

COLIN FRANK<sup>1</sup>

Milena Droumeva and  
Randolph Jordan, eds.

# SOUND, MEDIA, ECOLOGY

Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

This collection of essays aims to investigate how acoustic ecology and soundscape studies can contribute to current discourses on the climate crisis and Anthropocene living. This is done by reflecting on the legacy of R. Murray Schafer and the World Soundscape Project (WSP), a project formed in the 1960s at Simon Fraser University to research sound in the environment and communities, as well as by providing incisive contemporary research from the fields of sound art, noise abatement practices, media-theory, ethnography and other disciplines. Structured in three sections—the first being a critical reflection on acoustic ecology’s foundations, the second discussing sound in community formation and the environment, and the last giving focus to sound in media and society—this book contains contributions mainly from sound researchers, ethnographers, communication and media scholars, and artistic researchers; overwhelmingly at Canadian institutions, but also reflecting an international community. Evident across this book is the influence Schafer and the WSP have had on thinking about sound in the environment—be it rural or urban—and

---

<sup>1</sup> Dr Colin Frank is a percussionist, field recordist, installation artist, improviser, and multimedia composer. His works range from investigating found objects, machine noises, theatrical absurdity to site-specific performance, audience interactivity and DIY electronics. The PhD dissertation he completed at the University of Huddersfield considers how unconventional instruments and objects influence his creative process. In his duo project *Brutalust* he has released works on Verz, Accidental Records, and Crow Verses Crow, and he has worked notably with the Noisebringers, TAK Ensemble, AndPlay, Gods Entertainment, and the Moscow Contemporary Music Ensemble. His installations have appeared at Salem Art Works, Dai Hall, and Analix Forever. He teaches improvisation and experimental music.

how human noise is caught up with community and natural ecosystems in complex ways. Their perception-oriented investigative approach to soundscapes—be it through soundwalks, soundscape composition, radio work or, as Jonathan Sterne suggests, other multimodal scholarship which preceded current digital humanities practices—has been taken up by contemporary sound studies scholars. However, the WSP's methods have been transformed to accommodate the disparate contexts in which they are being applied. This is partly due to recording technologies being more widely accessible than they were when the WSP was active, and because the Internet and digital technologies are providing new opportunities for social connectivity and novel research methodologies, such as mapping soundscapes via community-constructed means, as seen in the soundmap RadioAporee or the app for mapping quiet urban zones, HushCity. But despite technological transformations, sound practitioners and researchers are still taking up basic acoustic ecology techniques, as is clear in *Sound, Media, Ecology*. By going to a location and pressing record or gathering with people to just listen, either by using earcleaning exercises or circumstantially noticing sounds (or their absence), researchers and practitioners are critically considering the interrelationships between sound, people, and the planet. Acoustic ecology and sound studies today are merging with Pauline Oliveros's Deep Listening practice, with cinema and media studies, with psychogeographical *dérives*, and even, perhaps an occurrence which would have dismayed Schafer, with the practice of noise abatement.

Although the title of this book indicates a wide range of possible theoretic avenues, it is in fact heavily endowed to WSP's 1960s-80s work. This is enforced with a timeline of the WSP presented before the Table of Contents, and the entire first section dedicated to acoustic ecology's foundations. While hearing from the prominent WSP members Barry Truax and Hildegard Westerkamp provides a contemporary perspective on the group's activities—including the problematics of gender disparities Westerkamp experienced as the only female member—in my opinion, the chapters that dwell less on historicity and more on contemporary ways forward in an increasingly damaged planet are where our gaze should be oriented. This is not to say the past should be ignored; as evidenced in these pages, works like *Kits Beach Soundwalk* (1989) or *Five Village Soundscapes* (1975) have served as inspiration for students and researchers alike, demonstrating the WSP's archive as a worthwhile resource to explore. However, given the extent of criticism surrounding the WSP's work, I wonder what the contemporary studies in this anthology would be like if they weren't framed in relation to Schafer's ideologies.

A major thread across the course of this book is that *sounds carry weight*. They can bear symbolic referentiality that, as presented by Mitchell Akiyama in relation to the activist group Ultra-Red, can serve to instigate political action for marginalised communities. Sound can shape the ways communities survive in precarious conditions, as Vincent Andrisani outlines how sound plays an integral role for communities in Havana to *inventar*, to be inventive within the constraints of limited material resources. Through listening and soundmaking, the inhabitants of an

apartment complex aim to improve their living conditions and assert their presence, contributing to the active formation of an acoustic community. Alternatively, sounds can have physical consequences, for instance by impinging on ecosystems and resultingly augmenting species' capacity to listen, as Linda O Keeffe notices in the decline of crickets' responsiveness to human presence when near the throbbing of wind turbines. In this regard, *Sound, Media, Ecology* demonstrates that sound studies are going strong, and it appears that no area is off limits for taking sound into account. On one extreme is the deep-sea ecosystems that Leah Barclay brings into the public's ear by merging ecoacoustic approaches taken from contemporary science with acousmatic compositional methods, and another extreme is Özgün Eylül İşcen's consideration of the "uncanny soundscape" and how acoustic ecology can oppose "the industrialization of memory,"<sup>2</sup> particularly via Palestinian experiences of exile as presented in the films of Mona Hatoum and Basma Alsharif. Studies like these articulate the pertinence of sound for understanding and reacting to current environmental and societal challenges.

One of the goals the editors set out with was to articulate the nuances in the varying permutations acoustic ecology has today.<sup>3</sup> As editor Milena Droumeva puts forth, "Acoustic ecology offers a proposal for reclaiming humanistic values and has long been a movement to *quiet* an increasingly loud, diverse, challenging, technologized world."<sup>4</sup> The at times contradictory perspectives of what acoustic ecology entails that are taken up in this anthology appear to attain the editors' goal. For instance, on the one hand, escaping or reducing the noise of modern technologies is upheld, while on the other hand, embracing it can be a means for finding tranquillity. This latter stance is interestingly presented by Andra McCartney, who discusses how traffic noise can be experienced as soothing and meditative, as well as Heikki Uimonen, who presents how radio listeners to the call-in Finnish show *Evening of Sounds* regularly request sounds of tractor engines for nostalgic and "personally meaningful" reasons.<sup>5</sup> While acoustic ecology can be scholarly, it is vividly alive in art making as well, including Sean Taylor and Mikael Fernström's community-oriented soundwalking practices. A slippage between domains and disciplines criss-crosses the studies in this book, presenting acoustic ecology as a multimodal, multimedia and widely varied field.

While *Sound, Media, Ecology* evidences the ties acoustic ecology still has to Schafer and the WSP, it also demonstrates that acoustic ecology has expanded and transformed reflexively to confront both local and global issues that are being faced today. From contemplating the cultural consequences that AI's listening to our digital activities might have, as considered by Sarah Barns, to the benefits local *ear*donances could have on city dwellers' mental health, as Karin Bijsterveld proposes, *Sound, Media, Ecology* raises pertinent questions and presents innovative ideas concerning

---

<sup>2</sup> Milena Droumeva and Randolph Jordan, *Sound, Media, Ecology* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 202.

<sup>3</sup> Droumeva and Jordan, 9.

<sup>4</sup> Droumeva and Jordan, 4.

<sup>5</sup> Droumeva and Jordan, 269.

sound in a world marred by environmental issues, precarious living, inequality, and other challenges pervasive in the Anthropocene. □