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Nothing to Hear, So to Speak: Spaces of Sounding and Listening at 100 McCaul Street

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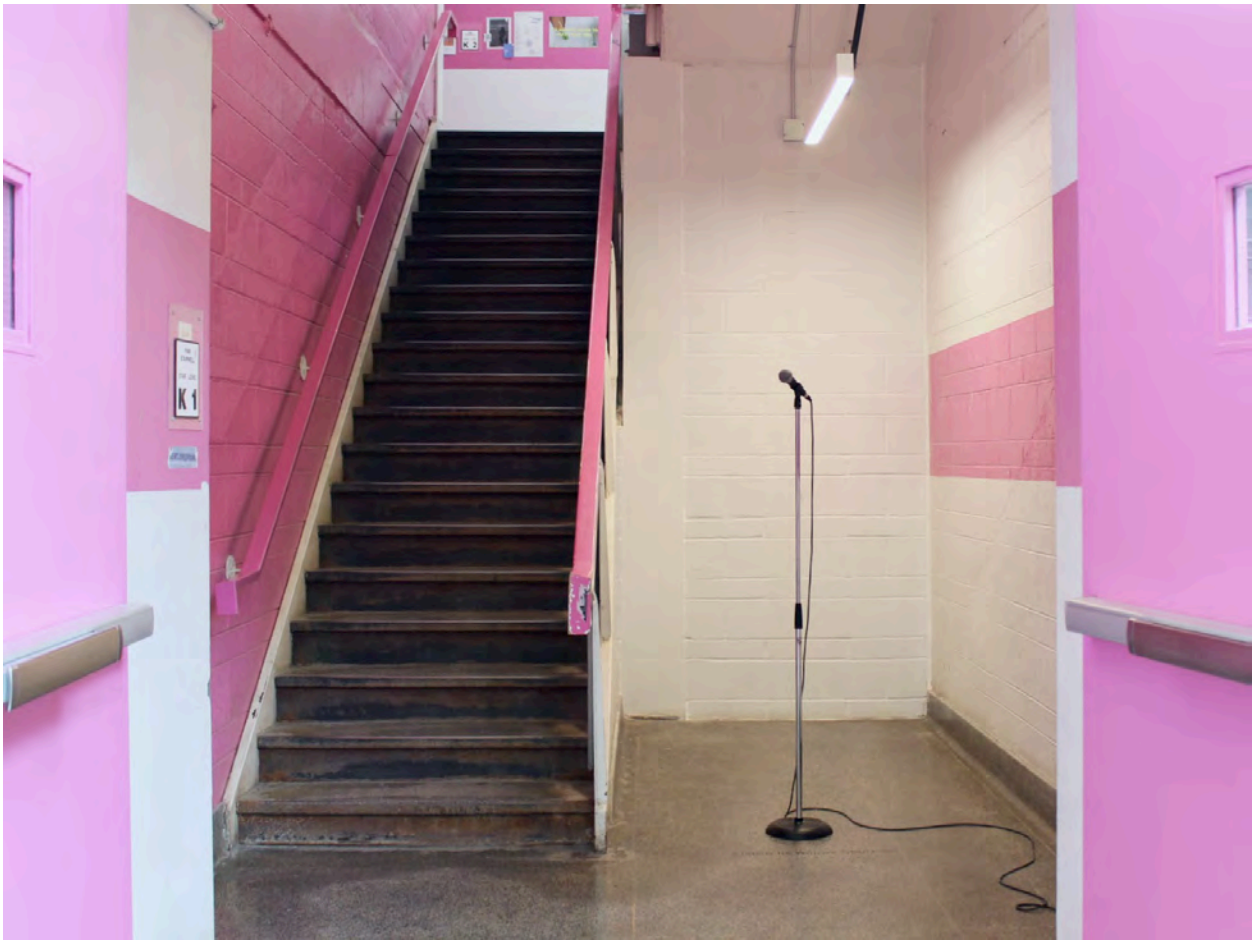

Fig. 1. Pink stairwell at 100 McCaul Street (2020). Image courtesy of author.

Introduction

It's the second week of March 2020, and I'm listening to the faint rumble of a low frequency hum while standing on the ground floor landing of a pedestrian stairwell. This enclosed space is located at 100 McCaul Street in downtown Tkaronto (Toronto). It's one of three concrete-walled stairwells in the main building of the Ontario College of Art and Design (OCAD). While all three—color coded as pink, yellow, and green—are frequently traversed by students, staff, and visitors, it's notable that voices are rarely heard in these spaces. That is not the case today. There is a loudspeaker on a stand in front of me, and from it, two distinct voices emerge. They begin to sing a melody in unison, although soon there is a pause, and for a second or two, the hum recaptures my attention. Before long, a lone voice starts to sing as a woman enters the stairwell and begins to listen. She departs once the singing descends into a boisterous cacophony of laughter. As she opens the door to leave, I notice how the hum increases in volume and reverberates throughout the stairwell.

The Hum

I witnessed this brief encounter while documenting *Nothing to Hear, So to Speak*, my site-specific audio installation conceived to investigate how co-produced experiences of sounding and listening can encourage transient audiences to consider multiple perspectives of space and place. The work was realized using a pair of wireless vocal microphones and compact loudspeakers. These devices broadcast the ad-hoc sonic contributions of students, staff, and visitors across four transitional and acoustically separate spaces at 100 McCaul Street over the course of one week. The first microphone was positioned on a stand in the pink stairwell (see fig. 1). Its signal was transmitted to a loudspeaker in the yellow one (see fig. 2). A second microphone was hung from an exposed ceiling pipe in the entrance foyer (see fig 3). Its signal

emerged from a loudspeaker in the green stairwell (see fig. 4). Printed instructions on the floor below each microphone explained where to listen.

Fig. 2. Still image from video documentation of *Nothing to Hear, So to Speak* showing yellow stairwell (2020). Image and video courtesy of author.

Fig. 3. Entrance foyer at 100 McCaul Street (2020). Image courtesy of author.

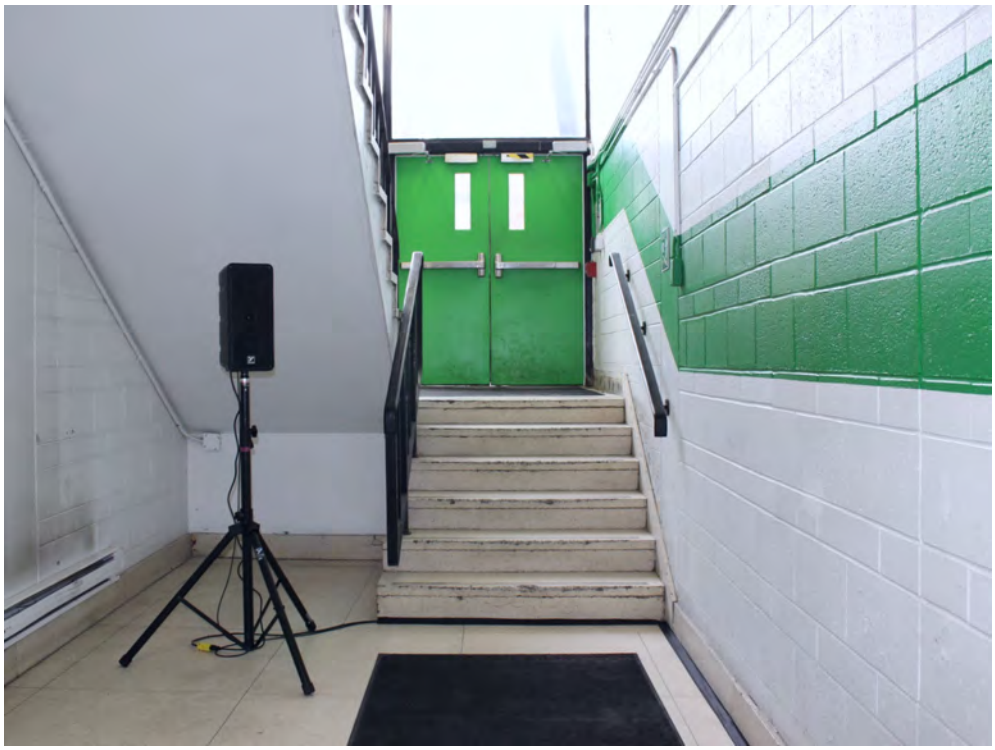

Fig. 4. Green stairwell at 100 McCaul Street (2020). Image courtesy of author.

The project was developed to encourage social interaction and empower a diverse array of participants to sonically engage with urban transitional spaces. Yet, through its aim to enact new formations of listening as part of this process, it inadvertently drew attention to settler colonial modalities of perception. When observing the installation, instead of focusing on specific human-generated sounds (or an absence of them), I became absorbed by the machinic low frequency hum that permeates the transitional spaces of the building. While from one perspective, the hum is merely the sound of an HVAC system, from another, its sonic constitution embodies and exemplifies a dynamic and relational colonial system: a relic of settler colonial interventions in the built environment.

The hum might, in fact, be recognized as one of the pervasive factors of everyday life outlined by theorist Eve Tuck and artist C. Ree in their decolonial treatise *A Glossary of Haunting*. As thinkers and makers, they grapple with how to imaginatively recontextualize the obscured stories of spaces: ones that linger below the surface of seemingly normal circumstances. They call on artists to draw attention to these under-examined occurrences that, they argue, can foreground the persistent manifestations of colonialism and power that exist in the built environment. For Tuck and Ree, creatively reframing a mundane moment to become a meaningful one is vital within a settler colonial context, insofar that focused acts of intervention—as they describe it—can work to "unsettle our sense of space" (653). Although the hum fills the foyer with an almost material presence, it goes easily unnoticed. Put another way: it's not that the hum is hard to hear—it's that the hum is actively filtered out and ignored. Stó:lō scholar Dylan Robinson contends that such sounds might seem insignificant, but within a context of normalized ignorance, they can perhaps be understood as the audible trace of

colonization. For Robinson, these are the sounds of settler occupation that linger and haunt everyday spaces, whether we acknowledge them or not (75–76).

Like most—if not all—North American universities, OCAD is located on stolen Indigenous territories. The land surrender for 100 McCaul Street is covered by the contentious Toronto Purchase Treaty of 1805, involving the Mississaugas of the Credit and the British crown. Anthropologist Patrick Wolfe notes how settler colonialism is "premised on the elimination of native societies" and constitutes "a structure not an event" (2). In other words, colonial policies and post-colonial practices continue to suppress Indigenous communities in the present day. On the one hand, these points of suppression might be readily apparent, such as the very fact that a Western university is situated on Indigenous land and tends toward the instruction of Eurocentric narratives. On the other hand, settler colonialism emerges through less obvious channels, such as individual and collective states of perception: frames of being and knowing that are often difficult to locate objectively without lived experiences that can ground a subjective positionality.

In this sense, when employing listening to push back against the grain of normative assumptions, or "listening otherwise" as Robinson suggests, it may be possible to understand who occupies a space and—in certain circumstances—under what terms spaces find themselves occupied (15). From my position—as an artist and settler intent on listening to the resonance of collective actions in site-specific ways—it stands to reason that I must contribute to new forms of listening, not simply new sounds to listen to. While *Nothing to Hear, So to Speak* might appear to empower participants to simply make sounds, the perceptual formations that these amplifications encourage constitute a substantive contribution toward listening *otherwise.*

Acoustic Graffiti

A counterpoint to OCAD's subdued aesthetic of white corridor spaces is offered through the assortment of hand-scrawled words, phrases, and drawings that cover the walls of the yellow stairwell. The graffiti has been tolerated since there are no CCTV cameras present. In turn, the contributors are granted anonymity. Along with the aural potential of the stairwell, the closed nature of its construction means that most sounds made there—or broadcast into the space—are contained acoustically. As a result, whoever makes sound has a certain freedom of expression that is not self-evident in the more surveilled spaces at OCAD (for example, the main entrance foyer). Unlike visual graffiti, augmenting a space with sound leaves no trace and can further generate an affective and embodied connection to place. In one sense, *Nothing to Hear, So to Speak* investigates this notion through voices, with the proposition that *acoustic graffiti*, or ad-hoc and anonymous sonic contributions, might be a meaningful addition to transitional spaces. This informal and unregulated re-sounding of a space could describe an unrestricted range of agonistic or antagonistic conversations and/or interactions between groups of people, amongst any number of other potential sonic encounters that work to simultaneously engage acts of sounding with opportunities for listening.

How might sound installations use forms of acoustic graffiti to transgressively *unsettle* the fixity of settler colonial perception and, in part, nudge everyday audiences toward pursuing a decolonial sensibility in their awareness and actions? Could these insights nurture the development of different political and affective spaces, as well as audiences? To some extent, these questions align with Robinson's theorization of "critical listening positionality" (9). He contends that it is necessary to understand how personal listening biases are formed and how settler colonial positionalities "can be generally understood as particular assemblages of

unmarked structures of certainty that guide normative perception and may enact epistemic violence" (10). Thus, it not only becomes vital to assess one's own position—that is: *how do I listen?*—but also to work collectively to enact changes in larger "places, models, and structures of how we listen" (72). In moving past these formations, Robinson proposes that precisely defining one's subjectivity is fundamental, insofar as it will prompt questions that allow a listener to "become better attuned to the particular filters of race, class, gender, and ability that actively select and frame the moment of contact between listening body and listened-to sound" (11). Robinson's theorization informs *Nothing to Hear, So to Speak*, which provided a platform for expression to allow for the enhanced perceptual awareness of everyday sounds as well as sounds no longer audible.

Conclusion

Nothing to Hear, So to Speak offers a moment of unsettling that while not directly aimed at critiquing colonial structures, nonetheless touches on key areas of this agenda. It crucially reinforces the necessity for further audio art works explicitly tackling settler colonialism. Such projects should align with Gascia Ouzounian's theorization of "critical spatial sonic practices," or sound installations that reorient an artist's relationship to sound and space (106). Ouzounian posits that artists who develop works that meaningfully engage the public and "account for social and political geographies, as well as physical ones" (106) can, in turn, transform spaces to effect powerful change. From this standpoint, it is crucially the people traveling through spaces who hold a distinct power to reorient their social and political dynamics. Artists should continue to work toward making literal and figurative space, through art and research, for diverse contributions that create further opportunities for enacting decolonial processes. For example, a future iteration of the project at 100 McCaul Street might seek the collaboration of

Indigenous students and staff at OCAD, and other community participants drawn from First Nation custodians of the land, to sonically or symbolically *cancel out* the hum in order to cleanse the space and reclaim the spatial imposition of the sound, as well as the energy it saps. Just as certain frequencies lay claim to soothe and heal, other frequencies—like the hum—may in fact not just remind but indeed place many individuals in bodily states of affective despair. In its existing form, *Nothing to Hear, So to Speak* offers up the smallest moments of everyday life as valuable opportunities to listen *otherwise.* Through this process, listening becomes a powerful way to chisel away at the colonial structures and systems that remain obscured in the built environment.

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Angus Tarnawsky is an artist, musician, educator, researcher, and PhD student at Concordia University in Tiohtià:ke (Montreal). His doctoral research examines the social and political

dimensions of everyday listening practices. Central to this work is the creation and analysis of site-specific sound installations in a variety of locations throughout the built environment. He holds an MFA from OCAD University and a BMus from the University of Melbourne.

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