotiation of identities and the construction of communities, whether in reception centers, cities, or refugee camps (LeBlanc et al., 2019; Pistrick, 2018; Puig, 2009; Vougioukalou et al., 2019; Western, 2020).

Eckehard Pistrick followed several musicians in a German center for asylum seekers and refugees for 6 months. His article shows how their experiences of migration have transformed not just how they relate to others but also their relationships to music. The center houses around 900 people from 25 countries—a constantly changing population united, for a brief moment, in a space of surveillance and suspended time. In what Pistrick calls “sonic hospitality,” music represents a way for the musicians and their audience in the center to share the “travelling memories” (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2013) they bring with them into exile. But above all, Pistrick shows how music creates “accidental communities” (Rosen, 2017) made up of individuals from very different worlds and on divergent migratory or professional trajectories, some but not all of whom were professional musicians before leaving their home countries. For these people, music in the camp has a binary character “as a creativity *because of*, or *despite* their own existential humanitarian crisis.” According to Pistrick, “In this light, they interpret their doing alternatively as an act of resistance to the conditions they are exposed to, or as a necessity to continue their cultural activities in the context of a suspended life.”

Sound and musical practices can serve as important tools for negotiating and defying the enforced, inflexible, and often abject identities—victims, criminals, or just occasionally heroes—assigned to refugees by the media, political authorities, associations, or non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The anthropologist Émilie Da Lage and the Iraqi Kurdish musician Beshwar Hassan examine music as a tool for survival in a migration context. They met in the Grande-Synthe camp, in France, when Beshwar Hassan was on his way to the United Kingdom, his chosen destination at the end of a long migration journey. Following the musician’s route, they show how music can be a survival tool, creating ethical communities engaged in the production of a shared memory, whether within a family (using social networks to stay in touch with Beshwar Hassan’s brothers and mother, scattered in exile) or with other refugee musicians he met in the Grande-Synthe camp. The materiality of instruments and the musical traces produced by audio and video recordings of the migration route form “anchor points” that configure life stories, giving refugees the opportunity to speak, to act, and to narrate their exile.

For Katie Harling-Lee, writing in this issue, giving the musical experience a narrative form becomes an “ethical” question. Life experiences that deserve to be lived and narrated (Butler, 2005) are made visible and audible by performing and listening to music. Harling-Lee analyzes the way a musico-literary narrative can transform and give meaning to the experience of organized violence. She explores the sonic aspects of the siege of Sarajevo as described in Steven Galloway’s novel *The Cellist of Sarajevo* (Galloway, 2009) and draws on Michael Walzer’s (2015) work on war in *Just and Unjust Wars* to show that listening to music is a subjective experience that

makes sense of events, connecting them to a pre-conflict lived past and to a post-conflict future to be constructed. Her article offers a reflection on the shared humanity of listeners in contexts of organized violence.

Sonic *lieux de mémoire* in contexts of organized violence thus contribute to the reconfiguration of the “distribution of the sensible,” that is, not reconfiguring reality itself but “what is given to us as real, as the object of our perceptions and the field of our interventions” (Rancière, 2010: 148). These dynamic and performative sites of politics are actualized through the embodied experience of sound, the lived actuality of individuals, and the meaning given to events, whether in contexts of survival or destruction.

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1. *Translators' note:* Our translation. Unless otherwise stated, all translations of cited foreign language material in this article are our own.

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