

# Ethical Questions about Working with Soundscapes

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**When soundscape composers, documentarians and artists work with soundscapes, they are expressing relationships with the world, through their treatment of place, sounds and audience. A number of questions could be asked about these expressions about places, the ethics of these expressions, and the ways in which these ethics are informed by underlying ideologies of sound, of sound production and of sound ecology. One key question concerns a common distinction between ‘high-fidelity’ and ‘low-fidelity’. Are there some – possibly unintended or unexamined – ethical implications embedded in the dichotomisation of ‘hi-fi’ vs ‘lo-fi’ in soundscape theory? Is this really an essential or unavoidable concept and expression, or are there alternatives? One such possible alternative is found in the concept of the ecotone – a marginal zone, a transitional area or time where species from adjacent ecosystems interact. This leads us to an idea of ‘ecotonicity’ that might offer a more flexible, less polarised, alternative to the hi-fi/lo-fi dichotomy. Finally, we will interrogate three themes around ideas of soundscape ‘authenticity’: authenticity of place, authenticity of production and authenticity of connection.**

## 1. INTRODUCTION

When soundscape composers, documentarians and artists work with soundscapes, they are expressing relationships to the place of work and its inhabitants and visitors, to the sounds listened to, recorded from or projected into the place, and to the audience of the work. Each time a soundscape composer designs a soundwalk or a theatre piece, an installation or broadcast work, relationships with the world are expressed through how the maker treats the place, the sounds and the audience.

A number of questions could be asked about these expressions about places and the ethics of these expressions. Does the maker want to reveal particular sonic aspects of the place as it is, as it used to be, as it might be? Does the composer want to create an ideal place through sound, and if so, what are the characteristics of this imaginary place and what ideas and values inform this utopic creation? How does the composer treat the sounds? How prominent are the composer’s treatments in relation to the sounds originally heard in that place, and what are the characteristics of this electroacoustic ecology? What

are the dominant and masked sounds in the piece and how do they interact? What connections are there in the work between what is heard in the piece and the place of recording? Does the maker imagine the audience as deafened into numbness and needing to be awakened to true listening by the composer or soundwalk leader’s approach to the soundscape? Does the maker imagine the listener is ignorant and needing enlightenment? Or is the listener imagined as possessed of original and unusual ways of listening, contributing to an expanded awareness of how to work with soundscapes? What are the ethics of this expression, and how are these ethics informed by underlying ideologies of sound, of sound production and of sound ecology?

## 2. HIGH FIDELITY

I would like to consider one well-known idea in sound ecology. One fundamental value that is consistently ascribed to soundscape work and sound ecology is the ideal of the hi-fi soundscape. I think it would be worthwhile to think a bit about this term, where it comes from, what baggage it brings along with it and how it might inform soundscape work. The concept of high fidelity emerged in the early twentieth century in both communication theory and audio production practice, as a marker of the degree to which an audio (or other kind of) system faithfully reproduces a signal. In order for a sound to be reproduced with high fidelity in the studio, it is usually isolated from other sound sources, electrical noise is reduced and contextual noise is blocked, and then individual sources are layered and mixed to create an illusion of a musical experience such as that in a concert hall or to create a layered narrative such as a sound documentary or soundtrack for a film. Each sound in this process is conceived of as an individual and precious signal that needs to be isolated from problematic noise in order to approach authenticity of representation, to sound as much as possible like an idealised source.

Emily Thompson, in *The Soundscape of Modernity*, argues that this move to think of sounds as signals

implies a change of listening criteria, in which clarity and control become paramount:

When sounds became signals, a new criterion by which to evaluate them was established, a criterion whose origins, like the sounds themselves, were located in the new electrical technologies. Electrical systems were evaluated by measuring the strength of their signals against the inevitable encroachments of electrical noise, and this measure now became the means by which to judge all sounds. The desire for clear, controlled, signal-like sound became pervasive, and anything that interfered with this goal was now engineered out of existence. (Thompson 2002: 3)

Clear, controlled, signal-like. The concept of the hi-fi soundscape engages with this idea of sound as signal, as an ideal of clarity and clear communication to be searched for in preferably natural quiet soundscapes, while lo-fi noisy soundscapes are associated with modernity and busy city life. In *The Tuning of the World*, R. Murray Schafer defines a hi-fi soundscape as an environment where 'sounds overlap less frequently; there is more perspective—foreground and background' (Schafer 1977: 43). The solitude of the pasture and the wilderness is romanticised and desired in contrast to the familiarity and close quarters of daily, noisy urban life. Escape to the wilderness, for those who can afford the time and money to get away from the city, is understood as paramount in order to free the ears from their daily assault of domestic noise. This urge to commune with Nature is similar to that found in the tradition of the Romantic Landscape, in visual art. Thomas Cole and other American landscape painters of the nineteenth century, and Canadian painters such as the Group of Seven in the twentieth century, considered Nature a wellspring of inspiration and solitude, where the individual voice of the artist could be heard away from the distractions of the city. Canadian author and critic Northrop Frye argues that a specifically Canadian approach to the romantic landscape is one associated with a far horizon and a long-range perspective:

The sense of probing into the distance, of fixing the eyes on the skyline, is something that Canadian sensibility has inherited from the voyageurs. It comes into Canadian painting a good deal, in Thomson whose focus is so often farthest back in the picture ... It would be interesting to know how many Canadian novels associate nobility of character with a faraway look, or base their perorations on a long-range perspective. (Frye 1971: 222–3)

This long-range perspective is also found in the ideal of the hi-fi soundscape. By referring to the hi-fi soundscape as an example of an ecological soundscape, are we shaping soundscape studies through a particularly northern and isolationist framework? Is this what we want?

When hi-fi was marketed as a set of products and a home listening practice, in the 1940s and 1950s, the

noise that the hi-fi enthusiast was shown to be insulating himself from was the noise of the family, of wife and child, of domestic urban life. What he was told he could find through the hi-fi was the solitude and clarity of a mountaintop, all within the comfort of his armchair (indeed, an advertising image of the time, depicted in Keightley's article, shows a man smoking a pipe and listening, in an armchair on a mountaintop). In his article on the gendered domestic space of high fidelity, in which men were able to insulate themselves from domestic life in hi-fi listening rooms, Keir Keightley (1996: 152) notes that sound effects LPs with sounds of bells, thunderstorms and other sound effects became popular with certain hi-fi owners. The hi-fi thus gave access to unusual sonic experiences, all owing the enthusiast to leave their home behind through listening and experience another ambience through sound.

### 3. HI-FI VS LO-FI

The concept of the hi-fi soundscape has been reproduced in many writings about soundscape studies as an idea fundamental to acoustic ecology. In the sound ecology formulation, the hi-fi soundscape is most closely associated with sparse wilderness and rural landscapes such as mountaintops and pastures, and the lo-fi soundscape with urban and industrial soundscapes.

Yet if hi-fi and lo-fi is to delineate a boundary between modern and pre-modern, industrial and natural, city and countryside, what do we do with noisy nature and sparse city soundscapes? There are many natural soundscapes dominated by overlapping sounds: noisy environments that are very dense and without clear perspective. There are also lo-fi urban soundscapes that people actively seek out for various reasons that have social functions in urban ecologies.

A waterfall, the tropical rainforest at night, or a bird nesting site, or a windstorm: these are all lo-fi and ecologically sound, ecologically important environments in wilderness settings, with many overlapping sounds of life. Is overlapping bad, and unecological? Does signal articulation indicate a healthy acoustic ecology?

Could clear signal articulation sometimes reflect an unhealthy system or damaging sound ecology? What happens when a hi-fi soundscape is imposed by some people on others, not through malice but because of a well-intentioned belief in the efficacy of silence to facilitate communication with the divine, to increase communication with an inner voice of penitence and spirituality, to find the still, small voice within? Consider the case of prison reform in Pennsylvania, and the concepts of solitude, silence, and controlled acoustics introduced by Quaker reformers.

At the Eastern State Penitentiary in Pennsylvania in the mid-1800s, the building was designed to isolate prisoners, to encourage solitude and penitence. Each cell had a private exercise yard and a solitary work bench lit by a skylight designed to resemble the eye of God. The prisoners were also isolated sonically. Visitors and conversations between prisoners were not allowed. Food cart wheels were covered with leather to hide their noise, guards wore socks over their boots to quell their footsteps. The only sounds a prisoner would hear would be the iron grate opening in the door or the sounds of his own work (cobbling or shoe repair by hand; no machines), or occasionally the voice of a preacher walking the halls. This is truly a hi-fi soundscape, where sounds were completely isolated like the prisoners, where metallic echoes could pierce souls, arising out of profound silence. This approach to incarceration had to be stopped because of the large number of prisoners who went insane (Cary 1958; Thibault 1982; Schmid 2003).

This situation raises several questions in relation to the idea of a hi-fi soundscape. Is it good signal-to-noise ratio that we are searching for, or a particular quality of silence that is comforting and inspiring, not oppressive and suffocating? Can we hear oppression or comfort or the space for inspiration within a particular hi-fi or quiet soundscape and how would we characterise that? What are the differences among experiences of silence: the silence in a Quaker meeting, with several people sitting together and mentally holding loved ones in the light of inspiration; the silence of a lonely prison cell where solitude and penitence is prescribed by those very same well-intentioned Quakers; the silence of a group of refugee families moving quietly through the jungle to avoid the gunshots of the army; and the silence of a comfortable retreat in a remote rural soundscape with birds singing, perhaps cowbells in the distance? How does the emotional and political context of the hi-fi soundscape affect its perception and value? How much silence do we want, under what conditions? Who is in control of the silence? Who can afford it? Who must maintain it on pain of death?

In both sound recording and sound ecology, the ideal of hi-fi seems to be related to ideas of authentic experience, of solitude, and of control of the environment. The authentic mountaintop of the hi-fi sound system and the idea of the hi-fi soundscape are both represented as retreats from the noise of urban domesticity. Is this what we want to represent to people? That in order to find ecological soundscapes, one must drive away from the city? That quiet, isolated sounds are ecological, and overlapping sounds unecological? What happens then with bird nesting colonies and tropical rainforests? What happens with urban situations that are quiet?

Do some of us feel a quality of reflective cleansing similar to silence through immersion in details of the

noisy sounds of surf, restaurant cutlery or passing trains? Or can we consider the importance of urban situations where the noise is productive and helpful to daily life? David Paquette's study of the neighbourhood of Commercial Drive in Vancouver gives an example of this. In that study, an extremely noisy restaurant environment is considered familiar, vibrant and friendly by listeners (Paquette 2004). The overlapping sounds of voices and cutlery in a reverberant space provide an accompanying drone for the exclamations of the friendly owner, and each private conversation is surrounded by a wall of sound that ensures privacy. Here, lo-fi and hi-fi seem less important as categories, and how the listeners approach, move through and use the space is more telling.

What kind of soundscape art is suggested by the hi-fi-lo-fi distinction? It would seem paramount in this structure to give people experiences of hi-fi soundscapes. People would need to be transported away from domestic urban noise into the rarefied atmospheres of wilderness settings. But when soundscape events are planned in remote locations that require participants to use cars to get there, such choices have political implications: as Alexander Wilson (1998) points out, access to wilderness parks is the privilege of the middle class who can afford to buy or rent cars. He notes that in some cases, roads to parks were designed with bridges so low that they excluded buses, a move which explicitly kept out those who do not have cars; while in many others there are no public buses or trains that will take people directly to parks.

Or hi-fi soundscapes could be preserved by field recordists and composers who would travel around the world finding and recording them, then these recordings and compositions would be made available to local people in urban centres, who would enter insulated and engineered hi-fi listening spaces, or use headphones, to transport themselves into the hi-fi soundscape. But what are the costs then of always thinking of the ideal as other, as unattainable unless with an engineering of space, the creation of an electroacoustic alternative, or far-flung travel?

#### 4. ECOTONALITY

What would happen if we consider a concept from ecology as a metaphor to think with? The concept of ecotoneality seems rich with possibilities. The ecotone is a marginal zone, a transitional area or time where species from adjacent ecosystems interact. Some species in an ecotone are not from any surrounding ecosystem but instead thrive here and do not live elsewhere, because of the rich possibilities contained in such regions, which have characteristics of more than one ecosystem. Beaches and the edges between forests

and grassland are both examples of ecotones, or the stratified fresh and salt waters of the confluence where river meets sea at the mouth of a fjord.

Ecotones are particularly full of life and of danger. The word is derived from the Greek word *tonos*, meaning tension, and refers to the competition for resources that happens, especially in such contested marginal areas. It is also possible to think of the connection with sonic and musical tones, and tonalities, of shifts in time and spatial practices that become audible in sounding places. Ecologist James Gosz (1993) states that the concept of ecotone refers to time as well as to space, so it is possible to think of ecotonal periodicity, ecotonal rhythms, as well as ecotonal places. Dynamics in ecotones can be sudden, as in a boundary, or gradual as in a marginal zone or interlude. Ecotonal times and zones have been fertile sources for enriched listening to places, ever since Luc Ferrari chose a beach at daybreak as the subject of his well-known piece, *Presque Rien No. 1*, composed in 1970–1. It is the dawning of day on a beach on the Black Sea in Yugoslavia. This piece is ecotonal in both time and place, and the ecotonicity is emphasised through time-lapse phonography focused on this area between land and water, taking the listener from night to day at a faster than usual rate, making change more palpable. The liner notes indicate how Ferrari emphasises his listening to the sounds over manipulation of them, and the way that he appeals to imaginative listening practices in the audience:

Instead of forcibly eliminating every trace of the origins of the material which has been taken from reality, Ferrari uses its reference to reality in order to appeal to the hearer's experience and imagination ... an undistorted portrayal, although in fast motion, of daybreak on the beach, it is electroacoustic natural photography, in which Cage's respect for reality is crossed with the dream of a sounding 'minimal art'. (Ferrari 1971: unpaginated)

The focus here is on the sonic qualities and relationships of the sounds as they were gathered by Ferrari on that day. The process of change in the piece is accelerated and made more audible through time-lapse phonography. Origins are not erased here: we can hear that this is daybreak at the beach, with a compression of time that shifts the experience into a heightened awareness of time passing, which brings heightened attention to the ecotonicity of that place. What are the possibilities of an ecotonal sounding art? What would it mean to listen for characteristics of ecotonicity in a soundscape rather than searching for single clear signals devoid of problematic noise? Instead of banishing sounds that overlap and rub up against each other, what would it mean to pay attention to how sounds overlap, to how they rub up against each other, in whatever context?

The liner notes for Ferrari's piece refer to the experience and imagination of the listener, which I also want to think about in employing the idea of ecotonicity. We could imagine the listening horizon of each listener, including the sound maker, as overlapping adjacent listening ecosystems. The act of listening to a piece makes a space of meaning where these systems overlap and rub up against each other. Consideration of the ideas of many listeners creates a complex system of overlapping listening horizons that can provide more nuanced perspectives on the piece and its sonic meanings. For instance, with Luc Ferrari's *Presque Rien No. 1*, as the piece became known in electroacoustic music, listeners from that perspective analysed the piece, producing some descriptions of it that differed from Ferrari's ideas as described in the liner notes. Music historian Peter Manning writes:

*Presque Rien No. 1* is an excursion into the sphere of organised collage using a wide variety of natural environmental sources such as birds, footsteps, seaside sounds, and children's voices. As the work progresses, the source elements, which remain largely untreated in themselves, become submerged under a growing stream of noise components which grow in density, eventually masking the environmental elements completely. (Manning 1993: 161)

In this description it sounds as though the composer has juxtaposed a number of disparate environmental elements and constructed noise components in a manner which emphasises sonic manipulation, and pays less attention to the place of recording. I have argued elsewhere (McCartney 2008) that this misinterpretation seems to be based in accepted knowledge about what constitutes electroacoustic music. Since the norm in acousmatic music is that sounds are to be treated as sound objects, as discrete entities like the sound signals of the recording studio, then it would make more sense to hear a tape piece as using sound objects and noise components that are selected, organised and collaged together, rather than hearing it as an approach to framing and condensing a recording of an existing sound environment. The writer makes sense of it according to normative electroacoustic practice.

This is a disciplinary listening, defined by disciplinary perspectives and ideologies of composition, manipulation and mastery. Eric Drott (2009) has argued recently that Luc Ferrari was attempting, through *Presque Rien No. 1*, to advocate for a new, more inclusive and democratic approach to sound art, one which worked against this focus on manipulation and virtuosity.

Ferrari appealed to the imagination and memory of the listener to make sense of this work. How do acoustic ecologists imagine the listening of audiences? One introductory article about acoustic ecology



describes contemporary listeners as concerned mainly with opposites, and extremes:

As the soundscape deteriorates, so awareness of the subtleties of environmental sound has withered in proportion. As a result, the meanings sound holds for the listener in contemporary soundscapes tend to be polarised into extremes—'loud' and 'quiet'; noticed or unnoticed, good (I like) or bad (I don't like). (Wrightson 2000: 12)

## 5. SOUNDS OF HOME

Is this how people listen in the contemporary world, in polarised terms devoid of nuance or poetry? Is this polarised approach to listening described here influenced by the polarised terms associated with acoustic ecology, such as hi-fi and lo-fi, natural and industrial, silence and noise? I would like to consider a couple of examples from a recent installation on sounds of home. Listeners were asked a number of open questions about sounds of home in the installation book, an essay on sounds of home was provided for people who wanted to read more, and listeners were encouraged to respond in any written form that they wished, from lists to poetry to descriptive prose to drawing.

One listener remembers the sound of radiators hissing from previous homes, describing the deep metal clankings of the sound and noting that their present home has this sound. Then the emotional tone of this experience is described as one of comfort and certainty. This is a complex and thoughtful response that indicates continued listening to this sound and thinking about its meanings in the life of the listener.

The book that was created for people to write in had an open format that encouraged people to interact with each other as well as with the soundscapes. On a page associated with a recording of streetcars, one listener speaks of a love of streetcars, with a preference for a particularly musical line in New Orleans. Another expresses a preference for the sounds of children and somewhat anxiously asks what is wrong with that, indicating an understanding of the controversy over domestic noise, the way that domestic sounds such as those of children are understood as a problem (as in the well-known saying that children should be seen and not heard). The anxiety of this listener seems justified when reading a comment underneath in which another listener expresses a preference (ironically no doubt) for sharp knives clanging in the shower, an oblique reference to Hitchcock's *Psycho*. Here, a polarised preference like that for the clanging knives over children's voices is thought-provoking for the maker of the soundscape installation. These comments indicate profound underlying attitudes and ideologies that can provide food for thought for the soundscape artist and researcher. The final comment is not polarised with the others but rather indicates the importance of links

between senses, as the sound of raking evokes a memory for this listener of another raking experience and how the smell filled their clothes (McCartney 2002: 11–12).

These listening responses indicate different kinds of engagement and approaches to listening. Some are rooted in aesthetic preference, some in memory, some in senses, some in musicality. In discussions during soundscape events and around installations, listeners can be encouraged to think in several ways about listening: musically – thinking about pitches, textures, rhythms; historically – thinking about other sound experiences in that place or the history of the place, how it did sound or would have sounded to people in the past; politically – thinking about which sounds are masked by others and which sounds dominate, and who is in control of the flow of sounds; mnemonically – thinking about memories that are evoked by sounds; evocatively – thinking about what other senses are activated by the sounds and the relationships between these senses. It is most exciting when these different ways of listening can be brought into dialogue with each other, creating an imaginary ecotone, in which the different ways of listening can inform each other in the ways that they overlap and rub up against each other.

## 6. AUTHENTICITY

Earlier I discussed hi-fi soundscapes as a search for authenticity of sonic representation. The theme of authenticity is an interesting one to explore in more detail. I will end with a few open questions about authenticity. Authenticity of place: what can we learn from a romantic or a nationalist landscape, and can we find ways to question that romanticism or nationalism sonically? How is naming important? Is it important to know the name of each type of car that passes by? The names and histories of each machine in a factory? Or only the names of living beings in the place? How should the recordist collaborate with others, such as ecologists or historians, to find this information? Is it most important to document traditional soundscapes and cultures? Is it possible to create a poetic cartography of a domestic soundscape or a noisy urban soundscape? How does one represent a post-industrial quiet village in ways that make its history more evident? Do we celebrate the advent of a quiet soundscape or hear it as a desolate remainder? How do we approach traumatic sonic experiences and soundscapes, and explore their silences, noises and emotional complexities?

Authenticity of production: do all sound sources need to come from one local place? Should they be played back in that same place, or can they travel? Is schizophonia<sup>1</sup> negative or can it be a bridge between places, an imaginary ecotone? What is the role of

<sup>1</sup>The splitting of an original sound and its electroacoustic reproduction – see Schafer 1969: 43–7.

processing and what are our attitudes towards processing of sound?

Authenticity of connection: is there an ethics of noise, like the cassette noise that builds up through the passage of Muslim sermons from hand to hand (Hirschkind 2006), or the noisy works of internet activists on the streets?<sup>2</sup> What is our ethics of connection with audiences? Do we connect with them through performance, questionnaires, discussions, social media, audiovisual media? Do we suggest listening strategies to audiences, such as tactile listening, mnemonic listening, historical listening, psychoanalytic listening, political listening, extending thinking about listening beyond the familiar aesthetic? Do we imagine one acoustic community in each place, or a set of overlapping ecosystems? One sonic identity or a number of sonic identities? Do we recognise the soundscape competences of listeners?

After reading this series of questions and thinking of your own listening and working experiences, you likely have questions of your own. It is important to continue questioning, and to consider in any recording situation how we work with the inhabitants of the place and the sounds heard, recorded and processed; and further, how our ideas about the work are influenced by ideologies of the studio, then reflected in the ways that sounds are presented and distributed, and in the ways that we think and talk about working with the sounds of places. If the aim is sound ecology, it is important to think about how the environment of the sound studio meets the environment of the place, and what kind of ecotone happens there.

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<sup>2</sup>For example, during the Maple Spring 2012 student protests in Montreal, many people would bang on pots outside of their windows to express support for the actions of the protesters. People would record these noisy urban soundscapes and immediately put them online on social networks in order to increase awareness and expand these expressions to a larger community.