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Using and composing the landscape, attending to the making of place through sound in London's East End. Lila, a case study

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RESUMEN:

Este artículo se basa en un proyecto de doctorado en torno al East End de Londres como área de campo. Se centra en el estudio de caso de Lila y, mediante el análisis de la narrativa del East End, analizaremos la importancia de los sentidos, especialmente del sentido del oído, su uso y composición del paisaje. A lo largo de este artículo, también analizaremos el concepto de paisaje sonoro en la fabricación de lugar, en especial en torno a la idea de que el paisaje sonoro se configura a través de los usos dados a un paisaje por sus habitantes. A su vez, argumentaremos en torno al concepto de cuerpo como entidad sensual (Latour, 2004) y la recuperación de esas cualidades, frente a la racionalización y estandarización de la vida cotidiana. Para ello, esta investigación se centrará en lo que podría ser visto como actos cotidianos, que son, de hecho, los bloques que construyen y habitan un paisaje. Sin embargo, como este trabajo inédito es sólo uno de los casos de estudio de esta investigación, no puede ofrecerse una revisión exhaustiva de toda la literatura disponible, aunque sí se presentan la literatura teórica más relevante para el estudio de caso.

Palabras clave: Londres, East End, soundscape, sentidos, oído, investigación urbana, lugar, espacio, cuerpo, paisaje

ABSTRACT:

This paper is based on an ongoing PhD research project having London's East End as its field area. It will focus on the case study of Lila and, through analysing her narrative of the East End, it will argue for the importance of the senses, notably of the sense of hearing, in using and composing a landscape. Throughout the paper, I will argue for the effect of attending to the soundscape in the making of place, notably around the notion that the soundscape is made by the uses given to a landscape and its inhabitants. I will also introduce my argument towards an awakening of our bodies as sensuous entities (Latour, 2004) and the recovery of those qualities instead of the rationalisation and standardisation of everyday life. For this, I will focus on the bearing of researching what could be seen as mundane everyday acts, that are, in fact, the constructing blocks of relating and inhabiting a landscape. However, because this paper is just one of the case studies of my research, I cannot offer an exhaustive review of all the literature that is in the research, I will though, present the theoretical literature that is most relevant to the case study.

Keywords: London, East End, soundscape, senses, hearing, urban research, place, space, body, landscape

1 METHODOLOGICAL PREFACE

This paper is based on the ongoing research I am undertaking as part of my PhD. In this preface I will provide a brief introduction to the research's methodology to provide a context for this article.

In this project, I am investigating the impact the soundscape has on the individual perception of the cultural landscape through a phenomenological approach based on Merleau-Ponty's (1992) and Sara Ahmed's (2008) conceptions of phenomenology. I am looking at everyday individual processes of making place through attending to the urban soundscape, that is the sound coming from the urban landscape.

I have worked with eight individuals chosen through snowball sampling (Adler, & Adler 1987). For the research I have carried out a longitudinal study, with several follow-up sessions. This has resulted in a set of 32 semi-structured interviews. As well as the interviews, I went for a 'recorded walk' with each participant through what they considered to be 'their' East End of London. We recorded the streetscapes (sounds that are audible from a determinate street) and urban soundscapes that had been repeatedly appearing during the interviews, resulting in eight sound pieces that constitute an inventory of sounds of the East End. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed. In addition to the interviews, I have been keeping a field notebook where I record the details of each meeting with each participant, whether we met in person, had a telephone or skype conversation, and note details of each encounter such as their moods, their body language and the pace and rhythm of the interview.

In this research I can only provide a mediated account of my participant's accounts. Because my research focuses on individual ways of making meaning I have to work with the issues arising from intersubjectivity and their subjectivity, working through empathy and listening to every word they have to say. That is why the interviews are generally presented as a 'life story' form of interview where they do most of the talking and the main purpose of the questions is to suggest a direction for their quasi-monologues. Bourdieu (1999) proposed that in order to overcome the artificial nature of research methods, research subjects should be encouraged to feel empowered in the research process and production. Hence, in my research

there are no subjects but participants. As in Duneier's (1999) research on street vendors, I have asked the participants in my project to behave as actors and active contributors to the research, which has resulted in some of my participants keeping the flow of information open beyond the set interviews, contacting me via email or telephone to add a few extra ideas and making personal notes on things they wanted to discuss or add to our conversations. This has meant that, even though the set questions of the interviews were the same for all participants, each of them has contributed to the growth of their accounts in the measure of what they considered appropriate or were willing to do. I have found that almost all of the participants have become engrossed in the research and have been very enthusiastic contributors and avid readers of some parts of the written product. Some of them have sent me articles they considered could enrich my research while others have sent me information on other projects that deal with the urban soundscape.

This article aims to focus on one of my case studies, Lila. It will present the early findings, as the research is still ongoing. Because of the nature of this article, I have not attempted to include a review of all the literature available in the fields of urban and sonic studies.

2 RESEARCH INTRODUCTION

My research is based in London's East End. I am undertaking this research as my PhD, even if I started the research over 4 years ago. Therefore, I have been working with some of my participants for around 4 years now. This research springs from another small research project in which I explored the Bengali ear and how was the East End's soundscape interpreted by a group of young Bengali boys and a group of Bengali women. Then, I realised how the senses influence our conception of space and decided to embark in a research project about their influence in the making of place. Finding participants willing to commit to such a lengthy and time consuming research was really very difficult and is one of the reasons I used snowball sampling, the first participant being Lila and coming from my professional entourage.

This paper will focus on the case study of Lila and, through analysing her narrative of the East End, I will argue for the importance of the senses, notably of the sense of hearing, in using and composing a landscape. I will

argue for the effect of attending to the soundscape in the making of place, notably around the notion that the soundscape is made by the uses given to a landscape and its inhabitants. I will also introduce my argument towards an awakening of our bodies as sensuous entities (Latour, 2004) and the recovery of those qualities instead of the rationalisation and standardisation of everyday life. For this, I will focus on the bearing of researching what could be seen as mundane everyday acts, that are, in fact, the constructing blocks of relating and inhabiting a landscape. However, because this paper is just one of the case studies of my research, I cannot offer an exhaustive review of all the literature that is in the research, I will though, present the theoretical literature that is most relevant to the case study.

In this research project, I am approaching space as relational, like Massey (1994). She does not understand space as an entity itself, in the sense that, for her, it is useless when seen as an empty container and can only be really understood when the relationships that occur in that space are included in its study. Here I am talking about economical, political and human relationships but also relationships between objects. Here I propose for us not stop at the relationships between individual and individual, or individuals, and space but also how are these relationships played and, more importantly, how are they sensed and perceived by their actors. Hence, the apparition and consolidation of the sensuous body (Latour, 2004), a body that is affected by the senses, a sensorially awake individual. Using Massey's idea of relational space including the sensory domain in amongst the relationships that constitute space will bring closer three theoretical nexus I am using throughout the research: relational space (Massey, 1994, 1999, 2005), phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty 1992; Ahmed 2008) particularly when it comes to understanding the relationship between the body and space) and the notion of the situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988) to further inform the intricacies linked to the interpretation of space and making of place from a, socially conditioned, individual's point of view. In this article I will focus on the individual level, mostly narrating Lila's account and distilling from it the influence of the sensorium in the making of place.

3 LILA LISTENING TO THE EAST END

Lila came to the research almost by mistake. Lila is in her late twenties, single and lives

in London's East End. She has lived there since she came to London over six years ago. Lila now works in the charity sector, focussing on the integration of the Bengali community, particularly Bengali women. She does different outreach work as well as teaching English as a foreign language to women. She also does some artistic work based on the East End; virtually all of this work is centred around the Bengali community, notably women. There is a strong issue in East London around Bengali women not having enough English literacy skills that organisations such as Toynbee Hall, Jagonari Women's Centre and the Atlee Youth centre are actively trying to overcome.

When talking to Lila I noticed that sound had, in her narrative, an important presence. That struck me a spectacular since talking about sound seemed to be new to her. For Lila, the sounds of the East End where inextricably linked to the ways in which people moved and 'used' the area, she talked much more of the notion of rhythm than that of sound. Lila's narrative was embedded in this idea of rhythm, it was very interesting to see how she talked from multicultural to processes of gentrification through the ideas of sound and rhythm.

For her, sound and memory are closely linked. Therefore, she stated several times that her perspective on the soundscape could only be a subjective and personal intake, limited by her own culture and background. I found that particularly fascinating since it seemed to allow Lila to just explore her ideas of rhythm without any constraints. This discourse echoes the notion of 'situated knowledge' (Haraway, 1988) where Haraway states that the only way to be able to look and research the world is through understanding and accepting that we are positioned as individuals living in society, being socially conditioned, and having a background that conditions our gaze upon the world, or more specifically, our perception of the world (that may come through any of our senses). Hence, Lila, by reflecting on her "limitations" as she termed it, was engaging in the exercise of being a positioned individual, producing situated knowledge with her account. I will explore this further, after presenting her account.

Lila talked about the pace of the streets. This notion of pace was centred around the audible signs of everyday life in the street, for example, the pace of steps or the roar of a car engine. Lila, having lived in the

East End for a while already, noticed that some streets, as Bacon street, have had "their rhythm changed" (Lila, interview extracts) in the last few years. She believes this is due to the process of regeneration that the East End has undergone in the last decade and a half but more precisely, in the "boost" (Lila, interview extracts) in regeneration speed that the Olympics brought. In fact, the Olympics only sped up a process of regeneration that has been an ongoing feature of the East End since the late 80s, starting by the renovation of Bishopsgate and then the transformation of the warehouses around Shoreditch into luxury apartments and offices. The East End, by its proximity to the City of London (the neuralgic business centre of London) has seen an expansion of business and a migration of City workers looking to buy a cheaper (than the West End) property still close to their workplace.

4 LILA'S RHYTHMS AND THE IMPORTANCE OF MEMORY

Lila gives a sonic example of this change, one that might not seem obvious at a first glance, the car engines. Some of the streets that run east of Brick Lane (such as Bacon street) have seen an increase in the building of gated properties. Security has become an issue for homeowners who need to feel safe, feel their possessions and assets are protected. Lila talks about the change their expensive cars and motorbikes bring to the area's sound, how the roaring of a Ferrari breaks through the otherwise music dominated sonic landscape of Brick Lane. She says that this discrepancy in rhythms is a reflection of the difficulties the cohabitation of cultures is facing in a space such as the East End. In fact, the migration of City workers to the East End has brought a change in the soundscape, with the apparition of many more motorbikes and car engines roaring in the streets. In addition, these sounds bring an interesting contrast to the leather soled shoes mainly used by the Bengali community or the sound of bicycles going past that are the main means of transport for the hip 'artsy' student or young professional that is usual at the Sunday Market and a regular to the evening bar life (Berrens 2012).

Lila makes an important point, already argued by Shafer in 1984 (1992); the people living and using a space are the composers and producers of its soundscape. For her (and Shafer) the soundscape is defined and constructed through the use and life the inhabitants of

that landscape make. Shafer used the term "monolithic soundmarks" (Shafer, 1994: 239) to define the sounds that cannot or should not be erased from a cultural soundscape, these are soundmarks such as church bells or, more often found in the global city, traffic sound, planes roaring across the sky and horns. "Whatever one may think of such soundmarks, they reflect a community character. Every community will have its own soundmarks, even though they may not always be beautiful" (239) Hence, both soundscape and soundmarks function like the cultural and social stamp of an area, revealing its life intricacies and spatial use.

Hence Lila's reflections on the rhythms of the area provide an insight into the cultural and social processes of the area. More importantly, Lila's reflections and observations of the soundscape shed light on her own processes of making place within that landscape.

We must note here that throughout the interview and participant observation process Lila demonstrated an extreme awareness of being an active actor in the construction of the soundscape of the East End; not only would that infuse a sense of pride but it would also make her feel responsible, to a degree, for the evolution of its soundscape. The idea of pride is interesting from two points of view. The first one is the realisation that by living in a space one is an actor of this space's constitution, here in the form of the landscape's soundscape. This is interesting, particularly for Lila, herself an immigrant from Lebanon, as it provides her with a sense of belonging to the area, being one of the actors of the constitution of its soundscape. Moreover, since the inhabitants of the area are actors in the constitution of the soundscape, the soundscape is tied to their ways of inhabiting and making place (in addition to being tied to time, as sound inextricably is). Hence, an attention to the relationship they establish with the soundscape can be a powerful indicator of their modes of making place.

The debate on place is a long-standing one (Agnew, 2011). From authors focussing on making space and place almost a same item (Casey, 2001) to a posterior separation between the two terms, where place was linked to a social subjectivity ascribed to a space (Markus 1994). Later on, Massey and Thrift developed the idea of place seen "in terms of meaning for human agents." (Agnew, 2001: 14; Massey and Thrift 2003,

286) This is the notion of place I will be using throughout this research. Therefore, space is to be understood as a relational space (Massey 1999) and place as the mode of inhabiting and relating to the space that each individual makes, a flow of links. We could say that space is a landscape and place is the landscape to which we associate a certain meaning, our landscape so to speak. Hence, the importance of taking a phenomenological standpoint to understand this relation, where the body and the individual make sense of space and construct space through this making of place, through being there, through inhabiting. Here, the theoretical perspective lies between Merleau-Ponty's (1992) theory on the situated body and Ahmed's (2008) phenomenology of the queer body. Thus, in order to better analyse the relationship between an individual and space, the individual's way of making place, it is necessary to take into account all the sensorial stimuli and the *situatedness* of the body (Merleau-Ponty, 1992) and the individual (Haraway, 1988).

Moreover, Lila talks about the sounds and memory as being inextricably linked together, she states that for her "memory gives me a focus from which to perceive sound, one that may be different for you" (Lila, interview extracts). Here Lila touches on the notion of being attuned to a certain sound and of the social and cultural construction of our perceptions and emotions (Illouz, 2010). Coyne (2010) talks about sound and perception as being deeply personal, for him "sound pervades the ambient field, but it also requires attention, it modulates and distorts space as an inflection in a sentence alters meaning. (...) Sonic repetition and inflection provide further metaphors for the agony of the senses, and accentuate the small change, the increment, the catalytic moment, tuning and detuning. (...) Sounds and even smells can tip the sensually aware into a new mode of action." (Coyne, 2010: 13) Seremetakis (1994) too argues that the senses can kick start another way of relating to the world, though for her memory plays a very important part in this relationship. For Seremetakis (1994) everyday life is a narrative, "the zone of lost glances, oblique views and angles where micro-practices leak through the crevices and cracks of official cultures and memories." (Seremetakis, 1994: 12-13) Global society determines this idea of the official cultures and memories and it is only through the research and experience of everyday life, what Seremetakis (1994) terms the *parapono* that the individual

first and then society can get back in touch with all the micro narrative processes of everyday life such as inhabiting a space and making place. For Seremetakis and for Coyne, we must shy away from cultural anaesthesia and awaken to our senses, which are an inseparable constitutive of our bodies and our rational minds. Hence, when Lila talks mundanely of her experiences in the East End, focussing on the sounds or rhythms, as she prefers, it is such a relevant and important practice, putting everyday mundane, quasi automatic or dreamless sleep (Perec, 2003) life back at the front seat, regaining the importance it deserves.

5 LILA LISTENING TO BENGALI WOMEN

In our conversations, Lila talked a great deal about the Bengali women she works with. She seemed quite confused or surprised at the thought that their life was not an outdoors one, like hers is. She didn't seem to be able to imagine being at peace or being used to a life indoors. For her, experiencing the sound of the landscape through an opening such as a window or through a TV set was a mediated version of the sound. She did analyse what are the factors that can lead a Bengali woman to have to adapt to this way of perception but somehow, it seemed an inflexion point in her narrative.

Lila teaches English to Bengali women, these are lessons meant to allow them to be able to communicate better and understand the language that is, once they are out of their home, constantly surrounding them. It is also meant to give them more independence and some of the equipment they will need for a proficient navigation of the area.

Therefore, Lila talks at length "even if with a clumsy vocabulary" with some of the women. They have told her that most of their daily practices are indoors ones, culturally the Bengali woman seems to be more focussed on keeping the household and on childcare that the British woman. Moreover, there is an issue within the Bengali community regarding the levels of English literacy of Bengali women as, in some cases, the women are finding a direct opposition from either their partners or their family. With little to no support in English literacy, comes a day when the Bengali woman who has been forbidden to attend literacy lessons feels trapped in an area where she needs English in order to carry out her chores (Ahmed

et al. 2001) Lila saw that as being kept captive somehow. For her, a woman used to long walks in her hometown, the idea of living indoors, as a culturally acquired lifestyle, was very difficult. Lila stated that there was a sensation of enclosure coming from the narratives of the Bengali women but that, because of her very limited knowledge of Bengali, she could not quite identify where it was coming from. It is through the rhythm of the steps that Lila has elaborated a theory about the possible lifestyles of some of these women.

"What springs to mind, rather than the sound and the boiling of busyness is the silence with which Bengali women, and I am saying women instead of girls, come into my lessons. In the sense that in the street they are walking hastily to get there, I look at them through the window, maybe they are late or maybe they would rather not be known to take such lessons, you know that some Bengali men are not very happy with their wives taking English lessons...anyhow, they walk hastily and then they bump into each other and you can feel that those steps that were once fast paced relax and join other steps (from the other women they have bumped into) and they start talking in Bengali. I can only understand little bits of Bengali which means that I am quite clueless as to what are they discussing but the change in rhythms and sounds is quite interesting, as if the company, not being alone and reuniting with other women broke their solitary monotonies between school drop-off and pick up time" (Lila, interview extracts) Here, Lila is suggesting that their steps paces are a reflection of a bodily haste, an attitude or trying to go through a space in the fastest possible way. This contrasts with the relaxed and chatter sounds that arise upon the reunion of the women just before starting the class, when the fear of the street, or the loneliness of the home is broken.

6 CONCLUSION

In this article I have focussed on exploring Lila's account of the East End's soundscape and, departing from it, bring forward the relevance of the senses in the making of place, and henceforth, in the representation of space. Lila's account is a rich insight into the East End. On the one hand she offers a deeply self-reflexive account of the soundscape of the East End, of the soundscape she relates to, we could almost call it her soundscape. On the other, because of her work with the Bengali community, notably around English

literacy, Lila's account also offers an insight on some of the cultural practices of Bengali women and their impact on the soundscape and vice versa. It is through Lila's eyes, ears, nose, taste buds and sensuous body that we receive an oral account of the East End, her representation of it. The soundscape, as Shafer (1994) argued, and I mentioned above, is inextricably linked to the actors that inhabit and use the space. Hence, the soundscape is not only bound to time (as in physically) but is also bound to time because of the actions and modes of habitation that the actors have. In the sense that the soundscape is bound to the ever changing everyday lives and actions that the actors engage in while in it. So as to clarify, because a soundscape is conditioned by the actors of that landscape, it is also tied to their rhythms and the constant change of the '*vas-et-viens*' of their everyday life actions. Thus, we can say that the soundscape is ever-changing and, by extension, so is the representation of the landscape. Therefore, by attending to the sensory dimension of the landscape, in this case the soundscape, we can access a representation of the landscape that is much more fluid and ever changing than that portrayed by other kind of accounts of an area.

In addition, tending to the sensuous body opens up the manner of relating to the landscape. Notably, as Ahmed (2008) points out "What makes bodies different is how they inhabit space: space is not a container for the body; it does not contain the body as if the body were "in it". Rather bodies are submerged, such that they become the space they inhabit; in taking up space, bodies move through space and are affected by the "where" of that movement. It is through this movement that the surface of spaces as well as bodies takes shape. (...) The locations of sensation on the skin surface shows that the sensation is not "in" the object or the body but instead takes shape as an effect of their encounter. As Rosalyn Diprose suggests, the world described by phenomenology is an "interworld", or an "open circuit" between the perceiving body and its world. (2002: 102)" (Ahmed, 2008: 53-54) That is why I am making an argument to awaken our bodies to their sensuous self (Latour, 2004) both re-discovering the senses and incorporating them into the perception of our everyday lives. As Seremetakis argues (1994), the everyday is the domain of the mundane, but it is in the unfolding of the ordinary that the extraordinary emerges. The senses will not only allow the individual to get a better understanding of

their situated bodies in space (Merleau-Ponty 1992) but it will also bring forward the *situatedness* of their production of knowledge (Haraway, 1988). Hence why studying the senses in relation to the making of place can unveil a different mode of attention to both ourselves and the space surrounding us, making stand out how we, as actors of a landscape, use and compose the landscape and its sensory outcomes by inhabiting.

Finally, what Lila tells us through her account of the East End is that by inhabiting a landscape, we are active contributors to the formation, development and representation of that same landscape. The senses provide a non-standardised or rationalised door to raising an awareness of our role as social subjects and urban dwellers, walkers, liver, travellers.

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Título: Uso y composición del paisaje, atendiendo a la composición de lugar a través del sonido en el East End londinense. Lila, un caso de estudio.

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