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Ilana Sancovschi, Cristiane Rose Duarte

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# Testimony of a Congolese Refugee

## Presencing Atmospheres Through Listening

Ilana SANCOVSKI<sup>1</sup>,  
Cristiane Rose DUARTE<sup>2</sup>

*Abstract. The aim of the current article is to point out notes about a research method focused on investigating atmospheres based on sensitive listening of testimonies. Based on a research conducted in the migration and refuge field, it presents the case of a field experience where a Congolese refugee shared her story with students from a public school in Duque de Caxias, Rio de Janeiro. This case study enabled concluding that it is possible presencing a certain atmosphere by listening to ones' testimony. Moreover, the field experience showed the feasibility of seeing the emergence of other atmospheres that gradually intertwine and overlap in the space shared by different individuals.*

**Keywords.** *Atmosphere, Sensitive Listening, Testimony, Refuge*

### Introduction

When we started our research about the association between culture and space based on the ambiance five years ago at LASC<sup>3</sup>, we believed that a present and concrete experience was essential to assure the success of our study. However, our research has gained such spatial and temporal proportion that has stopped us from achieving the success through the concrete spatial experience. Literature became a great ally in our research, aimed at understanding how Jewish culture was materialized in spaces (Sancovski, 2017). We developed a tool, "Imagined Walks"<sup>4</sup> to 'experience' ambiances at different times and spaces by following the narratives. Therefore, we decided to deepen our research and pursuit new ways of presencing atmospheres and ambiances mediated by narratives that could highlight the subjectivities interested us.

Currently, we investigate the (de)construction of "inhabiting the exile" in the migration and refuge field. Based on the approach of diaspora theorists, we understand inhabiting based on the being-space dialectic (Brah, 2011) and consider ambiances as constitutive and fundamental part of experiencing life in a new place. Over the last year, we have dedicated to listen to testimonies of refugees who have narrated their life experiences during the process of (de)constructing their inhabiting. Thus, the current article points out notes about a method under construction, based on a field experience whose listening process enabled perceiving atmospheres already experienced, as well as building new ones. The first part of the article addresses the field experience context, which was the basis for the conceptual and methodological

1. LASC/PROARQ. Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, [ilana.sancovschi@gmail.com](mailto:ilana.sancovschi@gmail.com)

2. LASC/PROARQ. Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, [crsduarte@gmail.com](mailto:crsduarte@gmail.com)

3. Architecture, Subjectivity and Culture Laboratory. See at: [www.lasc.fau.ufrj.br](http://www.lasc.fau.ufrj.br)

4. Inspired in the "Commented Walks" methodology (Thibaud, 2002)

development of the current study. The second part, presents notes about the adopted method. Then we present the field experience report, which enabled concluding that one can experience an atmosphere through sensitive listening mediated by other individuals.

## Testimony and Context

One of the biggest challenges we faced before starting our research lied on convincing refugees and asylum seekers to share experiences, since being acknowledged - researchers - as trustworthy “listeners” by them was not a simple task. Thus, the pre-existence of a space to share and exchange experiences was a valuable and fruitful field for our research.

The current article presents the testimony of a Congolese refugee who lives in Rio de Janeiro, nowadays. Sophie’s<sup>5</sup> story was told by herself in one of the lectures held by the program promoted by PARES-Caritas. On 2019, we followed the program called “Refugees in Schools”<sup>6</sup>, whose refuge topic was mainly addressed to students of schools in Rio de Janeiro. The idea is that educating these students creates vectors of the awareness about the refuge topic, forming empathic networks to the cause, promoting greater acceptance of a new social reality capable of favoring refugees’ integration.

It is essential emphasizing that we listened to Sophie’s testimony in a classroom of a municipal school in Duque de Caxias; this event counted on the presence of approximately twenty children (mostly Afro-Brazilians at the age group 12 years), one teacher, the social worker trainee at Caritas, Sophie and the researcher. We focused our analysis Sophie’s testimony in interaction with students, based on the listening method. As the field report shows, listening enabled presencing different atmospheres experienced by the refugee in her testimony; it also enabled presencing an atmosphere in motion in the space shared by us; thus, somehow it constituted what Foucault ([1967] 2013) calls heterotopy.

## Testimony, Listening and Atmosphere

According to Selligman (2010), testimony must be understood since a complex set encompassing individuals’ perspective, narrative and ability to judge. Moreover, the superficial understanding about the testimony can lead to the spectacularization of pain that - in cases like the herein reported one, i.e., the traumatic experience of a refugee - can become quite recurrent and hide shades of the experience to be shared. The complexity of a testimony claimed by the aforementioned author is an important key in our research field. Thus, issues such as empathy, sensoriality and spatial sensitivity were also added to our understanding about testimonies to enable a sensitive listening capable of experiencing different atmospheres.

Lacapra (2005) addressed trauma in the context of history in order to highlight interaction between the claim for absolute truth and other historiographic factors or forces. Based on this perspective, the subjective dimension is an important factor in the history composition, since it gives relevance to testimonies, life reports, among others. According to the author, “empathy is a type of virtual, vicious experience [...], according to which individuals’ emotional response is associated with their respect for

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5. *The refugee’s name was changed to preserve her identity.*

6. See: [www.caritas-rj.org.br/refugiados-nas-escolas.html](http://www.caritas-rj.org.br/refugiados-nas-escolas.html)

the other and with the awareness the experience of the other is not their own experience” (Lacapa, 2005, 62).

In compliance with Lacapa’s perspective, we herein acknowledge that empathy is essential to enable effective sensitive listening. In addition, our research does not aim at finding the veracity of narratives; it is mainly focused on investigating the subjective experience of the other. Our listening experience has operated in an empathetic way - not in the sense of putting ourselves in the other’s place, but in welcoming and understanding the other’s place. Thus, sensitive listening enabled presencing the atmosphere mediated by the experience of others and, simultaneously, the atmosphere shared by us as listeners.

Barbier (2002) has defined sensitive listening based on his research on education, training and psychotherapy. He also stated that sensitive listening is based on empathy.

“Researchers must know how to feel the affective, imaginary and cognitive universe of others in order to deeply understand their attitudes, behaviors and system of ideas, values of symbols and myths” (2002, 1).

Interestingly, Barbier (2002) did not approach the spatial field in its strict sense, but we can understand that the sensitive approach used by him can lead to the understanding of space and of the atmospheres composing such a space. Finally, Barbier has also argued that sensitive listening should not be restricted to one interpretation. “Interpretive propositions” can only be made in a second moment, when meanings are borrowed from the cultural capital resulting from researchers’ experience (2002, 4).

As researchers in architecture and urbanism field, we used sensitive listening to adhere to the sensitive experience of space lived through testimonies. We presenced atmospheres in the transversality of meanings. We witnessed atmospheres mediated by others, which gained meaning throughout the listening, not only due to the narrated story, but also to voice tones and impositions, to reactions of listeners who shared the present space with the narrator, and to affections shared in this common space where refugee and students have gathered. Thus, listening gained much greater proportion than just hearing and it adds values and meanings to the space experienced at the time of listening.

Therefore, listening is the basis of our research; it is the initial moment when we make ourselves available to the sensitive experience of an atmosphere that gains new life in our own experiences. Our field experience in the case of the Congolese refugee concerned the record of her narrative, as well as her interaction with students. Reflections about this experience took shape from the first listening, and gained volume based on the re-listening process and on our own memories.

### **The Refugee Experience in Overlapping Atmospheres**

According to Augoyard (2007), *ambiance*, or atmosphere, is a concept easy to be felt, but hard to be explained. If the experience of a given atmosphere is directly linked to individuals’ sensations, perceptions and actions in space, the current study should overcome two obstacles: the first one lies on presencing atmospheres through listening and the second one concerns conveying the action in motion to readers. Thus, we made the option for presenting the written narrative of the field experience. Although we knew that writing could hide shades of sensitive experience, we tried to portray as much of the research and analysis process as possible.

As previously mentioned, our listening procedure took place in a school. We entered the classroom with students; they were excited about the opportunity to listen to a refugee<sup>7</sup>. The teacher apologized to Sophie for the mess. Sophie replied to him: "We were once like that too! This is normal." After children's anxiety was overcome, Sophie started telling her story.

Sophie started her testimony by introducing herself. She kept her voice in a lower tone at the time she approached her listeners, which indicated stress and introspection for having to go back to unpleasant places associated with her life experience. Yet, by using a very shy tone, she apologized for her Portuguese. Despite her accent, she was very fluent. The first sentences shared with the class allowed us witnessing an atmosphere, which appeared to involve her life. Her stress and shyness brought us to the experience of being in a new place where communication is an obstacle to overcome, where sounds of words are different and mean nothing. We witnessed an atmosphere that highlighted the feeling of being "out of place," of "not belonging."

Sophie moved on in her narrative, at this time, she talked about her professional training - "I studied in my country! I graduated in international relations" - full of pride. She also said she had a good job "when it all happened"; from here, her voice became sad, what suggested she wanted to erase what happened from her memories. Her testimony made clear, her sense of belonging and identity is linked to a place. Although Sophie has a job in Brazil, she associates her identity (including professional identity) with her original country, where she studied and worked.

Sophie explains the reason for conflicts taking place in her country before she talked about the hard times she experienced. She spoke about her country, and her voice was filled with pride, "my country ... is a rich country!" then, she compares it to Brazil when she said "it is ... like Brazil, where we are." Sophie's narrative seems to claim a sense of belonging, her voice and speech seek identification space. It is as she carried a double atmosphere; her identity was transited and changed in these atmospheres, she sometimes identified herself with the present place, sometimes with the place of origin. "I don't want what is happening to my country, to happen here!" She ended this passage by saying that whenever she talked about her country in her narrative, she would return to Brazil, her new country - once again she claimed the sense of belonging to the place.

Sophie's testimony also reports atrocities such as invasion, killing and rape taking place in several villages. Her angry tone of voice presented us a picture with strong colors and tense movements. These reports allowed us to witness an atmosphere of terror, which we shared with students. At that time, we perceived attentive and tense looks in the classroom. However, Sophie's voice assumed a lower and sad tone when started to talk about her personal experience, which indicated that it was really hard for her to talk about.

Sophie said that she left early that day and left her relatives at home. When she returned, it was no longer possible to enter her city because it had been taken by rebels - her voice even broke at that moment. "They were already...," she said, "people were screaming and crying." Sophie's narrative presented several gaps at this

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7. Although periphery zones are the common destination of many refugees seeking residence in Rio de Janeiro (Cidade, 2018), it was not possible knowing whether there are refugees in the place where the research was conducted.

point; although she fully expressed the atmosphere of tension, fear and suffering experienced by her, the narrative was not localized, we were not able to visualize for sure the physical space where Sophie was. We ended up experiencing the idea of confusion in this atmosphere, as well as the previously mentioned tension, fear and suffering.

The moment when she agreed to ‘flee’ from her city appeared in Sophie’s testimony in a very painful way. She had met a neighbor who convinced her not to go looking for her family. Sophie did not know whether they had managed to leave the house or whether the rebels had taken her ones as prisoners. However, the preservation of “family blood” spoke louder and Sophie accepted to escape. At the time Sophie finished telling her story, we could see shock and fear in the faces of the children; as if they were mirrors of a given space, of a represented atmosphere.

After Sophie’s narrative was over, students were allowed to ask questions. The very atmosphere of the classroom started to change as the questions brought the refugee’s reality closer to that of the children. Laughter, whispers and a certain amount of excitement about sharing an experience have gained room and overlapped a new atmosphere to that experienced by Sophie. A student asked: “Did you suffer any prejudice here?” and then the refugee told about an experience she had on a bus in Rio de Janeiro. The identification between the refugee and the children was very clear throughout her narrative, since sympathetic laughter and amazement interrupted and followed the story. Prejudice is a fact in atmospheres experienced by children who live in periphery zones in Rio de Janeiro. It is as if they witnessed their own experiences on Sophie’s narrative. The experience sharing and the mutual acknowledgement of the experience lived by the other have led to the acceptance of an unknown social reality, it also opened room for the likelihood of including the other in city spaces.

## **Final Considerations**

Since the scope of this article is limited, we only presented few moments of our field experience, which led to preliminary conclusions. We must say that the experience of sensitive listening in the context of our research led us not only to presence a different atmosphere but also to build new ones. The place described by the refugee, the place we imagined and the place the students imagined were overlapped at the same time. Thus, the herein presented atmospheres comprised the subjectivity of each individual attending the lecture in order to build a collective “inhabiting” and, mainly, to (de) construct the refugee’s “inhabiting”; this dialectical experience has shown her the possibility of social inclusion. Our field experience enabled seeing the environment gaining complexity throughout the listening and exchanging processes, which overlapped and interweaved the atmospheres in the classroom, both in the present and imaginary spaces. We all started to experience an atmosphere of sharing and hope.

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