

# *Three Recent Moments With Pauline Oliveros*

by Stephan Moore

**I. JUST PAST MID-AFTERNOON** we edge into rush hour, and traffic on the motorway slows down. From behind a 4-meter noise barrier, I track the sounds of passing cars and trucks. As the road becomes more congested, their deceleration shifts the soundscape's dominant sounds from the high-frequency whiz of speeding tires to a lower drone of purring motors.

It is late February 2017, and for a fourth day I am sitting under a tent by a motorway in the Cremorne neighborhood of Melbourne, Australia, surrounded by speakers and, more distantly, microphones. I am here at the invitation of RMIT post-doctoral fellow Jordan Lacey, the principal investigator on a research project studying experimental methods of mitigating the noise of motorways passing through residential areas. My task is to create generative compositions that assimilate and dynamically accompany the traffic noise, transforming its role in the soundscape from an annoyance to an organic, unfolding musical experience. The sounds of the traffic flow through the microphones, through my code, and then, quietly, back out into this pocket park.

Throughout this process, I am listening to the voice of my teacher, Pauline Oliveros. It comes to me in the way that I often hear a mentor's internalized voice, where I am not sure whether I am recalling something once heard, or if I am simply talking to myself via my memory of Pauline's voice and personality. As I sit here, listening to the traffic and preparing to work, I hear Pauline encouraging me to direct my attention inwards. She advises me to become aware of the mechanics of my own listening process, and to catalog its characteristics under these unique circumstances, in order to better understand what I have been and will be doing. Pauline liked these kinds of lists. I take her suggestion.

- **Acclimation:** when I initiate a new transformation program, at first it seems quite soft and indistinct, but its perceptual volume increases rapidly over the first minute of listening.
- **Habit:** after listening to a transformation for a few minutes, I will continue to hear it after I shut it off, as though my ears have a "blind spot" that my mind fills in.
- **Ambiguation:** if a transformation is working, I will eventually start to lose track of what sounds are actually traffic and what sounds are being produced by my program.
- **Familiarity:** as I listen to the variety of sounds that sum to create the traffic noise, their familial membership, frequency (population density), range of variation, and consequential relationships become known, allowing outliers to be easily detected.
- **Horizon of now:** when two related sounds occur within approximately eight seconds of each other, I naturally correlate and connect the events that produced them. Beyond that threshold, the gestalt has moved on, and my mind no longer urgently seeks to draw a correlation.
- **Role reversal:** the sounds of the transformation program flowing around the traffic, which are simply filtered and delayed versions of the traffic sounds, begin to sound like the main sounds, while the sounds of traffic begin to feel ornamental.
- **Transference of perspective:** few things have the power to alter my listening experience more than the known presence of other listeners. When another researcher comes to sit beside me, my listening process begins again, and unfolds differently, taking my sense of their awareness into account.

- **Vacuum:** the sudden cessation of a transformation program is jarring out of proportion to the amount of change in the soundscape it produces. There is an entrainment, an interlocking of perception and expectation, that I participate in without will or consent. Its disruption feels violent.

As I compile this catalog, I realize the important role that duration plays in this project, and that the artistic medium I am engaging with is the domain of aural attention, with all of its shifting qualities: sensitivity, stimulation, discernment, blending, fatigue. Listening is revealed in this context as a narrative process, and its story is the multivalent play of sounds across my ever-changing awareness. In attending to this awareness, I practice what Pauline called Deep Listening, trying to expand my perceptive abilities in their scope and sensitivity to nuance. It also occurs to me that my code will succeed in its aims only to the extent to which it embodies and emulates Pauline's model of everyday awareness and attention.

Leading up to this project, Jordan and I first connected over our shared practice of Acoustic Ecology – field recording, soundscape composition, and actively exploring the interface between humanity and the natural soundscape. So now I note that in approaching this project, which is fundamentally rooted in Acoustic Ecology, I draw my primary tools from a practice of Deep Listening. This work sits comfortably in the curved spot where these two disciplinary branches of musical awareness converge, or diverge, depending on what direction one travels.

**II. IT'S EARLY MARCH**, back in Chicago, and I've had a squealing in my right ear for nearly a week. I caught a cold just before my flight home from Australia, and my congested skull has been uncomfortably pressurized ever since I landed in LA on the way home. The hop from LA to Chicago only made matters worse. I had been mildly panicking, but earlier today a doctor reassured me that this is not an ear infection, and that issues like this resolve themselves within two weeks, usually. My ear is emitting a high pitched tone that is loud enough to mask the consonants in other people's speech.

After cursing my situation, cursing my ear, and roundly shaking my fist at all of the shortcomings of the human body for good measure, I remain in the same situation, sitting alone with this sound. Once again, Pauline comes to mind, and her voice offers counsel. Now I am listening into my ear, finally overcoming my discomfort and knee-jerk rejection and getting inside this insistent sound. It exists neither in the outside world nor in my imagination— it is an artifact of the physical apparatus of hearing, a consequence of having ears. A malfunction, but only if I choose to think of it as one. For a moment, at Pauline's suggestion, I allow myself to choose differently, to hear this sound as just another part of my reality, no more or less worthy of my attention than any other sound.

Once I separate it from its inconvenience, I find that it's a complex, alien sound of considerable beauty. When my attention wanders away from it, it is high-pitched enough to sound like a single, crystalline sine tone, but under scrutiny it unwinds into a multi-threaded silver rope. I begin to notice how one part of the sound is fluctuating slightly with my pulse, and another with my breathing. Individual threads oscillate independently in pitch and/or intensity, and are masked or foregrounded as they interact with other threads. Even as I study it, I observe how easily my attention slides away from its rippling surface. After having formed a habit of ignoring it, paying close attention to it is hard work.

What does Acoustic Ecology tell me about this sound? Is it merely obstructive noise? Or is it possibly a legitimate and interesting sound but beside the point of a study of environmental sound? Questions of provenance muddy the waters. I check the Handbook for Acoustic Ecology online, and find an entry for “Tinnitus,” which leads to the terse definition of “Acoasma” (also spelled acousma, acoasm, or acosm): “A nonverbal auditory hallucination, such as a ringing, buzzing or hissing.” From there, I can only proceed to a definition of “Hearing Loss” in all of its causes, occupational or not (“sociocusis”). It seems that my experience with this sound is understood, then, the context of a loss of ability to perceive the environment, which is absolutely true, and which would be disheartening if it were not temporary.

And then, what does Deep Listening tell me about this sound? Pauline emphasized listening to all sounds, real, imaginary, and in-between. Her aim was not necessarily to draw inspiration from these sounds (though she certainly often did), or to evaluate them or choose among them — the point was to hear them, as many of them as possible, and then to act, or not, from this position of expanded awareness. What if this sound in my ear were permanent, as it, or something like it, someday might be?

Where Acoustic Ecology talks about the limitations of my internal listening environment, Deep Listening moves the horizon of that environment. Still, on the whole, I find it unfair to compare these perspectives beyond noting that, in this situation, one perspective seems closed-ended while the other seems so open. The goals of each discipline are different, and it is impossible to choose between them, not that anyone is asking me to. Each is a tool, to be used together or independently, as the situation demands. The problem, then, lies not in the difference between these approaches, but in the dogmatic application of either.

I begin thinking about what it would take to produce this sound with technology, to synthesize it and then manipulate it, to get deeper inside it, to try to imitate its shimmers and fluctuations. This is an unrecordable sound, so far as I understand the limits of recording technology, and it also cannot be shut off, but I am finding a way into it, to become friends with it and to coexist with it. The sound becomes my sound, it belongs to me. Since I carry it around with me, I find moments to study it in different contexts. Between classes at my university, I stand at the shore of Lake Michigan and listen to how my sound interacts with the waves crashing on the rocks. Four days later, when I wake up to find it greatly diminished, I actually almost miss it.

**III. IN EARLY APRIL,** I travel to San Miguel Island in the Azores to attend the Invisible Places conference, where Jordan Lacey and I are scheduled to speak about our work with motorway noise transformation. We hope to connect with the community of artists and ecologists in attendance, share our process and hear outside perspectives on what we have done. Our paper is among the first to be given. In the discussion that follows, the central question raised is whether the implementation of soundscape transformation systems would dissuade communities from taking other steps to address noise pollution more directly. It is as though our work, by promising to lessen the impact of traffic noise, has somehow positioned us as apologists for the purveyors and perpetrators of urban noise production.

Obviously, from our perspective, this is a mischaracterization. At first I am frustrated at what feels like a dismissal of the potential for our work to have a positive impact — considering the cultural trajectory of noise, ever since internal combustion engines began to drastically alter our urban soundscapes well over a century ago, it seems like a misplaced idealism to think that only absolute measures have merit. It feels like a continuation of the tale of the war between evil modern noise and good old-fashioned quietude. Perhaps this group is simply not willing to consider the potential value of the project. As these thoughts escalate in my mind, Pauline’s wise voice visits me again,

encouraging me to open my mind, release my agenda, and hear the anxieties expressed in this pushback as valid and instructive. After all, it’s not as though I do not share their concerns about the damage caused by the deafness of industrial development and transportation culture. Indeed, my interest in the project stems from these very concerns. So why the disconnect?

Heeding Pauline’s counsel, I listen more openly to the conference as it progresses. What I hear, far more than fear and pessimism about the state of the soundscape, is the excitement of people energized by their own projects for raising auditory awareness and enriching their communities with sonic experiences. I realize that I have been drawn to both Deep listening and Acoustic Ecology, in part, by the aspirational aspects of each discipline. Each harbors an admirable idealism about the relationship of sound to the human condition. In Acoustic Ecology, that idealism is focused outward, on the relationship of individuals and societies to the environment, while Deep Listening’s focuses inward, on honing human perception, and fostering an understanding of its implications. These differing paths often lead to similar destinations, which is why we found the response to our paper surprising. But, that encounter aside, to the extent that there is a disconnect between the practices, one has to listen hard to hear it at this conference.

Then, in the conference’s final keynote, on the occasion of her birthday, Hildegard Westerkamp chooses to speak very personally about her family’s connection to the Azores. During the Q&A, she is asked to tell the story of how she became involved in the Vancouver Soundscape project, and how that led to the World Forum for Acoustic Ecology. One detail in her recounting of this story is new to me — when citing the work of R. Murray Schaffer as influential and compelling, she mentions the influence of Pauline Oliveros’ Sonic Meditations in the same breath. This is the thing I have been trying to reconcile — that there are some of us who draw upon AE and DL as two legs of our practice, and see past their possible incompatibilities to a kind of synthesized practice. It never occurred to me that Hildegard might share this integrated practice. Afterwards, I find a moment to approach her and thank her for the talk and ask about this connection. She says, as though I had just pointed out something very obvious, “Oh yes, well, Pauline and Murray were like the mother and the father.”

Now that Pauline has left us in the physical plane, and Murray has stopped making public appearances, those of us influenced by their work have an opportunity to think broadly about the project of pulling both of these powerful and important legacies forward, and perhaps joining them, hybridizing them, and exploring how they can usefully be incorporated into each other. At the very least, we can begin talking about how useful they can be when applied in tandem. In my own practice, I find myself balanced between Acoustic Ecology’s specificity of time and place and Deep Listening’s orientation towards the here and now. Another fulcrum can be identified balancing between Deep Listening’s radical receptivity and Acoustic Ecology’s emphasis on advocacy and civic engagement. Where Acoustic Ecology’s approach tilts towards the empirical, Deep Listening moves towards the phenomenological. Yet, both approaches seek to identify and strengthen a nexus between art and science, seeking ways to infuse one with the other. Both disciplines bring their practitioners more fully into an engagement with the world. Already, as I conduct myself day to day, I endeavor to do so as a child of “the mother and the father.” Perhaps, through listening, engagement, and discussion, this will be a moment for that hybrid community to grow.

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