Why Historians of the Auditory Urban Past Might Consider Getting Their Ears Wet

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1. Introduction

A city might hug it, sit precariously above it, be in danger of being deluged by it, slip gently into it, or may be veined by it. Regardless of its particular location and specific configuration, the urban area that does not touch – and is not touched by – a body of water was, until the mid-twentieth century, quite a rare thing. As Lewis Mumford memorably showed in his *The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects*, cities, with relatively few exceptions, have nearly always been built on coasts, inlets, bays, harbours or along rivers. And for good reason: water allowed transportation of goods and people, offered sources of food and protection, and, during the industrial revolution, helped power machinery and factories. Bodies of water and urban environments became inseparable.[1] Can we really entertain a London without a Thames, a New York City without a harbour, a San Francisco without a bay, an Amsterdam without a canal system? No. Nor should we. But we do, at least when it comes to listening to the past. For the most part, we listen to, and examine, study, and make sense of the sound produced on land, physically in the city, and in so doing inadvertently muffle the sounds coming from the water. When it comes to aquatic soundscapes and how they functioned to help constitute urban soundscapes, we are, for the most part, quite deaf.

And unnecessarily so. To say that many cities are within view of the water is to also to say that many of them are touched by it and, for our purposes here, to also say that city and urban soundscapes very often have been constituted not simply by what sounds and noises were produced and heard on land but also by those at sea, on lakes or on

1 Mumford 1961.

(or, indeed, in) rivers. It might well be the case that most histories of urban soundscapes cannot profitably and reliably convey the full range and meaning of their subject without also listening to water. This is not to say that current work is interpretively at sea but it is to say that we might begin listening more attentively to the auditory interplay between sounds made by and on water(s) and how they interacted with – exporting and importing – the sounds of the cities. While those aquatic and terrestrial soundscapes were not necessarily always one and the same they cannot properly be understood without mutual reference.

2. Barely Audible Trickles. Historical Writing about Sound and Water

That point, of course, is quite obvious upon reflection but it is not one that has been made often or explicitly by scholars of acoustemology (a term Steven Feld helpfully used to capture the ways hearing and listening constitute knowledge of the world).[2] This is hardly the place for a full review of the historiographical holes; neither is it my desire to point to particular works and flag their eliding of aquatic soundscapes. If it were, the limitations of my own early work on nineteenth-century U.S. soundscapes would figure prominently. It is, though, worth saying that historiographical niches and subfields that one might expect to yield a sustained call or treatment of the acoustemology of seas, rivers and oceans, say very little about the matter. Certainly, we know a little about the sounds of certain rivers and certain types of water – waterfalls, especially – and we are often told what the water body might have looked like. But even as we keep water in the picture we oddly keep the sound of water out of historical acoustemology generally, the history of the urban soundscape specifically.[3]

In fact, the only sustained, in-depth treatment of the sound of water of which I know comes not from environmental or social historians – who one might reasonably think most interested in the topic – but, rather, from an art historian: the redoubtable Douglas Kahn. Kahn's *Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts* offers a magnificent treatment of »the sound of actual water« within the late modernist arts' movement in the United States. Indeed, it might not be too much to claim that we probably know more about how people under and in the seas and oceans listened – courtesy of Hillel

2 Cf. Feld 1982.

3 On the sound of the Rhine, Erlmann 2010, 151-52, 165-66; on waterfalls, see Schwartz 2011, 37, 148, 261, 287, 362.

Schwartz's recent work on twentieth-century sonar technology used by submarines – than we do about how the sounds of the sea influenced experience and understanding by listeners on land and in cities.[4]

My inspiration for this brief essay – more properly, rumination – comes, then, not so much from existing literature but, rather, from two quarters. The first – and most immediate – source of inspiration comes from the tantalizing bits of evidence embedded in the essay »Shifting Sounds: Textualization and Dramatization of Urban Soundscapes«, by Karin Bijsterveld, Annelies Jacobs, Jasper Aalbers and Andreas Fickers (this volume). Oceans, seas, and rivers do not drive their essay but they do inhabit it in interesting, potentially useful ways and I would like, before expanding on their evidence, call attention to it.

In their essay, we have various references to the sounds of ship foghorns at sea, ship horns in East London, the putatively quiet canals of Amsterdam reminding people »of the far away murmur of the sea«, and, courtesy of the pioneering work of Joy Parr, hints of how the riparian sounds of the St. Lawrence River – throbbing ship engines, the slapping sounds of the river – evaporated with the building of dams and levees.[5] What's so refreshing – and useful – about these pieces of evidence is how they function to suggest the ways in which water informed urban soundscapes. Water not only possessed its own soundmarks that people in cities listened to – what we might consider water's natural sounds (its slapping, its association with quiet) – but the seas and rivers also served as aquatic platforms for various technologies that produced their own sounds, thus enabling us to historicise how water – and what it carried – sounded at various points in time. For example – and here I am pivoting beyond the aforementioned evidentiary nuggets a little – the sound of the Thames changed as maritime technology evolved. When steam replaced sail, the auditory texture of how the river sounded changed. So too did the Thames' auditory reach. Steam whistles likely penetrated much farther and deeper into the city than did the flapping of canvass and jostling of rigging associated with sail-powered shipping.

4 Kahn 1999, 242-59, quotation on 244; Schwartz 2011, 713-21. My own work (Smith 2001) says little about the matter and mentions water only in passing. One might expect historians of the environment to say a bit more but water does not figure very much at all in Peter A. Coates' recent, exploratory and thoughtful essay (Coates 2005). Similarly, the rivers, lakes and waterfalls veining the United States pop up rarely, even in work that traces human movement across the land. See, for example, Keyes 2009. And two recent, unusually thoughtful overviews of historical acoustemology do not make dedicated calls for water's inclusion in the future writing on sound. See Rath 2008, Rosenfeld 2011. But do see the attention to aquatic sounds by Parr (2010), noted below.

5 Parr 2010, 87.

3. Watery Sounds. Nature and Industrialization

My commentary here is informed by my own recent work on nineteenth-century soundscapes in the United States, specifically on early industrialization in the United States and also on the acoustemology of the American Civil War.

Contemporaries, at least in the nineteenth century, believed water relevant for their understanding of soundscapes and environment generally probably because water was so prevalent that its sounds were inextricable to many peoples' daily experiences. For example, in 1856, the American popular magazine, *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, ran a brief story on the meaning of the sense of hearing. The piece did not highlight the sound of water; nor did it privilege the sound of land. Rather, the magazine writer offered a sense of how the sounds of water, land and air braided to create a sense of being in, and experiencing, the world. Sounds »are heard everywhere«, noted the writer. The writer urged readers to listen, for example, to the sounds of nature:

> We may step into the tearful landscape [of nature] on a spring morning, and join in the jubilant songs of early birds; we may throw ourselves into the waves, and shout for joy amidst the thunder of the ocean, or we may listen on the sandy sea-shore to the throbbing of his great pulse, as he rises from the vast deep and embraces the land with a stormy, long-drawn kiss.[6]

A touch overwrought and clearly a product of Romantic sensibility though the commentary is, the writer nevertheless grants us access to a nineteenth-century American sensibility that refused to segregate sounds and thereby reveals a habit of listening and a way of hearing the world that braided sounds on the land with sounds from and in the sea.

In my examination of early industrialization in the United States – located in New England during the first half of the nineteenth century – it became clear to me that how that process sounded was very much tied to water, specifically riparian forms. Early textile factories, such as the ones in Lowell Massachusetts, were powered by water, with rivers often inextricable to the very architecture of the factory. As one writer explained in 1843:

> The city of Lowell stands upon the Merrimack river; upon a point of land, formed by the Concord river, at its confluence with the Merrimack, and a bend in that

6 Anonymous 1856, 640.

> river, from which its direction is at a right angle with its former course. It is intersected by many canals, the principal of which is the Pawtucket . . . thus forming an island of the city; it being *entirely surrounded by water*.[7]

It was precisely this riparian-driven technology that helped the first generation of factory workers make the intellectual transition necessary for work in the loud, noisy, sometimes deafening textile mills. These earliest factory workers, mostly young women from the surrounding countryside, came to places such as Lowell with the sounds of water – rivers, seas, waterfalls – fresh in their minds. As historian Anthony F. C. Wallace writes of an early textile factory in Rockdale in the 1850s: »The mills themselves, powered only by water, whispered and grunted softly«.[8] But even when the mills were loud, bellowing, and cacophonous, workers framed what they heard, in part at least, within a pastoral idiom that often drew on and from water. »Directly below my window passes the combination of nature, and human invention, forming a canal«, wrote one Lowell worker in 1842. Water powered this »American Manchester«, and the traditional sound of rushing torrents could be heard literally in the mills.[9] Others explained that the noise was tolerable because Nature's volume could be similar. As one Lowell worker, Susan, put it:

> You know that people learn to sleep with the thunder of Niagara in their ears, and a cotton mill is no worse, though you wonder that we do not have to hold our breath in such a noise.

Susan reached into the loudest sound of rural New England – the roar of Niagara – and made sense of her new aural environment on the factory floor.[10] This first generation of industrial workers interpreted the sounds of the urban, industrial environment in terms of natural sounds they already knew, helping them to not only make the transition to an urbanizing, industrializing society but also allowing them to calibrate changes in the urban environment thereafter.

7 H.F. 1843, 145, 147; Lewis 1844, 242. For a fuller discussion, see Smith 2012, 39-57.

8 Wallace 1978, 4.

9 M.T. 1842, 57.

10 Eisler 1998, 52, 51.

4. Shhh, Bang. Listening to the American Civil War

Listening to particular events during the American Civil War (1861-1865) is also instructive, revealing how a fuller understanding of how participants experienced and understood the war cannot rely solely on what they heard on land and in cities. Take, for example, the opening salvo of the war in April, 1861. That took place in Charleston, South Carolina, at the time one of the largest cities in the United States. While most people – Confederate soldiers and civilians – were located in the city, they listened actively to the noises, sounds, and silences emanating from the watery harbour that arced around the city. Nestled in Charleston's expansive, Atlantic-fed bay was a Union garrison, Fort Sumter, a man–made granite island that had just been captured by federal, Union forces and was now, at the beginning of the war, in their possession. Heavy guns from Charleston were directed at Fort Sumter in an effort to dislodge the Union troops. But, equally, Fort Sumter fired back, the exchange of booming of cannon between city and fort reverberating around the harbour. Sounds of martial might and noises of war skipped off waves and rattled around the bay, giving the entire battle a heightened auditory feel, a sense of unprecedented loudness that impressed contemporaries deeply. This was a bloody war that started with exceptionally loud bangs, thanks in part to the water over which shot was fired.

Moreover, the federal troops who initially captured Fort Sumter – on the night of December 26, 1860 – did so by paying attention to what was happening on the water. To capture the fort, Union troops, under the command of Major Robert Anderson, had to row several boats at night from the other side of the harbour (they were stationed at Fort Moultrie, opposite Charleston) to Fort Sumter. To execute the stealthy manoeuvre successfully, they listened intently for the presence of Confederate steam-powered boats patrolling the harbour and went to lengths to muffle their own sounds so that their voices and sounds of their oars did not travel over the Bay and alert Confederates in and around Charleston of their movements. My point is this: if we listened simply to the sounds of Charleston the city at the beginning of the American Civil War we would be in possession of a warped and impoverished story, one that would could not satisfactorily explain how Fort Sumter was captured by Union forces or fully describe why the battle had such resonance – literally – for the soldiers at the fort as well as for those people in the city. By taking the body of water around the city into account, we are in possession of a more textured and, dare I say, accurate account of the event, one that is acoustically inclusive as well as explanative.[11]

11 These observations are based on my ongoing work, Smith (forthcoming).

5. Conclusions

Until we start reading the auditory history of, for example, the Thames into the auditory history of the city of London, the history of bays, harbours and seas into the history of urban environments of which they were arguably a part, and the history of rivers into the history of early industrialism, we possess interpretations that unduly favour the soundscape of *terra firma*. Not only is this unfortunate, it is also misleading simply because for the people who lived and worked in those urban environments the presence of water mattered not least because it influenced how they conducted their trade, moved their goods, exchanged information, harvested food, fought wars and generally understood their environment. All of these activities constituted in part what it meant to be a city dweller and all of them had their auditory meaning and soundmarks. If we are to attend to the sensate past fully, we should be careful to sound not just the city but, when appropriate, sound the bodies of water that often formed part and parcel of those places.

6. Sources

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