

## Sonic Methodologies in Urban Studies

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**Full citation:** Christabel Stirling, ‘Sonic Methodologies in Urban Studies’. In Michael Bull and Marcel Cobussen (eds.), *The Bloomsbury Research Handbook of Sonic Methodologies* (pp. 115-139). London: Bloomsbury, 2020.

### Introduction

[P 115] What does it mean to talk about the music and sound culture of a particular city at a time when the production, circulation, and consumption of music is increasingly trans- or post-urban? As opera festivals are broadcast from the theatres of one city to the cinema screens of another, rapid cultural flows between Accra, Johannesburg, and London culminate in new ‘global’ genres and cross-cultural modes of musical production, and the ‘worldwide crews’ of electronic/dance music flit remotely between frenzied dance battles in Southside Chicago gymnasiums and the smooth wooden floors of Manhattan Records in Shibuya, Tokyo. Meanwhile our notions of where and how to locate the urban grow increasingly complex. How can we understand and research the relationships between music, sound, and the city in an era of hyper-connectivity and digital mediation? How important are the affective qualities and socio-political potentialities of urban locality, spatial proximity, and live musicality in such an era? How should one go about conducting qualitative research of large-scale urban music events where audience numbers are in the tens of thousands? And what methodological demands are placed on researchers engaging with music and sound cultures in monstrously convoluted megacities such as São Paulo, Mumbai, or Manila?

Glancing at the literature on cities, the diverse and even incommensurable approaches towards analyzing the post-industrial city seem to announce the difficulty that contemporary urban scholars face in dealing with cities that are increasingly fractured, centrifugal, and enveloped by a vast mediascape of local, regional, and transnational networks. On the one hand, cultural geographers and non-representational theorists celebrate the virtual spatiality of the dematerialized ‘information city’ with its promise of global interconnectivity and a sociality irreducible to spatial propinquity (Amin and Thrift 2002; Amin 2012). Brimful of seductive metaphors such as ‘flow’, ‘hybridity’, ‘excess’, and ‘emergence’, this literature emphasizes the radical potentials of wireless infrastructures and the non-anthropocentric public spheres that they make possible. On the other hand, urban anthropologists and architectural theorists critique the notion that virtual space could ever [P 116] supersede or displace material space, pointing to the paradoxical enhancement of spatial propinquity in the digital age, where power and wealth are re-concentrated in

specific places and locales (Sassen 2001; Gandy 2005; Harvey 2006). As these scholars note, it is the global metropolitan elite who are lifted out of the chaos of the concrete city in air-conditioned ‘citadels of connectivity’ (Gandy 2005: 37). Meanwhile sprawling vistas of congestion, poverty, and infrastructural collapse rage on around and below – vistas that are themselves encased in new media, often operating via parallel or ‘pirate’ distribution circuits, but that nonetheless remain precarious, subject to continual breakdown.

In accounts of the city where music and sound are prominent, it is, however, the recursive and ‘nested’ relationships between co-present and mediated space that become especially palpable (Born 2013). Amidst the buzz of Cairo’s popular neighborhoods, Charles Hirschkind describes how Islamic cassette sermons ‘spill into the street from loudspeakers in cafés’, at once reconfiguring the acoustic architecture of the city as the recorded voices of well-known orators collide with car horns, bustling crowds, and a Michael Jackson bassline in a passing car (Hirschkind 2006: 7). Reaching the ears of sensitive listeners on the street, in shops, and on buses, the cassettes draw individuals into moments of private ethical reflection and shared affective unity. Taxi drivers and shop owners become part of a pious virtual public nested within the private space of their vehicle or establishment, ‘[exploiting] moments of boredom and labor’ as they hone their virtuous selves through visceral modes of appraisal (Hirschkind 2006: 28). Meanwhile, in post-industrial Detroit, Carla Vecchiola traces a different kind of virtual public – one that has evolved from the city’s grassroots electronic music community and its capillary global movement. As she notes, transnational networks not only take Detroit and its music ‘out across the globe’, but also draw streams of ‘international techno tourists’ to the city from Asia, South America, and Europe, generating a physical coming-together of Detroit’s global music fanbase in ways that strengthen local community building and disrupt images of urban decay that abound in Detroit (Vecchiola 2011: 96). In this context, online communications and mail-order custom initiate new trans-urban socialities that exceed the locality of the city while remaining inextricably tied to it: as a ‘social network of friends not yet met and familiar places not yet physically experienced’ (108).

At a time when the boundaries between material and immaterial, concrete and virtual, have become so intensely interwoven, what difficulties are posed to scholars engaging with sound and music in heterogeneous urban settings? How can we get to grips with the methodological requirements of cities that are so culturally, politically, and physically different, but that – through ongoing currents of immigration, displacement, digital circulation and exchange – are also intimately connected? And how might we capture the potential fluidity and ‘openness’ of the networked city while continuing to challenge the spatial exclusions and immobilities that erode public life in the physical city? Considering such questions, this chapter explores possible approaches and methods for dealing with the complexity of the twenty-first-century city. I begin by providing an overview of recent research conducted at the intersection of music, sound, and urban studies, highlighting the methods that those engaging in such work have developed. Next, I reflect upon how methods and techniques from across the musical sub-disciplines might combine to [P 117] create more critical urban methodologies. Finally, I discuss how I have put some of these

methodological strategies into practice in my own urban musical research. In particular, I reflect upon the potentials of using a number of audiovisual and participatory methods alongside more conventional ethnographic techniques and approaches. As I argue, different cities have different methodological needs, and successful ways of working in one urban context are not always transferable to another. Nonetheless, it is my hope that this chapter will offer a set of tools to be taken up, experimented with, and adapted across a range of empirical urban contexts in order to better grasp the complex realities of our time.

## **Music in the City and the City in Music**

Increasingly, urban studies scholars working in geography, sociology, and architecture have engaged with music and sound as a major part of their research. With cultural geographers such as Susan Smith (1997), George Revill (2000), and Arun Saldanha (2002) having probed the spaces and places of music since the mid-1990s, more recent work in this field has seen a shift to music and sound's ability to *initiate* spatialities through practices of performance, encounter, and the 'fleshy dynamics of embodiment' (Anderson, Morton and Revill 2005: 643; Revill 2013; Simpson 2017). Grounded in a conception of urban space not as bounded or preconceived but as dynamic and continually unfolding, such a shift has had methodological implications too, encouraging a participatory and experimental engagement with the 'now' of musical practice and performance – an approach dubbed by Nichola Wood and colleagues as 'doing and being' geographies of music (Wood, Duffy and Smith 2007). Rosemary Overell's (2012) work on 'brutal belonging' in Australia and Japan's grindcore scenes is a strong example of this approach being taken up. Drawing on Wood et al.'s (2007) notion of 'participant-sensing', Overell uses a digital recorder to capture 'on-the-spot' experiences of grindcore scene members at different gigs and venues, as well as supplying participants with their own digital recorders through which to spontaneously log their thoughts and feelings (Overell 2012: 90-4). While not an entirely 'non-representational' method, these audio diaries, she notes, help to 'close the gap a little' between the affective dimensions of musical urban life and the 'clinical ethnographic interview', generating a livelier, more embodied account of the spaces and atmospheres produced by grindcore (90).

Paralleling this, sociologists such as Les Back have, for a long time, been 'listening' to urban multiculturalism, attending ethnographically to the musical and cultural dialogues arising between South Asian and African Caribbean immigrants in niches of London and Birmingham, as well as, more recently, examining how the movement of music across borders – the 'trafficking of sampled sounds' (Back 2016: 191) – can generate transnational and trans-urban connections that challenge 'racially inflected nationalism[s]' (Back 1996, 2016). Key to Back's work is his striving towards what he calls a 'sensuous' or 'live' sociology: a sociology that favours a wide range of sensory experiences and multi-media methods, from film making and soundscape recording to thick situated description of 'social life [P 118] in process', thus broadening ethnography's reliance on interview (Back 2009: 3). Listening to Deptford market in South East London, for example, Back bears witness to a thriving multiculturalism characterized by 'rituals of sociality

and banter', good-natured haggling, and the convivial sharing of food recipes – a vibrant sonic social scene that contradicts xenophobic claims made by his participants in interview and that emphasizes the need for method triangulation (15). Similarly, in his account of London bus soundscapes, sociologist Richard Bramwell highlights the 'ad hoc' social and technological networks that emerge around the playing and sharing of music on bus journeys – a sociability that disrupts the 'anti-sociality' invoked by the buzzes, beeps, and automated voiceovers of the 'official' bus soundscape, while also subverting the government narrative of London transport as a site of suspicion and mistrust (Bramwell 2015).

Complementing these social scientific studies, musicology and sound studies have also shown a burgeoning interest in urban geography over the past two decades, developing areas of research such as iPod listening and urban experience (Bull 2007); 'gigographies' and the cartographies of live performance (Laing 2009; Lashua, Cohen and Schofield 2010); music's intertwinement with tourism, travel, and gentrification (Cohen 2007; Holt and Wergin 2013; Garcia 2015); and the role of music in diasporic urban placemaking, particularly as a spatializing or 'homing' device through which to cultivate shared spaces of belonging (Dueck and Toynbee 2011; Henriques and Ferrara 2016). Of this literature, Sara Cohen's ethnographic work on 'popular musicscapes' in Liverpool is particularly useful methodologically, mobilizing critical forms of cartography alongside archival materials, photographs, and interviews to draw out the hidden musical histories of the city. By juxtaposing several different kinds of music city maps – from tourist music heritage maps to participants' hand-drawn maps of their music-making activities in the city – Cohen and her collaborators reveal how particular narratives, musicians, and venues (e.g. the Beatles, the Cavern Club) have taken on a skewed mythological status in Liverpool, coming to symbolize 'entire musical genres and eras' at the expense of the journeys and trajectories of other musicians and styles (Lashua, Cohen and Schofield 2010: 126; Cohen 2011: 240). In particular, these 'master maps' of music heritage obscure Liverpool's black musical histories and legacies, including the constraints on black musicians' mobilities in the post-war period and the ongoing exclusion of black-originating genres like grime from urban public spaces. Mapping, in the hands of these scholars, then, becomes a tool through which to draw out the disparities and contradictions between 'official', historical, sociocultural, and personal characterizations of the musical city, and to illuminate a city's musical obstructions and absences as well as flows.

Notably, mapping has also been a key method for sound studies scholars. Primarily associated with the World Soundscape Project and the emergence of acoustic ecology in the 1970s, 'noise maps' have evolved as a way of charting the volume, density, and movement of noise in cities, using both quantitative decibel charts and qualitative pictorial diagrams and graphic notations (cf. Schafer 1970). Meanwhile, 'sound maps' constitute a more playful, artistic engagement with urban sound, less associated with public health and noise as a pollutant, and more with sound as a defining quality of a city's character, and thus as potentially crucial to urban planning and design (Cusack 2017; Lappin, [P 119] Ouzounian and O'Grady 2018). With the explosion of web-based maps in the last decade, sound and noise mapping have largely become crowdsourced activities, generating new kinds of 'participatory' sonic urbanism and communal

sound archiving, as well as raising concerns about free labour, access to technology, and acoustic surveillance (Waldock 2011; Ouzounian 2021).

Other kinds of sound mapping, such as soundwalking and field recording, have also become popular among sound studies scholars, particularly those engaging with the social and corporeal dimensions of urban sound and/or sound art. Significant, here, is David Pinder's (2001: 8) auto-ethnographic account of Janet Cardiff's *Missing Voice (Case Study B)*, which unfolds as an aural psychogeography of London's East End mediated by the doubtful, fanciful, subjective listener who walks to excavate 'hidden histories and geographies'; Linda O'Keeffe's (2015) participatory soundwalks with teenagers in Dublin, which expose the 'missing voices' of young people in urban design and the role of the urban soundscape in exacerbating social exclusion; and Tom Hall and colleagues' (2008: 1033) 'touring interviews' – 'interviews as, or nested within, soundwalks' – in which young people in South Wales 'walk' their interviewers through the city, with street noise often emerging as an 'innovative disturbance' that shifts dialogues, sheds light upon urban reconstruction, and highlights disquieting levels of acclimatization to overwhelmingly loud industrial sounds. As Marcel Cobussen, Vincent Meelberg, and Barry Truax have noted, such in situ urban sonic practices expand the sensorial dimensions of listening considerably, generating experiences of sound that are simultaneously tactile, kinesthetic, olfactory and gustatory, as well as sociocultural and situated (Cobussen, Meelberg, and Truax 2016: 6). Consequently, when taken as a qualitative research method, soundwalking acts as a particularly powerful articulator of the differentiation of urban acoustic experience, illuminating the conflicting sonic atmospheres, (im)mobilities, and histories that permeate the city and rendering the experiences of those who are marked by fixity and marginality as well as choice and fluidity. In this way, soundwalking might be seen to proffer a sensorial counterpart to Cohen's cartographic practice, unsettling 'official' accounts of the spatially open, networked city and revealing instead the diverse, often limited ways in which individuals and social groups navigate urban space in the physical city.

Building on sound's intertwinement with urban social and cultural identities, a further important tributary to emerge from musicology and sound studies pertains to histories of sound in/of the city. Documenting the changes wrought to cities such as Madrid, New York, and Lyon during the nineteenth century, historians of European and American music have noted how urban and economic developments of this era not only altered the acoustics of the street and the trajectories of sound through the city, but also fuelled the emergence of new social class identities, marked, in turn, by conflicting sound cultures that jostled for space in the modern metropolis (Picker 2003; Thompson 2004; Boutin 2015; Balaý 2016; Llano 2018). Particularly frequent in this literature are references to the 'silence-seeking' bourgeoisie, whose display of contempt for noisy (often immigrant) street musicians and the 'shrill cries' of peddlers signalled both their legitimacy as part of an elite social class category, and their desire to control and impose order onto literal neighborhoods of the city. Sound and music as instruments of power and order are also [P 120] at the forefront of an emerging body of work on colonial urban music history, attentive to the attempts made to impose European urban values on colonized societies through sonic-sensory regulation and the

propagation of European music (Irving 2010; Baker and Knighton 2011; Rotter 2019). Employing different methodologies and consulting a wide range of archival sources – poetry, guidebooks, historic urban plans, paintings, and personal diaries – these studies act as valuable historical forebears to contemporary forms of audio mapping and ‘sensuous’ sociology in their ability to shed light upon how a city’s sounds were perceived by different social and cultural groups at particular historical moments. Moreover, in charting the point at which urban noise started to emerge as a public health issue in the West, such accounts are vital to understanding the historical trajectories of contemporary noise mapping.

A final significant area of research relates to anthropologies of urban sound. In recent years, ethnomusicologists have engaged compellingly with the relations between affect, the social, and the spatial in urban environments, emphasizing sound’s ability to implore, repel, and provoke in ways that instigate shifts between public and private experience, reconfiguring or reinforcing socio-spatial relations (Stokes 2010; Born 2013; Hankins and Stevens 2013). Much of this literature has focused on postcolonial and/or post-conflict cities currently undergoing rapid urbanization in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia (Hirschkind 2006; De Witte 2008; Eisenberg 2013). Adopting ‘listening’, participant observation, and film-making among other ethnographic techniques, these accounts make palpable the deeply encultured nature of city sound. In Beirut, for example, the acoustically magnifying derelict buildings around which the urban soundscape ricochets coupled with the relentless drilling and hammering of an enterprise-driven post-war reconstruction programme amount to a situation in which the grievances of a troubled history literally resonate (Royaards 2019). Urban sound, in this context, thus takes on a profound historicity: imbued with the acoustics of disintegrating architectural shells and yet-to-be-populated towers, traffic noise and muezzin calls carry the sonic trail of ongoing political instability, spatial rem(a)inder and erasure, and an uncertain identity and future. Meanwhile, in Accra, public space is similarly cacophonous but differently contested, here saturated by the sounds of the various religious groups that vie for audible presence in the cityscape. As Marleen De Witte notes, the combination of technological mediation, in the form of powerful PA systems, and open-air architecture due the hot climate, means that ‘private sound easily becomes public and public sound permeates into spaces as private as one’s bed’, leading to an ‘auditory sacred space that is never contained’ and that fuels frequent clashes over territory, cultural history, and citizenship (De Witte 2008: 693, 706).

If holding the sounds of these and other cities together exposes their differences, it also allows similarities to come to the fore, particularly regarding the evolving aurality of so-called ‘media urbanism’. Defined by Ravi Sundaram (2009: 6) as the convergence of crisis-level urban growth and ubiquitous media, the soundworlds of media urbanism are those promulgated by low-cost mobile telephony, fast-moving electronic music devices, and increasingly ‘hackable’ technological infrastructures in cities that are themselves expanding at dizzying rates. Under such conditions, the endless sounds of construction work and the perpetual car horn-blowing of informal transport services that use ‘beeps’ to pick up [P 121] passengers are overlaid with electronically boosted music, political campaigns, religious chants, news, prayer, radio sermons, and jingles, most of which extend far beyond their physical locations (Hirschkind

2006; De Witte 2008; Sundaram 2009). Government and local authorities are thus confronted with a multiplicity of mediated sound cultures, which, due to the escalating movement of peoples, are growing in diversity as well as volume, are often antagonistic to one another, and are increasingly seen as pervasive, ‘unmanageable’, emerging from the body politic ‘*as if without limits*’ (Sundaram 2009: 24, emphasis original). Such exhilarating levels of urban-technological intensity and sonic maelstrom do not, however, obscure sound’s potential to act as an ideological force in the city. On the contrary, as Delhi’s portable media-playing youth are vilified as ‘ear contaminators’ by civic campaigners seeking to affirm their middle-class identities (Sundaram 2009: 24-5), while the Ghanaian government mobilizes a noise abatement discourse to resolve a cultural religious sound clash (De Witte 2008: 707), urban sound’s intertwinement with identity formation, social control, cultural-historical friction, and attempts to silence and segregate the ‘other’ appears as strong as it did in the nineteenth century. Such degrees of difference and similarity across both geography and history bring into articulation the potential gains to be made from studying cities in comparative cross-cultural and temporal perspective, rather than merely as singular-complex entities (Klotz et al. 2018).

## **Methods and Methodologies**

This latter point raises the question of methodology, and how it might be distinguished from and brought into a critical relation with questions of method. Indeed, taken together, the above literatures offer a wealth of innovative methods for researching music, sound, and urban matters. Where ‘participant-sensing’, listening, and soundwalking enable particular proximity to the micro-social and embodied dynamics of urban musical experience, ethnographic and archival approaches to mapping (popular) music expose the higher-level institutional and economic forces that are at work in (re)producing particular versions of the music city. Meanwhile, historical source analysis affords unique levels of insight into the lost auditory worlds of cities undergoing modernization, colonization, and other irrevocable sociocultural and economic changes, while noise and sound mapping, as analytical and artistic tools, have significantly altered how cities are perceived, planned, and designed, and will likely continue to do so as environmental discourses gain force.

Perhaps less common in the literature is a critical interrogation of why particular methodological approaches are deemed more or less suitable for engaging with music/sound and the urban, what specific benefits and limitations they bring, and what the different stances could amount to together, particularly when brought into a relation with theoretical discourses. Autoethnography, for example, has numerous advantages for researching the affective propensities of urban sound and/or sound art, enabling one to detect changes in adrenaline levels or heightened sensation in the skin and flesh in conjunction with other aspects of the ‘assemblage’ – sounds, technologies, personal [P 122] and other histories, spaces, discourses, and social relations (Born 2010a: 88). Yet, it is also limited to the experiences of the individual researcher. Supplementing this with ethnography, which might involve participating in, observing, filming, recording,

and ‘listening’ to particular field sites or installations over time, as well as talking to and interviewing participants, reveals more about how different people going about their lives experience and respond to city soundscapes and sonic practices, while also facilitating a sensitivity towards what Danilyn Rutherford refers to as ‘affect and “affect”’: the affects felt by the researcher engaging with the ethnographic field, and the affects experienced by the participants being researched (Rutherford 2016: 289). An important benefit of ethnography, then, is its capacity to expose the existence of multiple, situated perspectives and vantage points, and the propinquity it affords to the embodied socio-spatial relations produced by music and sound.

Nonetheless, without an historical perspective, it is difficult to fully comprehend and diagnose the contemporary. This is true both at the micro-social level, given the way that social and political histories saturate the everyday urban sonic landscapes in which we live in ‘intimate, up-close terms’ (Back 2016: 1027); and at the macrosocial level, in terms of being able to deduce the ‘cumulative outcome’ of such everyday processes as ‘historical trajectories of variation or transformation, stability or stasis’ (Born 2010c: 235). Triangulating history with (auto-)ethnography thus presents numerous advantages. It enables, for example, insight into the continuities and breaks between past- and present-day street music cultures, including how and why certain modes of perception and ideology ‘became available’ at particular historical moments, what discourses and legislative measures emerged as a consequence, and the extent to which these achieved stability over time. It reveals how the unequal movement of sounds, genres, and people through the contemporary city – exemplified in London by the expansion of classical music and other predominantly white cultural forms into non-traditional urban spaces conterminously with the relentless shutdown of black-run venues and genres like grime – have long historical precedents, from the sonic-spatial domination of classical music over immigrant street music in Victorian London, to the violent exclusion of black musical expression from urban space via the ‘colour bar’ in post-war Britain. And it shows how historical forms of embodied ‘sensitivity’ and white middle-class boundary-drawing, including the power to command silence over urban space, not only penetrate through to the present in European cities in the form of noise complaints, racist policing, and revoked venue licenses, but also congeal in new geographical and political spaces, under new media conditions, as the bedrock for new ethnic and class identities – as Sundaram’s account of New Delhi’s denigrated ‘ear contaminants’ makes clear. Bringing these diachronic perspectives into dialogue with theory, it becomes apparent that recent work in cultural geography, which wants to see the city as radically emergent through a conceptual emphasis on affect, process, and performativity, poses problems for understanding experiences and events that are characterized more by continuity than change.

The overarching point, following Georgina Born and Will Straw, is thus that we need methods capable of articulating both stability and dynamism in urban musical cultures – ways of working that grasp the ‘effervescence’ and sensory richness of city sounds and [P 123] socialities as well as their direction of movement and scale (Straw 2001: 252-4; Born 2005). Combining questions of temporality and history with ‘up-close’ descriptive and ethnographic work, as Born suggests, allows us to trace ‘the historical trajectories of musical assemblages’, uncovering the ways in which seemingly unstable, fast-moving urban musical



practices expand into larger processes of historical change or continuity, transformation or reproduction (Born 2005: 34, 15). Moreover, working comparatively across geography and topography, as well as history, sheds light upon the often-surprising similarities and differences that emerge between cities, their soundworlds, and their rates of change/stability at particular historical conjunctures. As Straw's (1991) work on 'scenes' demonstrates, the empirical challenges that this kind of work generates include thinking about how 'indigenously' produced sounds can propagate to new urban centres and subsequently evolve at a different rate; how 'native' and 'dispersed' scenes may enter into mutually influential relations and precipitate unintended musical developments and trans-urban connections; and how cities can become host to a vast range of musical practices and publics that diverge from each other 'physically', at the face-to-face level, but coincide and overlap 'virtually', via the shared taste communities that they engender globally.

How, then, one might ask, is it possible to work in all of these different ways at once? How can one design and conduct rigorous ethnographic fieldwork in complex urban settings while also attending rigorously to history? What is gained or compensated by choosing multi-sited over single-sited research, and is the capacity to carry out intensive fieldwork jeopardized in opting for the former? And if digital technologies have transformed the sonic fabric of cities, have they not also transformed the methodological possibilities for researching sound in/of/and the city? In the remainder of this chapter, I discuss how I have grappled with some of these questions in my own urban musical research. Indeed, while combining multi-sited ethnography with history and theory enabled unique insights and perspectives, it still left me with the practical problem of how to conduct qualitative research in a city that spans 610 square miles and has an estimated population of nine million (London). As I describe, such a challenge not only entailed that I 'cast my net' appropriately, but also that I think in more experimental ways about methods that might do justice to musical urban sprawl.

## **Comparison, Difference, and Diachrony**

For the past five years, my ethnographic research has focused on live music audiences in London, drawing insight from classical music, sound art, dub reggae, and electronic/dance music. Specifically, I have been concerned with the social and affective processes by which music and sound generate collectivities, and with how one can or might gain proximity – methodologically and representationally – to the visceral, non-discursive aspects of musical experience. Working comparatively across genres, some of the questions I have sought to answer are: how do music and sound act upon the physical body in ways that potentially shift embodied social boundaries and power relations? What kinds of social [P 124] spaces do music and sound make possible, and what role do these spaces play in the production of urban public life? Can music and sound catalyze social coalitions that are emergent, and that simultaneously reorder existing social hierarchies and divisions? To which extent could this facilitate a reimagining of the concept of affect for a musical and sonic politics?

Comparison has always been central to this project. One significant reason for this was that, since the project was not ‘about’ a particular community, institution, or otherwise easily describable entity, but was rather constructed around more open questions about what might or might not be possible (musically, socially, spatially, politically) at a particular historical conjuncture (contemporary London), it was important to draw difference into the ethnographic picture. Comparison, which was built into the research through multiple field sites and ‘juxtapositions of locations’ (Marcus 1995: 105), seemed an obvious solution, given its ability to situate the present as pluralistic and multi-faceted rather than unitary. By traversing, discovering, and moving between an array of musical spaces – some familiar, some strange, many placed at considerable distances from each other, others adjacent but oblivious to each other – comparison allowed me to channel the close-up, local perspective of ethnography along multiple tributaries. It enabled me to build a map of the urban musical terrain in London that drew a huge amount of diversity into it, generating a richer, more complex, if necessarily partial, ethnographic and historical understanding of the present. This employment of ‘difference’ as a methodological principle proved central to my theoretical concerns too: it facilitated what Michel Foucault (1981) refers to as a ‘polyhedron’ of empirical information through which to understand the workings of musical affect, thus moving away from the theory-driven empiricism of many affect theorists (see Stirling 2019).

Regarding the study of music and sound cultures in such a big city, it also seemed important that the genres and field sites I selected had the propensity to occupy a range of sites and neighborhoods – not just collectively but in and of themselves too, so as to allow for different levels of comparison. At the time of fieldwork (2013-15), the migration of classical music out of the concert hall and into unusual urban spaces and venues was gaining particular traction in London, fronted by initiatives such as Nonclassical (est. 2004), the Night Shift (est. 2006), and the London Contemporary Music Festival (est. 2013) (see Nonclassical n.d.; Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment 2020; London Contemporary Music Festival [LCMF] n.d.). Studying this ‘new music’ movement alongside classical concerts taking place in traditional concert hall settings thus allowed me to analyse the live performance socialities of classical music across nightclubs, car parks, warehouses, train stations, and Second World War air raid shelters, as well as concert hall auditoria. Similar levels of comparison were made possible by my sound art fieldwork, which drew me to a range of urban spaces: canal towpaths, churches, residential streets, housing estates, galleries, and arts cafes. Electronic/dance music, encompassing various styles and sounds, presented an interesting inversion of the classical music scene in terms of its increasing ‘intellectualization’ and the prevalent emphasis on certain subgenres as ‘art’ forms to be consumed in concert halls and galleries as well as nightclubs. During fieldwork, for instance, I saw prominent DJs perform at the Southbank’s Festival Hall, the Barbican Centre, and [P 125] the Tate Galleries, and this was paralleled by a growing number of collaborations between DJ/producers and symphony orchestras.<sup>1</sup> Finally, the dub reggae scene was, at the time of fieldwork, very

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<sup>1</sup> For example, techno producer Jeff Mills’s collaboration in 2015 with the BBC Symphony Orchestra and dubstep innovator Mala’s collaboration in 2018 with the Outlook Orchestra.

wide-ranging, incorporating relatively ‘mainstream’ events at established inner-London nightclubs, smaller-scale dances in non-gentrified neighbourhoods and community spaces, and large-scale street carnivals such as Notting Hill and Brixton Splash. As a field site, it thus presented a prime opportunity for comparative work between a range of indoor and outdoor sound system sessions.

Working between and across these genres and scenes, then, took me to all kinds of social and musical spaces in all corners of the city – from an outdoor disco festival in Enfield to an historic Caribbean venue in Southall. It demanded that I travel long distances – by train, (night) bus, bicycle and foot – at all times of the day and night. It generated overlap and similarity as well as difference, as individuals who I had met as part of one scene popped up unexpectedly in another, while a single multipurpose venue hosted a reggae night, an experimental classical concert, and an all-night techno event in the space of a few days. Further, it allowed me to take unexpected trajectories, following the fragmented and dispersed activities of musical and cultural formations across multiple online/offline locations. While the research thus didn’t move between cities – though it might productively in the future – it still encompassed multi-sited ways of working, requiring that I negotiate different degrees of familiarity and estrangement in relation to my field sites, moving between ‘public and private spheres of activity’, and demanding that I constantly recalibrate my positioning in terms of what George Marcus refers to as the multi-sited researcher’s ‘shifting affinities for [...] as well as alienations from, those with whom he or she interacts with at different sites’ (Marcus, 1995: 112-3).

What did comparison between these four broadly defined field sites allow that single-sited research might not have? Two points are worth drawing attention to here. First, holding these genres together, as contiguous sites of urban musical activity with distinct histories and discourses, enabled both differences and surprising commonalities to come to the fore. For instance, while opposed in many ways, a number of striking similarities emerged between the dub reggae and classical music scenes, particularly with regard to the honing and enclaving of the historical and cultural spaces in which these musics exist in their live forms, and the disciplined forms of embodiment and listening that occur within and help produce these spaces. Parallels surfaced between dub reggae and sound art, too, notably in the experimental aesthetic techniques shared by both genres – montage technique, spatial manipulation, transplanting ‘found’ sounds – and the creative trajectories and experiences of those who produced and participated in them. At the same time, thinking about the nature of the social relations brought into play by the different field sites, sound art’s place-based, participatory, and collaborative potential, which enables artists to work in diverse urban neighbourhoods with various communities, afforded very different forms of social and affective engagement than, say, electronic/dance music, which in turn encompassed a huge amount of difference in itself given its incorporation of multiple subgenres. Only through comparison was I able to trace these links between field sites, translating what in one site was comparable to or divergent from, similar but not necessarily equivalent to, another.

[P 126] A second important vector of comparison was my ability to map the movement of individuals across different musical collectivities, and in so doing, to understand both the interrelations and

disconnections between scenes, and the potential reasons why certain musical performance situations made more sense to certain individuals than others. It became possible to see, for example, why those I'd met at one field site felt unable or unwilling to participate in the co-present spaces of another, in spite of liking and listening to the music of that other field site and feeling part of its 'virtual' community. One way this came to light during fieldwork was when a number of women expressed a strong affinity for dub reggae, drum and bass, and grime but admitted that they wouldn't participate in these musics' live scenes because the masculine atmospheres and protocols of the spaces in which the musics were embedded made them uncomfortable. Not only, then, did comparison allow me to grasp the particularities and differences between the genres themselves and their collective spaces of performance. It also enabled me to trace the musical pathways of individuals distributed across those collective spaces, and thereby to grasp the differing degrees of access and urban mobility that different people harbour in relation to diverse musical genres. Comparison as a methodology thus helped me, in the words of Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd, to 'think in the space between individuals and groups' (2002: 72); to realize the collective dimensions of selfhood, and to understand that, as individuals, we are 'inserted into economies of affect and imagination which bind us to others in relations of joy and sadness, love and hate, co-operation and antagonism' (Gatens and Lloyd 2002: 73). I do not believe that these insights would have come to fruition with single-sited research.

The opportunity to grapple with the qualitative complexity of live crowds was partly also attributable to my decision to use ethnography as a primary research method. By virtue of its situated, local perspective, ethnography allowed me to get right up close to the fleeting, sensory, and ephemeral aspects of urban musical experience. It facilitated detailed observation of the movements, gestures, and actions of individuals within musical collectivities; the demographics and social relations (convivial, apathetic, hostile etc.) brought into play by such collectivities; and the elusive immaterial quality often referred to as 'vibe' or 'energy' that circulates through a musical/sonic body. More than this, though, ethnography allowed me to enact continual shifts in perspective between multiplicity and singularity: to attend qualitatively to the threshold mechanisms that enable people to move between private and public experience in the presence of music and sound, and in so doing, to see how relations of difference and individuality co-exist with, and are crossed by, relations of unity and similarity. I was thus able to approach a question that has perplexed social theorists for over a century – that being the question, as Lisa Blackman frames it, of how the many can act as one, and how one can act as many (Blackman 2012) – with a methodological stance that neither reduced the musical public to a unitary totality or entity, nor permitted descent into bifurcating plurality and heterogeneity. Moreover, when triangulated with comparative and diachronic analysis, such an approach brought to light how particular socio-musical formations exhibit far greater degrees of stability and continuity than others, and how relatedly, as Born puts it, certain genres are transmitted through time and space 'much more successfully than others' (Born 2010c: 244).

[P 127] To give a simplified example of this: as part of my fieldwork, I sought to bring analyses of London's contemporary classical music scenes – both the 'new music' and established concert hall scenes – into dialogue with literature on the social history of concert life in Europe and America. What this

approach revealed was an extraordinary degree of continuity between past- and present-day audiences. Customs, postures, and practices that were established among bourgeois concert goers in the mid-nineteenth century, such as silently submitting to the ‘work of art’, suppressing outward emotional responses to the music, and policing the manners of fellow concert goers, endure practically unchanged into the twenty-first century. Further, such practices – as well as the primarily white, middle-class, musically educated publics that enact them – endure *in spite of* contemporary classical music curators’ explicit attempts to draw new kinds of audience and alleviate the formalities associated with classical performance by relocating the music to nightclubs and other non-traditional concert spaces and reprogramming it alongside popular and non-Western genres. The picture that emerges is thus one of profound historical longevity and resistance to change. ‘New music’ initiatives seek to initiate transformation by seemingly returning to a pre-nineteenth century model of concert life, emphasizing ‘miscellany’ as a programmatic principle, encouraging informal behaviours, and relocating the music to quotidian urban spaces such as parks and public squares, as was common in the eighteenth century; yet audiences not only remain normative to the genre, particularly in terms of race and class, but also struggle to relinquish the listening habits and affective registers of nineteenth-century white, male, heterosexual bourgeois idealism. Classical music’s antiquated social and embodied norms are, then, seemingly ingrained to such extent that changes in spatial location and musical programming tend to be fairly inconsequential.

By contrast, the dub reggae and dubstep assemblages exhibit a much greater degree of contingency, with alterations to the spaces and sites of performance impacting the musics’ social identity formations in significant ways. When dubstep crossed over to mainstream in the mid-late 2000s, for example, the genre’s migration to new, less ‘underground’ spaces helped to re-draw gatekeeping boundaries, making the scene more accessible to women as well as to white middle-class groups. Unlike the intractability of classical music, changes in venue, promotion, and publicity were thus seen to shift the demographics of dubstep audiences quite dramatically. Similar processes have taken place in dub reggae, specifically in relation to Jah Shaka, who runs one of the UK’s oldest sound systems. As my interlocutors reflected, Shaka dances held at cultural centers in the 1970s and ‘80s were predominantly black and male – much like the sound system events that take place at Caribbean cultural centers today. Yet, during the 1990s, this changed in a fundamental way. Around 1992, the Black Arts administration service Culture Promotions took over Shaka’s management and started promoting to a wider audience. Booking Shaka gigs at venues such as the Rocket on Holloway Road, which was popular with students, as well as the Dome in Tufnell Park, significantly modified Shaka’s crowds, bringing in a considerable white middle-class following and many more women in addition to his mixed-class black and Asian crowd. Gradually becoming a staple of Shaka dances, this social heterogeneity again demonstrates the power of promotion, venue, and urban location to shift audience demographics in certain musical assemblages.

[P 128] The broader observation, however, is that there appears to be a racial and class dimension to these processes. White middle-class audiences are drawn into black-originating or multi-racial genres like dub, dubstep, and more recently, grime, at moments when these genres have crossed over to mainstream

or changed their promotional strategies and venues; while conversely, black and/or working-class audiences have not been able or do not wish to move into historically white and/or higher-class musical spaces like classical music, regardless of the changes made to space, site, and publicity. Such findings suggest, firstly, that certain musical public spheres are much more resistant to change than others; and secondly, that social boundaries – particularly those of (higher) class and race (whiteness) – are being inadvertently recreated by the classical music assemblage itself, even as claims are made for trying to transform them.

These kinds of comparative insights came to fruition, in part, by repeatedly attending, observing, and documenting relevant musical events; building trusting relations with, and interviewing, audience members, musicians, promoters, venue owners, and sound engineers; spending time in record shops, record production houses, venues, cafes and other neighbourhood spaces; and ‘following’ the activity of musical initiatives from offline to online spaces. I then sought to read across from this ethnographic work to relevant histories and theories. Nonetheless, I still faced three major challenges in undertaking my fieldwork. The first was the question of how to research and convey the mercury-like qualities of musical affect and atmosphere in ways that didn’t simply fall back on discursive methods. The second challenge was how to conduct qualitative crowd research, sometimes in situations where audience numbers were in the thousands, or where my hopes of talking to more than a handful of people during the course of an event were dashed by the rules and taboos of the genre. And the third challenge was how to approach the study of music and sound art in a city as vast and as rapidly changing as London. How, in other words, could I even scratch the surface of this musically saturated, densely populated city, barely recognizable from one year to the next in its high streets, backstreets, nightclubs and skylines? Responding to these challenges, I developed a toolbox of audiovisual, participant-based, and collaborative methods, which I mobilized alongside conventional ethnographic techniques. In the next and final section, I unpack this toolbox in more detail.

## **Live Methods**

A key source of inspiration when designing my fieldwork was Les Back and Nirmal Puwar’s *Live Methods* (2013). Writing from a sociological viewpoint, Back and Puwar argue that digital technologies have transformed our ways of apprehending and analysing the social world, creating space for an ‘expanded’ sociology. With the smartphone having largely eclipsed the notebook as the ethnographer’s storage device, digital methods such as photography, video, and audio recording – all of which are embedded in a smartphone – offer new tools for ‘real-time’ or ‘live’ investigation and ‘inter-corporeal understanding’ (Back and Puwar 2013: 7). By making use of such tools, they suggest, we might get closer to [P 129] ‘the fleeting, distributed, multiple, [and] sensory [...] aspects of sociality’ through research techniques that are mobile and operate from ‘multiple vantage points’ (28).

Several of the methods reviewed earlier can be classified as ‘live’ – from Overell’s use of digital recording at grindcore gigs to Hall and colleagues’ soundwalking interviews. In my own fieldwork, I also attempted to put a number of ‘live methods’ into practice. Among the most fruitful was a ‘think-out-loud’

technique that I adapted from Tia DeNora's (2000) pioneering work on music in everyday life. Similar to Overell's use of 'participant-sensing', this method involved inviting audience members at different musical and sonic events to literally 'think-out-loud' into a recording device – my iPhone – about their real-time social and embodied experiences. Part of the appeal of this method was that it attributed a certain agency to my participants, allowing them to make spontaneous utterances without me intervening or taking notes. But these audio snapshots of dancefloors and concert spaces also proved to be an invaluable way of documenting the minutiae of urban musical experience. At electronic/dance music nights, for example, participants would use 'think-out-loud' to express disgust at the pungent bodily smells that had suddenly interrupted their musical pleasure; comment on the way that an event mutates from one hour to the next, as crowds flood in to see their favourite DJ and then vacate the dancefloor immediately after; and lament the tendency for intense crowdedness to breed sexual harassment. Further, these audio memos were revealing in terms of the (dis)connections they exposed between sonic foreground and background. In one memorable example, a participant can be heard complaining about a high-profile DJ's mixing skills not being up to scratch, just as a distorted but distinctly 'dodgy mix' becomes audible overhead. In conjunction with my own observations of individual-collective relations, as well as informal dialogue with crowd members, this method thus helped me to build a rich sensory-affective picture of music, sound, and sociality in their live forms.

Encouraged by the success of 'think-out-loud', I also pursued the idea of mobilizing a 'team-based auto-ethnography'. Conducted once again through audio-recorded voice memos, I asked a group or 'team' of three or four participants to become 'co-researchers' by accompanying me to a particular event, recording their observations and experiences into their phones, and forwarding them to me at the end of the night. Though this method proved difficult to coordinate, and I only succeeded in making it work a handful of times, the data it generated was illuminating, offering glimpses into the potentials that digital technologies harness for transforming ethnographic crowd research. Indeed, such a technique was an effective way of 're-imagining [participant] observation', producing what Back and Puwar call a 'pluralization of observers' (Back and Puwar 2013: 7): a group of individuals who document the same event from multiple vantage points, as different social-subjective nodes in a complex crowd or public. Not only did such a technique allow me to involve my participants in the research, acknowledging them as peers and listening to their thoughts and concerns; it also illuminated possible new ways of researching 'live' and 'live-streamed' musical events simultaneously, with a group of researchers potentially dispersed across co-present and mediated publics, working collaboratively between different cities and even time zones. Finally, what both the 'team-based' and 'think-out-loud' methods drew attention to was how the affective and the sensory were almost always the first points [P 130] of reflection for participants in documenting their sonic experiences. This often worked as a complement to my own text-based field notes, which sometimes centered more on larger-scale observations, such as audience demographics, entry fees and dress codes, spatial and material properties, venue capacity, and levels of policing. As such, I was able to amass data

that moved constantly between music and sound's micro-socialities and macrosocial conditions and qualities.

A final 'live method' that I put to use was field recording. Initially, I would make recordings of the musical events I attended purely for mnemonic purposes – to help me remember what was going on or what something sounded like. As such, these recordings were often low fidelity and semi-random: sporadic snapshots of a dancefloor or snatches of conversation captured in the smoking area, sometimes no more than a few seconds long. Yet, listening back at home, I was often amazed at the level of sonic detail that my iPhone had managed to capture, rendering audible imperceptible, forgotten moments and affective transitions that would have otherwise passed me by. One could hear, in the form of shouts and cheers, for example, the jubilant collectivizing energy that erupts across a dancefloor when a well-loved tune drops; the mediation of sounds and vibrations through the physical materials of a spatial environment such that those sounds can then tell us something about the textural surfaces of that cultural space; the distortion on the recording and the levels of shouting that pulsate into audibility between bass kicks, often indicating a deliberate cranking up of the volume by venues to encourage people to 'drink more, talk less', as one engineer told me; and the moment when the selector started the record at the wrong speed by accident, and everyone had a good laugh.

I started to see how these soundscapes were imbued with much wider urban political issues and cultural histories. Audible expressions of disgust and exasperation at the overcrowding of a dance club event, for instance, were often a trickle-down effect of intensifying gentrification and social control, with venues forced to 'oversell' their events in order to cover the costs of extortionate commerce-driven DJ fees, soaring rents, and compulsory security measures. By listening, I was able to gain an alternative insight into how these issues manifest audibly and physically on dancefloors: how certain musical public spaces in London are becoming sites of rigorous control permeated by a crushing, individualizing crowd density. On the other hand, capturing the rattling windows and vibrating wooden-panelled toilets of a bass-infused reggae dance was simultaneously to become sensitive to long cultural histories of migration, homemaking, and survival. Indeed, the refraction of sound through the 'homely' surfaces of wood and carpet that have sustained African Caribbean cultural centers since the post-war period speaks back to a time when black British communities were violently excluded from urban public space and compelled to create their own venues. Initially little more than living room dances with the furniture pushed back ('shebeens'), these cultural spaces or 'public homes' today remain invested with sonic histories of resistance and defiance by virtue of their specific material and spatial properties. Field recording as a method, then, revealed sound's potential to impart alternative or additive knowledges about the urban social world and its musical and sonic environments – to do justice to the impassioned and textured qualities of sonic sociality and history in ways that writing, speaking, and vision struggle to. Such a method [P 131] in turn raises questions about



the epistemological work that sound has the capacity to do, and how sound might be incorporated into the research process *as sound*, rather than as transcription or other kinds of discursive translation.<sup>2</sup>

*'Draw Your Musical London'*

As a final methodological tool, relating particularly to the challenges of urban ethnography, I took inspiration from urban sociologist Emma Jackson (2012), who, in her work on contemporary spaces of homelessness, invites her participants to produce mental maps of the city under the instruction, 'Draw Your London'. Through their creativity and willingness, Jackson is able to chart the trajectories of young homeless people in London: their routes through particular neighbourhoods, their attachment to specific urban places, and the forms of violence and governance they encounter. Moreover, by virtue of the composite maps, Jackson is able to identify similarities and differences between her participants – mutual fears, danger zones, shared spaces of loss, belonging, and opportunity (Jackson 2012).

Repurposing this method, I experimented with asking my interviewees to 'Draw Your Musical London', inviting them to create a musical mind map of the city that showed the spaces and places that were of musical significance to them.<sup>3</sup> Part of my reasoning for deploying such a method was so that I could better understand how people become implicated in wider socio-spatial, affective, and musical currents, whilst remaining disconnected from, and unable to 'make sense' of, others. And indeed, an important finding to arise from the 'musical mapping' project was how participants perceived themselves to be spatially and musically 'distributed'. Brief descriptions scribbled on the maps often relayed a deep sense of attachment and nostalgia to multiple spaces, people, and sounds, many of which were placed at a temporal as well as spatial distance from each other. One participant, for example, included a colour-coded 'Key' to delineate different decades of musical life (1970s, 1980s, 1990s etc.), while another mourned the loss of bygone life-changing nights experienced in his twenties. In addition to this palimpsestic quality, what the maps also conveyed was a strong sense of the socio-musical circles through which people deemed themselves to move. Of particular interest, here, was how participants' cartographic portrayals of themselves sometimes reflected a merging of 'imagined community' and physical reality, incorporating venues and musical spaces that they'd never actually been to before but still felt they belonged to. Equally, there were times when participants would omit certain musical 'selves' from their maps, wanting to be perceived in a certain way, only for these 'hidden' musical identities to surface in interview or discussion at a later date. Linked to this, in turn, was the question of people's musical-geographic 'radiuses' and degrees of urban mobility, often detectable from the size of their genre maps and the breadth of the spaces that were accessible to them. Indeed, studying the maps in conjunction with interviews and participant observation became an important way of analysing the eclecticism and scale of people's musical affiliations

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<sup>2</sup> This is something that I have explored in a short sound piece published as part of the Optophono edition 'Acoustic Cities: London & Beirut' (Ouzounian and Bingham-Hall 2019) and is something that I continue to explore with my friend and collaborator Freya Johnson Ross.

<sup>3</sup> With hindsight, I realize that this method in many ways resembles the hand-drawn maps of Lashua and colleagues' (2010) participants in their study of music in Liverpool.

and participatory horizons – their ‘omnivorousness’ (Peterson and Kern 1996) – which I [P 132] often found to be heavily mediated by class, race, gender, sexuality, and age. In this sense, the maps revealed patterns and disconnections between the private musical tastes and listening habits of particular individuals, and the degree to which those individuals were, or were not, able to traverse public musical-spatial boundaries and urban thresholds (see Figures 6.1, 6.2, and 6.3).

When triangulated with ethnographic, historical, and theoretical approaches, ‘live’ and experimental methods such as these have the potential to significantly enhance our ways of knowing and understanding cities and their complex music and sound cultures, not least by offering ways of overcoming the practical challenges of qualitative crowd research and generating new techniques for exploring the sonic texture of urban nightscapes and the spatial distribution of sonic ‘selves’. Moreover, working with critical forms of cartography and field recording that are participant- as well as researcher-based seems to go some way towards allowing the researcher to experience the world beyond their own mind. At the same time, it is clear that such methods also present new challenges, particularly in relation to questions of representation, ethics, and transferability. How, for example, does one go about naming, dissecting, and representing experiences that are felt, sensed, or only half-known, and what evaporates or gets lost in the process? How might a soundwalk or ‘on-the-spot’ voice memo be incorporated into the research process without recourse

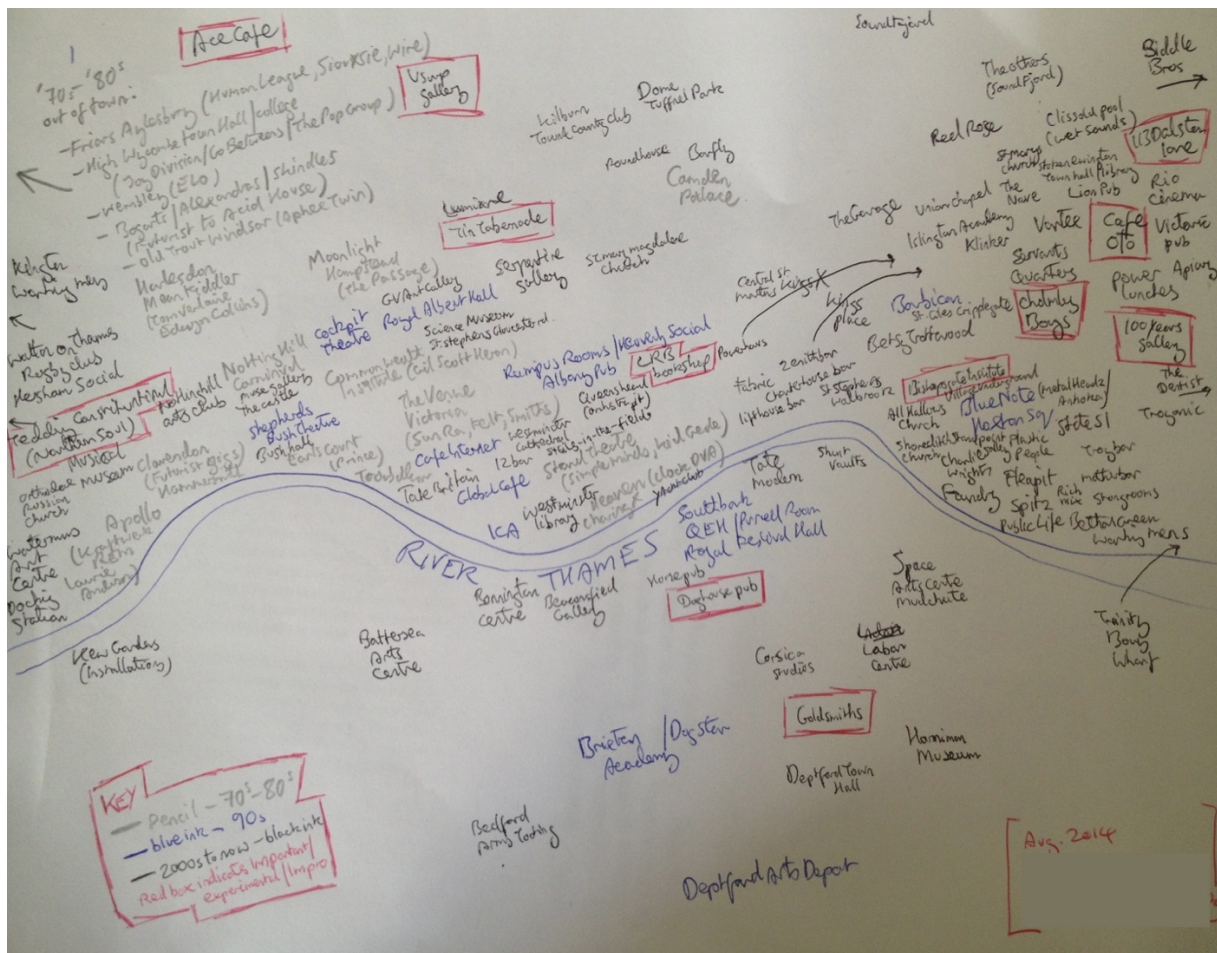


Figure 6.1 Chris’s ‘Musical London’ map, 2014.

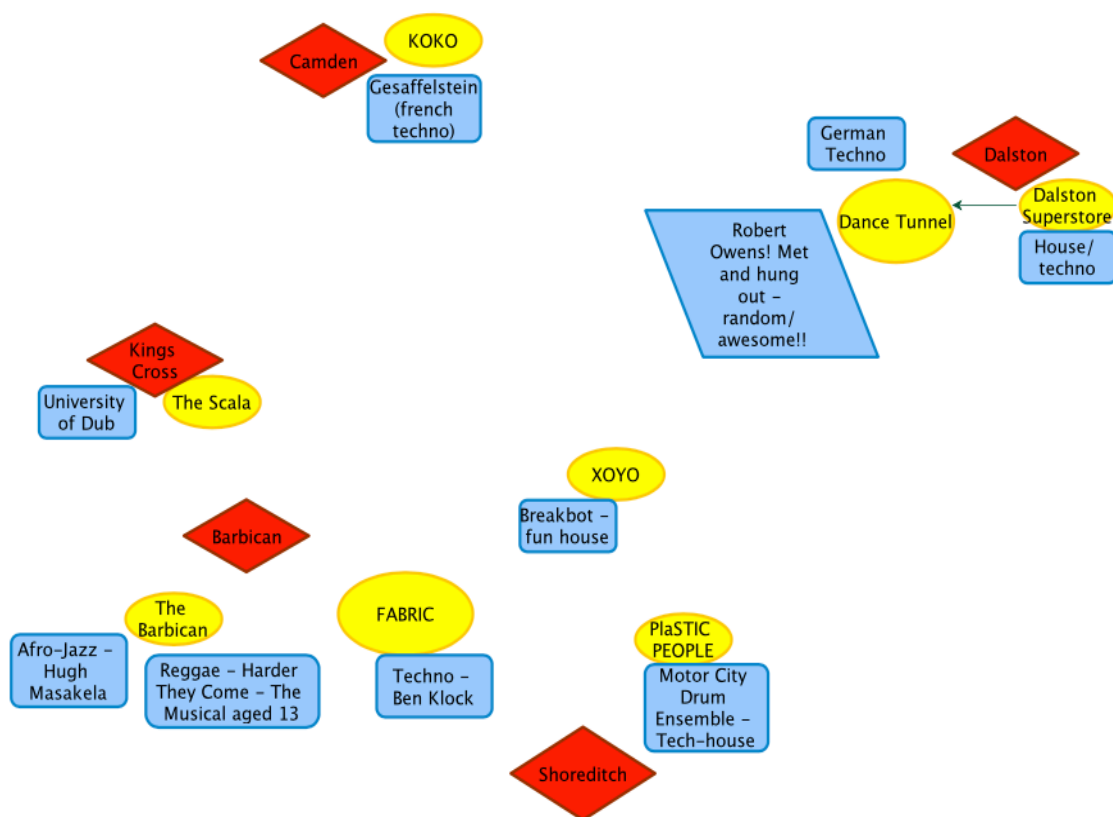


Figure 6.2 Ali's 'Musical London' map, 2014.

to description or text? How should one credit those participants who become central to the research through collaborative methods such as mapping and field recording? And what can be done about the potential non-transferability of digital and 'live' methods – something that I encountered in my own fieldwork upon realising that 'think-out-loud' was extremely [P 133] productive across the electronic/dance music spectrum but not at all feasible during a classical concert, but which is also a conceivable problem for those working comparatively across cities. How might practices of field recording and 'think-out-loud' work in a city like Beirut, for example, where cameras and sound equipment (particularly in the hands of Westerners) are viewed with intense suspicion and distrust?

Across sound studies and urban sociology, responses to some of these questions have started to emerge in the form of multi-media publication platforms, 'compound' sound-text-image research outputs, and reflections upon what it means to collaborate and co-author with our participants (Back, Shimser and Bryan 2012; Gandy and Nilsen 2014; *Journal of Sonic Studies*; Ouzounian and Bingham-Hall 2019). To this I would add that there remains considerable scope for experimenting with 'live' methods across diverse urban musical contexts, and that if different cities have different methodological requirements, some of the methods outlined above might productively be tested, transplanted, and potentially modified according to the particular encultured cities/sites that they seek to reveal and transcribe.

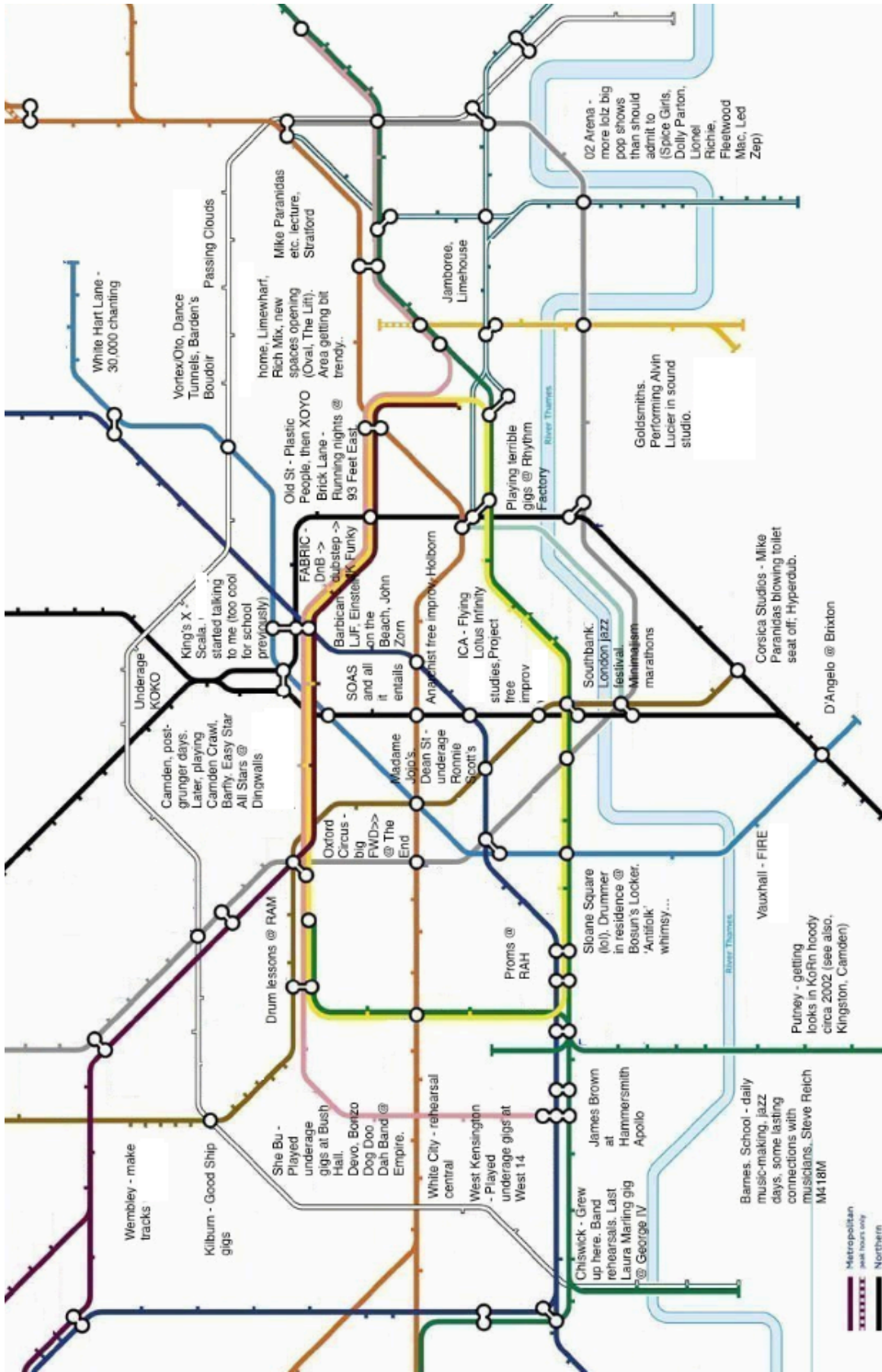


Figure 6.3 Martin's 'Musical London' map, 2014.

## Conclusion

The sheer range of techniques and approaches discussed in this essay speaks both to the expansive interdisciplinary nature of the research being conducted between music, sound, and urban studies, and the challenges faced by those pursuing such research, as cities [P 135] themselves grow increasingly complex and demanding in terms of the methods and tools required to work effectively within them. Journeying through cultural geography, urban sociology, historical musicology, sound studies, and anthropology, one finds an array of innovative and carefully honed techniques for understanding specific dimensions of the sounding city – from the ‘live’ methods of listening, soundwalking, and digital recording, which have a particular capacity to render the processual sociality and impressionistic quality of contemporary urban life, to historical and literary depictions of the nineteenth-century acoustic city, which impart a vivid sense of the changing affective and ideological power of urban sound as cities themselves underwent dramatic change. Notwithstanding the specialist capacities of these methods, scholars such as Back (2009) have emphasized the need for method triangulation in grasping the contradictory, multi-faceted, and often inconsistent nature of city life. In his own work on racism and multiculturalism in London’s East End, Back moves between interviews with his participants, soundscape recordings of their daily social interactions, and historical analyses of migration, class, and belonging in East London to reveal significant disparities between words, sounds, and actions: interviewees’ racist melancholia and historical amnesia around ‘whiteness’ and community cohesion are undermined by the convivial intercultural exchanges and multiracial friendships that they perform and participate in daily on the streets. As with the contradictions that emerged in my own fieldwork between participants’ cartographic and interview-based portrayals of themselves, Back’s findings reiterate the importance of traversing different spheres and scales of sociality – from the intimate one-on-one interview through the public social arena to the diachronic ‘long’ view – in order to grasp the chasms as well as connections that arise between the said and the seen/done, between imagination and reality, biography and history.

Building upon this notion of method triangulation, I pointed – in the second half of the chapter – towards the potentials of a relational methodology that moves pluralistically and at times agonistically between history, (comparative) ethnography, and theory. Such an approach takes inspiration from Born (2005), Straw (2001), and others such as Lawrence Grossberg (2014), who argue for a closer methodological relationship between the affective, performative dimensions of musical urban sociality and the wider institutional forces and ‘weighty histories’ that ‘give each seemingly fluid surface a secret order’ (Straw 2001: 248); but who also – particularly in Born’s and Grossberg’s case – stress the importance of holding theoretical discourses to account through rigorous historically informed empiricism. In this way, speculative concepts and theories can be treated as ‘tools’ whose feasibility has to be ‘constantly constructed and contested’ in relation to specific concrete situations, while the complexity of the empirical, in turn, may be enlivened and potentially reconceived by imaginative conceptual thinking (Grossberg 2014: 13; cf. Born 2010b). Indeed, only by pursuing such a methodology – one that places theory in the teeth of

ethnography and history, that refuses, in Deleuzian terms, to choose one ‘or’ the other – can the limits of conceptual or empirical or historical work alone be deciphered, and the potentials for more radically collaborative and generative ways of working be brought into being. Within this, as I have shown, digitally enabled ‘live’ methods can take on a critical role in triangulating the empirical, rendering audible the historical, and dramatizing or modifying the conceptual. [P 136]

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