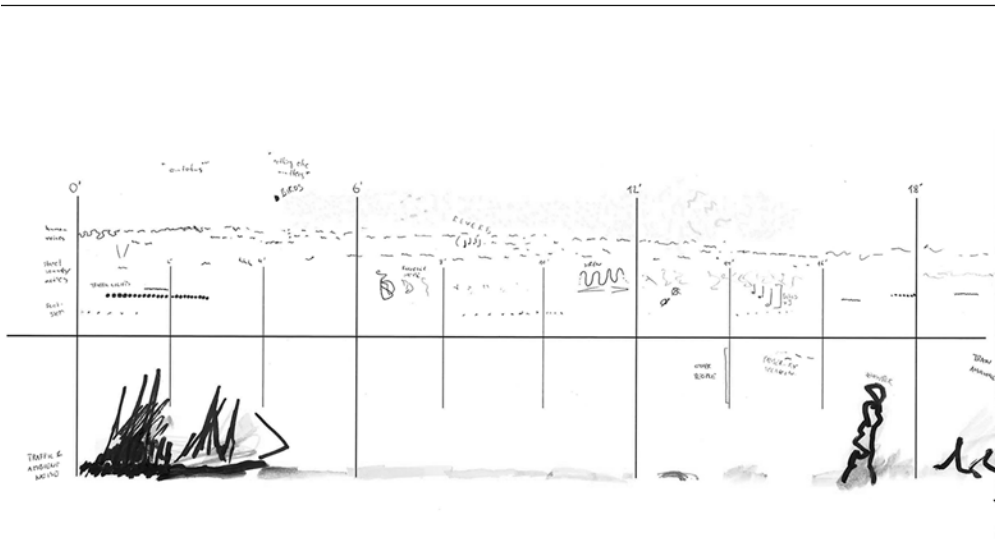


# 11

## The Street

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**Figure 11.1** Juhana's graphic notation from a walk in Ljubljana (excerpt).

## Turku, Ljubljana, Brighton

There is no strict silence in the street. It is always busy. Life in the streets is fluid. As is the traffic itself. Background noise in streets is often unidentifiable.

(Soundnotes, Turku)

The ubiquitous hum of engines—sometimes constant and at other times oscillating up and down in tone and amplitude as the cars accelerate and decelerate—constructs a dense aural fabric merged with the wheel noise and the ambient traffic noise coming from further away.

(Soundnotes, Ljubljana)

In the rare silent moments amidst the fugue of the motors, sometimes even a bit of birdsong can be heard. Perhaps the birdsong might have been there all the time, but it was just hard to notice due to the overwhelming traffic.

(Soundnotes, Ljubljana)

When thinking about the aural architecture of streets, it is often traffic and noise that first come to mind. Nonetheless, the reality is much more varied. Streets are like the veins of a city; they connect different mobile elements—people, bicycles, cars—to different places. The street sound environment is diverse, globally and locally, but it is also transformational and transitory. Even in the same streets, over periods of days, weeks, and a calendar year, sounds come and go.

Any empirical survey of street sounds would encounter various human practices: moving, walking, driving, riding, working, talking, playing, drinking, eating, or relaxing. For some of these activities, sound may play a significant or almost indispensable role (think of talking), whereas for others, sound is more or less an accidental and uncoordinated byproduct. Besides humans, many non-human actors contribute to the common soundscape:

Wind, obviously. Omnipresent nature in the street. Barely audible. Or strong winds that occupy one's ears completely. Sounds of birds and seagulls. Background noise is barely audible. But it is still there.

(Soundnotes, Turku)

If every movement is vibration, and every vibration makes a sound, then the city is a veritable “sound body” (Kapchan 2015: 34). It spreads its tentacles around in the form of streets, forming a sonic system full of colorful, structured and unstructured sounds, some of them difficult for a human ear to distinguish.

In this chapter, we jump into the complexities and subtleties of urban aural rhythms and timbres by walking in the streets and by resounding (cf. Järviluoma 2013) the experience of doing this activity. Walking, one of the quintessential features of the human form of life (Ingold and Vergunst 2008: 1), has been studied from a number of perspectives: from auto-topographic approaches (Arlander 2012) to transmaterialities of walking (Springgay and Truman 2017), and to different multisensorial approaches (Pink 2007, Järviluoma and Vikman 2013). It offers an interface to street life in its various modalities.

Why not choose to cycle, drive a car, or sit on a bus? These activities would undoubtedly be potential methodological extensions, but nevertheless, walking—in its relative slowness, vulnerability, and the tangibly tactile connection with the street *in concreto*—remains an elementary form of urban participatory observation (e.g. Jenks and Neves 2000, Morris 2004, Middleton 2010). By moving around as pedestrians, by lifting our feet and putting them down again, by stepping on the asphalt, gravel, or grass, we not only assume an external perspective from where to contemplate the sensory events as they unfold around us, but, by walking, we take part in the sonic texture of the city—embedding ourselves in it, contributing to it, and experiencing it:

The first and the most vital repetition of street sounds are footsteps: their meter may be constant or changing. When walkers walk, they synchronize. But sounds of footsteps are constantly changing, depending on boots and surface. They may be rhythmically constant, accelerated or slowed down. Only when a pedestrian stops does he or she not produce walking sounds.

(Soundnotes, Turku)

As part of the research project SENSOTRA, we walked with our colleagues and local research participants in three medium-sized cities around Europe: Turku (Finland), Ljubljana (Slovenia), and Brighton (United Kingdom). During the walks, a pair of local informants, one younger and one older, teamed up with one or more researchers. The informants took turns in leading the group through the city, choosing their preferred route, paying attention to senses and memories, and narrating the sensory experience to the other walker and the accompanying researcher(s). The walks were recorded and analyzed in video and audio formats. Whereas classic ethnographies have been conducted as solo work (Muršič 2011), these sensobiographic walks were conducted by teams in different cities.

This method of *sensobiographic walking* (Järviluoma 2016) highlights the human being as moving through space and focuses on sensory experiences: smelling, touching, hearing, tasting, seeing, and feeling what and *how* one remembers the places passed. Sensobiographic walking has its roots in the research project Acoustic Environments in Change, which had the aim of mapping the local soundscapes from five European villages (see Järviluoma et al. 2009). The method is also inspired by the *commented city walks* of Jean-Paul Thibaud (Thibaud 2013), *sensory memory walking* (Järviluoma and Vikman 2013), *soundwalks* (Westerkamp 1974), and the notion of *topobiography* by Pauli Tapani Karjalainen (2018).

Our objective in this chapter is to perform and “resound”—that is, to reconstruct and reverberate through a different medium—a version of the urban sound environment as experienced and reimagined through the recordings from these sensobiographic walks. What we construct and analyze is a sort of “imaginary landscape”: a mash-up of two walks in two different cities, Turku and Ljubljana, as interpreted by researchers who were not present on those particular walks, but who only listened to the recordings. By doing this, we aim to challenge the textualizing tendencies in aural ethnography (cf. Howes 2003: 3–28). At first, this goal certainly sounds paradoxical: to question the dominance of “text” in a practice that literally means “writing” (“-graphy,” Gr. *graphein*). However, even in the sensobiographic walking method, where emphasis is expected to be on multisensory experiences of the environment, the narrative form of telling and writing a story is so strong that it may easily overwrite sensory plurality and ambivalence. Thus, the guiding dilemma is: How can we take seriously and account for the aural diversity and specificity of the street without reducing it to the “model of the text” (Howes 2003: 3)?

In the research process portrayed in this chapter, we try to deal with street sounds more straightforwardly, taking the role of aural bricoleurs and giving space to the agency of soundscapes. We experiment with text, visual means, and quantitative analyses not only as interpretations of street sounds but as expressive materials that are already on the verge of developing a life of their own. The processed materials are not mere representations of the street, but *resonances* of the places with their communalities and peculiarities. By working with these resonances, we seek to develop an open and playful way of coping with the textual–aural nexus and linking materialities of street sounds to the materialities of street life more generally.

How did we select the sites of our research? Giffinger et al. (2007) note that while the majority of the European population lives in medium-sized cities (with populations of between 100,000 and 500,000), the mainstream of urban research focuses on global metropolises. The rationale for choosing mid-sized cities as research sites in the SENSOTRA research project was to challenge the prevailing narrative that significant socio-cultural transformations can only be traced in the most densely populated areas. On the contrary, the project deliberately selected sites falling outside of the dominant gaze.

Ljubljana is the capital of Slovenia, with 300,000 inhabitants. It was built around a castle on a hill above the Ljubljanica River, where the majority of the sensobiographic walks were done. The city center is now mostly a traffic-free zone, so the traffic noise is concentrated at city entrance roads and several crossroads. There are some industrial facilities located in some parts of the city, but in general, it is an administrative, educational, and tourist center. The history of Ljubljana begins with the Roman settlement of Emona and continues through the Middle Ages to modernity. Its shape was changed by an earthquake in 1895, through the works of architect Jože Plečnik in the twentieth century, and it became an important regional center after the First World War.

Turku is the oldest city in Finland. It was settled in the thirteenth century and functioned as the capital until the early nineteenth century. Today, Turku is the sixth-largest city in Finland, with a population close to 200,000. The geography of Turku is characterized by the Aura River, which goes right through the city center. The riverbank has become very popular for weekend strolls, attracting tourists and locals alike, especially on warm summer days. As the participants for the study were encouraged to choose their routes freely, a large part of the walks took place by the river and the around neighboring areas, such as the Old Great Square, the Lesser Square, and the Market Square. The riverside promenade, of about three kilometers, reaches from the Old Great Square to the harbor area that fifty years ago was dominated by the clanging sounds from the Crichton-Vulcan shipyard, which at the time was the spearhead of the Finnish shipbuilding industry. While marine and metal industries are still import for the region, the service sector and high-tech and knowledge-intensive industries have gained more and more prominence.

Regarding street sounds, one of the most dramatic changes in the last century has been the surge of car traffic. Private cars were rare in photographs of Turku from the late 1940s, with the streets mostly populated by pedestrians and cyclists, along with horses and trams. In 1972, the tramway was shut down, as it was considered outdated. The numbers of cyclists in the streets had already diminished rapidly, with the private car becoming a modern mode of transport (Männistö-Funk 2018.) Today, cycling is once again embraced; new cycling lanes are being built and plans are being established for calming traffic. Turku, as well as Ljubljana, have popular bikeshare systems, and today, increasingly often the sound of the car engine is accompanied by the ticking tone of the bicycle freewheel.

Sounds of bicycle wheels, mostly silent, are constantly coming and going. Bicycle ball bearings add a specific additional sound of moving. They come close to the ear, closer than walking, and go away in passing. The sounds of bicycles come very close, may become intimate.

(Soundnotes, Turku)

## Polisgraphy and the Trap of the Text

How to speak about something that cannot be spoken about? This oft-repeated quandary from Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logicus-Philosophicus* (1961 [1921]) is very pertinent to the field of sound anthropology. Of course, sounds *can* be spoken about, and they can be written about, as they often are. Numerous academic and popular articles, as well as entire books, have been devoted to the topic: to describing verbally what things sounded like in a certain environment, in a certain time, and from a certain listener's "listenpoint." But aurally, in the strict terms of the air pressure that causes a vibration in the eardrum, texts are nearly mute. The only sound directly caused by reading a verbalized derivative of listening is the occasional scraping rustle of turning the page.

The problem of representation, however much debated (e.g. Clifford and Marcus 1986, and the thousands of works citing it), still haunts ethnography: the practice of "writing" (*graphein*) a "community" (*ethnos*). In describing, analyzing, and understanding the sonic community of the street—let alone its intermeshing with the broader socio-cultural, socio-economic, and socio-political contexts—we have to become two sorts of writers: not only sound-writers, or *phonographers*, but also city-writers, *polisgraphers*, writing sounds of the city and through the city. Even more importantly, we have to question, time and again, the very foundation of this writing: What is it based on? On the "objective" facts about the blowing car horns and heels clicking on cobblestones, or on our "subjective" experiences of them? Likewise, we have to pay attention to how sound is transferred to a different medium: How does writing capture its non-textual object? How does it translate and transform it? How does it label and categorize entities? What does it include and emphasize, and what does it downplay and undermine?

The street is not primarily a space of attentive listening, of attuning one's ears to sonic events or writing down notes about them. Rather, it is space of action where manifold events take place, some intentionally and some accidentally. To address the street as a space of commons and contestation, we also have to push our ways of "hearing" the city from the perspective of being a passive spectator to taking more seriously our role in conveying and potentially reshaping the urban experience.

The process of writing down street sounds and sound-streets is inescapably partial. The streets do not write themselves; we write them as researchers. The researcher has the prerogative and responsibility to act as the mediator of this aural knowledge. At the extreme end, the cautiousness about the researcher's role could lead to abandoning the whole process of analysis as a deliberate intervention. To write the sounding street as is would require a more literal take on "writing." Would a serious sound-writer, then, resort to the phonograph—a machine that reproduces and records sound vibrations by debossing a sheet of tinfoil with a stylus (like Thomas Edison's first models in the 1870s)—to follow the etymological root of writing as "tearing" and "scratching"? Or would we perhaps choose a modern descendant of the same pedigree—say, a portable digital audio recorder capable of encapsulating an almost hyperrealistic audio portrait?

To substitute words with sound recordings—and to replace the human phonographer with the non-human phonograph—would be an obvious but trivial answer to the dilemma. It would imply a shift from representation (as in saying something *about* something) to a mere restaging (as in saying something again as faithfully as possible), and similarly, from narration (*diegesis*) to imitation (*mimesis*).

Anthropologist David Howes debates the problem of writing sensory experience extensively in *Sensual Relations* (2003). He argues that, in the history of anthropology, the mode of knowledge has shifted from being “multisensory and social” to being “spectacularly stylized and centered on the individual ethnographer” (Howes 2003: 3). Further, he notes that the metaphor of “reading culture” carries two biases: visual (“ocularcentric”) and verbal (“verbocentric”) (ibid.: 19–20). A “reader,” to begin with, is a voyeur, a passive spectator instead of an active participant. This reader who portrays culture through writing tends to assume that the expressions interpreted through reading and writing carry some kind of propositional knowledge. However, “not all knowledge need be verbalized (i.e. take the form of a proposition)” (ibid.: 20). Thus, there are many pitfalls to avoid: the individualist notion of an ethnographer, the distancing of the written accounts from the vivid sensory reality, and the understanding of sensory experiences as a part of an overwhelmingly coherent system of knowledge.

A radically different perspective on the problem of representation, or for overturning the concept of representation altogether, has been suggested in the approach known as *New Materialism* (e.g. Coole and Frost 2010a, Dolphijn and Van der Tuin 2012). In *Vibrant Matter* (2010), Jane Bennett presents an encapsulation of this onto-political project by asking “[h]ow would political responses to public problems change were we to take seriously the vitality of (nonhuman) bodies?” (Bennett 2010: viii). The idea is, thus, to push our thought toward recognizing how things matter not only *to us* but also *in themselves*. The path taken in this chapter relates to so-called Critical Materialism (Coole and Frost 2010b: 6, 27–32) which sees (hears) the world as both materially and socially/discursively constructed, paying attention to the dialectical intertwining of human and non-human agency, and to the capacities of things to make an impact, and to the diversity of materialities that exists.

While Howes seems to suggest that the necessary shift for avoiding the “trap of the text” is to move from “writing” to “making sense” (Howes 2003: 26), the epistemological path inspired by new materialism takes a step further, and in a way, a step backwards. Instead of aiming to make sense of the patterns of sensing within a delimited context, the approach affirms the particularity and non-reducibility of sensory experiences: their “thing-power”—the “efficacy of objects in excess of the human meanings, designs or purposes they express or serve” (Bennett 2010: 20)—and, in a sense, their senselessness.

In our experiment, we extracted the street sounds of Turku and Ljubljana from the interview tapes as sounds, momentarily leaving aside the aspect of how the informants contextualized, reflected on, and interpreted them. We listened to the tapes with little contextual information, focusing mostly, if not only, on the sounds that were heard. We chose to ignore the visual cues from the video footage, as they would too easily lead one’s imagination to certain pre-established ways of building a narrative of an urban stroll. By excluding words and sight, as well as proprioception, smell, and touch, the experiment

opens a specific aural dimension of the street. Certainly, this could be criticized as the worst form of “sensory exclusionism” (Howes 2003: 6), a perspective where only one sense and one way of mediating it is unduly foregrounded. However, we contend that this foregrounding can be harnessed as a tactical “troubling” and “staying with the trouble” (Haraway 2016) in mediating sensory knowledge.

## Phonographic Palimpsests of Sensobiographic Walks

Texts from walks performed by other people, later randomly selected and listened to by two who were perhaps sitting in a chair ... listening to the acousmatics of walks performed, repeating the missing parts, in language they did not understand. Listening to the street through headphones.

(Sonja’s research notes)

What do the streets sound like in Turku and Ljubljana? The first answer to this is very straightforward: We might regard the interview tapes as taking on the function of technology-mediated aural evidence of what could have been heard in the streets by the group while doing the sensobiographic walk. For the analysis, two sensobiographic walks were randomly selected from the SENSOTRA project’s dataset, one from Ljubljana and one from Turku. The footage from these walks was recorded with a chest-worn video camera and a handheld audio recorder.

Usually, when listening to recordings for the purpose of transcribing them or otherwise learning what was discussed during the walk, we tend to focus on one specific auditory element: the narration of the person who leads the walk, and the dialogue between her/him and the other participants. This mode of listening develops a certain sensibility, where the priority is to comprehend what is said. In the background of the narration, the urban soundscape is often noisy. For a transcriber, the fact that the walks took place in an uncontrolled urban space might be seen as more of a nuisance than as an area of interest.

Background noise occasionally fills a soundscape of the walk and thus makes speakers in dialogue speak louder and louder. Human conversation in the street competes with other traffic noises. The street is a place of contestation.

(Soundnotes, Turku)

Just as in trying to get one’s voice heard over the traffic while walking, the act of listening and trying to hear “what is in there” constructs a dichotomy of content and noise: the speech—intelligible, meaningful—as content, and the urban environment—chaotic, unpredictable—as noise. Although our research focuses on the multisensory experiences of a city, the way we attend to these experiences and describe them textually is most often verbally mediated and assumes the “model of the text” (Howes 2003: 3). For the experiment herein, we decided to invert the lens of our hearing: to ignore the semantic content of speech as “noise” and to foreground its environment as “content.”

The material from Ljubljana was analyzed by a Finnish researcher (with practically no knowledge of Slovenian) and, vice versa, the material from Turku was analyzed by a Slovenian researcher (with no knowledge of Finnish). We employed the language barrier as a research tool, as a form of bracketing so as to challenge established conventions of listening to interview tapes as dialog and, on the contrary, to shift the focus from the human-centric and narration-centric perspectives to what is outside: the urban environment. Thus, instead of focusing on how the walkers describe the aural environment and their memories about it, we harnessed the lack of verbal comprehension as way of letting the environment speak for itself.

Ethically, this is a controversial strategy because, by ignoring semantic information as well as many contextual factors, we neglect most of what the informants on these walks would probably have thought of as valuable. What we did is not to denounce the compelling stories and details told by our informants, but to challenge ourselves in the process of interpretation and to seek a path toward an alternative way of describing and redescribing the aural realm.

Our method consisted of the following interrelated aspects:

- Challenging our established conventions of working with the fieldwork material by bracketing out certain sensory and lingual elements in favor of others.
- Experimenting with different methods (e.g. qualitative, quantitative, visual, poetic) of producing soundnotes: sort of “imaginary fieldnotes” that resound (but do not simply “reproduce” or “represent”) the aural environment through a different medium.
- Working with processed materials collectively by circulating, reinterpreting, rewriting, remixing, and recomposing them with the aim of subverting the individualist–subjective propensity and, instead, building common ground between the different interpretations while also leaving space for contradictions.

We began analyzing the street sounds of Turku and Ljubljana through a series of iterative experiments with different ways of playing with the sound material. In the effort of continuously rewriting and overwriting the descriptions of the street sounds, the method could be described as one of “phonographic palimpsests” (cf. Daughtry 2017; Waterman 2017): of interpreting and reinterpreting; of doing and undoing; of writing and erasing; of mixing and separating; of layering and flattening.

Instead of having a full methodological plan at the outset, we progressed step by step, inventing new ways of processing the materials on the go. First, we listened individually to the sound recordings and prepared textual reflections of walks that were conducted by other people. We then randomly selected parts of these reflections and listened to recordings again. We listened to the acousmatics of walks, repeating parts but avoiding dialogues, as we did not understand the language. This was, basically, listening to the streets with headphones, displaced from the original scene. We compared the soundnotes from two cities, put relevant observations together, and mixed them anew. Later, we separated structurally or experientially similar aspects of the walks in the streets, organizing them into multiple forms.



From the Turku material, Rajko wrote a thematically organized summary with sixteen different categories: *background sounds, sounds of walking, animal sounds, sounds of traffic, sounds of parks and green areas, the street as a ludic and common space, street life, music on the street, sounds of indoor and outdoor spaces, sounding streets, street sounds and movement, unexpected sounds and sound signals, other kinds of streets and their sounds, silent streets/streets of silence, sounds of occupation and inhabitation, and sounds of nature*. Juhana took a slightly different approach to the Ljubljana interviews, first preparing graphical notation that mapped the sound events to a timeline with intuitively and inductively born categorizations and notations (see Figure 11.1). After that, he wrote the imaginary soundnotes mostly based on the score, then remixing the text into thematic categories comparable to the ones in Rajko's experiment. Finally, he juxtaposed the two soundnotes from the two research sites into a single mash-up that could possibly reveal some common features—as well as contradictions—of the urban aural settings.

After the first phase, Sonja started working with all of the materials produced thus far: the two thematic soundnotes from two cities, the graphic score, and the mash-up. As she did not listen to the audio files from the streets, her experience of the streets in Turku and Ljubljana relied on her memories of both cities. Her deafness to the primary material was a choice she made to distance herself from the aural experience of these two cities. Instead, she worked with the textual-graphical interpretations from the earlier stage of analysis.

I am trying to imagine the streets inside my mind, trying to hear the seagulls in Turku, and the footsteps in Ljubljana ... The printed papers are messy and wrinkled for I have tried to categorize the papers, draw circles when I find repetitive words, ideas.

(Sonja's research notes)

She experimented with quantitative methods, such as counting frequencies and drawing word clouds, and produced, for example, a sevenfold categorization of the street sounds as portrayed in the textual accounts: *machine-like, non-human, human, relational, musical, poetic, and noise* (Table 1). She also created various word clouds (see Figure 11.2), working on the materials as a quantitative listener. As she decided not to listen to the walks themselves, there was not much left but to “read” the streets and write down how that felt.

While the purpose of our methodological experiment was to question the textualizing tendency of aural ethnography, we ended up working primarily with sounds-as-text. However, this does not imply that the experiment to have been flawed. Instead of “looking at” or reading the street sounds of Turku and Ljubljana as coherently organized narratives, we broke down the sounding streets into heterogeneous elements that can be recombined in multiple ways. This opened a playful approach to street life, an approach that heard

**Table 11.1** Sonja's analysis of the aural categories present in the soundnotes.

	Human	Non-human	Machine-like	Musical	Relational	Noise	Poetic
Turku	14	16	14	6	17	10	4
Ljubljana	11	9	12	11	9	5	1
Total	25	25	26	17	26	15	5



*Rhythmanalysis* (Lefebvre 2013) reveals cities as places of private, public, and common life. In contrast to museums, historical and memory places, gardens and thematic parks, streets are not *heterotopia*, neither in Foucault's (1986[1967]) nor in Lefebvre's terms, although they are representative, contested, and occasionally inverted. Urban planning typically serves the interests of elites in designing and redesigning cities, but the elites rarely occupy streets. We cannot hear them, but they dramatically affect street life. Through various means and measures, the elites control policy and police (Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003: 22). This is why city streets witness memories of occupation and liberation, protest and repression.

Streets have always been an arena for the most exposed social, political, and class struggles (Harvey 2012: 66). "The right to the city" (Lefebvre 1996, Harvey 2012) is not given but gained. Even aurally, the street is a place of continuous contestation and opposing power structures. The pedestrian's way of sensing the city—even when augmenting the experience by walking with headphones filled with music—is quite different from the isolated position of being inside a motorized vehicle. As cultural geographer Don Mitchell suggests, the street is a focal site of political contestation: ultimately, the right to the city depends upon the right to the street (Mitchell 2011).

Struggles over the street become visible during protests. Revolutionary noise (Attali 1985) manifests itself in places of confrontation, the unregulated space of class struggle, revolutions, upheavals, violence, fascism, antifascism, or simply street spectacles at sport or cultural events, as well as in the spontaneous activities of street vendors, artists, and drinking, partying, and playfulness. The streets of Ljubljana host street play, street art, graffiti, the annual street theatre festival, Ana Desetnica, and during the night, the Lighting Guerrilla Festival. Turku is also a lively cultural hotspot, and it was the European Capital of Culture for 2011. However, it experienced a carnivalistic "Capital of Counterculture" campaign at the same time (see Lähdesmäki 2013).

In the distant past, paths of communication between buildings were roofs, not streets. The narrow streets of the earliest urban settlements were close to nature. Rivers were the essential communication routes of many cities in the past, and this was the case for both Ljubljana and Turku. City squares later became places of worship, politics, and trade. With the first modern metropolises, such as Paris in the nineteenth century, new amorphous crowds of passers-by, the people in the street (Benjamin 1968a: 165), began to dominate both the spatial and aural environments. But this was just the beginning. Small towns soon followed the developments. In the first half of the twentieth century, military dance bands would play marches and waltzes in city parks. During the weekends, Ljubljana citizens would walk from the city center to the Tivoli Park and back (Ovsec 1979, Jerman 2003).

Escaping the crowded streets, acoustically, is like stepping into emptiness. Suddenly, the volume of the traffic noise drops, and the acoustic space is transformed. Whereas the previous space felt completely open (unrestricted), it now seems that the surroundings, whatever they are, reflect the sound and emphasize the human voices near the microphone of the recorder. The reverb here is surprisingly spacious: the voice of the speaker now sounds like it is in an amphitheater.

(Soundnotes, Ljubljana)

We understand walking as a historically, spatially, and theoretically situated practice that appears as a purposeful intervention to the prevailing pace of a city. With the relatively noisy and restless appearance of modern motorized cities, walking is a resistant and sticky practice that turns the tables. In addition to being resistant, walking can also be methodical. In *Théorie de la dérive* (1958), Guy Debord argues that even psychogeographic experiments, however playful and experimental in spirit, should follow a pre-decided and relatively systematic method. Debord criticizes the Surrealists' conception that freedom would be achieved by aimless wandering. We are so accustomed to our customary ways of using the city, the argument goes, that simply letting go is not enough for breaking away from our habitual patterns and, thus, cannot give us a novel perspective on urban life.

Recently, there has been even stronger interest in different walking methodologies (see, e.g., Springgay and Truman 2019; O'Neill and Roberts 2020). One of the roots of this growing interest can be considered to be in soundscape studies of the 1970s and their inventive, dynamic, mobile methodologies (Järviluoma, (in press)). The background for the experiment portrayed in this chapter is in the method of sensobiographic walking, originally developed by Helmi Järviluoma and her team. For Järviluoma, the method deals with the elusive attempts to scrutinize the escaping phenomena of *sensory remembering* (ibid.). The method was a product of years of exhaustive investigation to better understand and illuminate the multilayered event of sensory experience. When applying the “*écoute resituee*” that Järviluoma (2009) adapted from Nicholas Tixier's and CRESSON scholars' “*écoute située*” (Tixier 2002), the “re-” is worth emphasizing here: it is not only the memories in situ that matter for us but the activity of memorizing, relistening, and redoing that layers the dynamism of this activity.

There is something in walking that makes memories pop out. When asked to think about the urban space with all senses, which we do not normally deliberately do in our everyday lives, memories are easier to reach when we move around in the particular places. However, as Debord (1958) argues, our ways of using the urban space also tend to be rather restrained and follow the same patterns from day to day. Breaking out of our habits requires deliberate experimentation and imagination. The method of using imaginary soundnotes can reveal aspects of the urban aural regimes that would have been concealed in the form of narrated memories. Further, in addition to addressing “what streets sound like,” we should be more concerned about “what we would *like* streets to sound like.”

## White Noise Is Very Pleasant?

A street is a space of commons, a place of sharing. But at the same time, it cannot be anything else than only a temporary assemblage.

(Soundnotes, Turku)

Music streaming platforms, such as Spotify, have created the possibility for today's citizen to transform or even to “shut down” one of their senses in a noisy city. Are we actually more used to shutting down our senses when walking in a city as a means of protection and privacy? Jean-Paul Thibaud portrays a Walkman city traveler who tries hard to derealize

the urban space with the help of a musical dimension plugged into his ears, but never fully achieving this: “We see him fully absorbed, lost in his sonic universe, whereas just one more step, a scream, or a glance is all it takes to bring him back into contact with his surroundings” (Thibaud 2003). Listening to the environment decreases as people partly privatize their city soundscape through headphones. Streets reflect specific metropolitan individualization and “extravagances of self-distantiation” (Simmel 2002: 18). Hiding behind headphones can be seen as escapist, but we can also think of this activity as the augmentation of our urban reality—a creation of a new sonic atmosphere through a musicalization of the environment, a possibility for “perceptual orientation” (ibid.). According to Thibaud, walking listeners use their devices to decode and protect themselves from cities’ sonic aggressions and, moreover, to give meaningfulness to places passed by, actually enhancing the events they experience (Thibaud 2003: 330). Nevertheless, there are people who resist the tendency to take the urban collectiveness of aural architecture as a bag full of unwanted sounds (Kaye 2013), and there are other people who can withstand no more sound and instead look for places of quietness.

What if we move beyond the content and representation of unwelcomed sounds, or sounds and their welcomeness and, like Marie Thompson in *Beyond Unwanted Sound* (2017a), look into what noise—or sounds—do? What kinds of different roles and strategies can we take in while writing about them and their doing? An interesting debate on the sought-for agency of noise has been sparked by the rapid increase in electric vehicles (EVs). In contrast to a combustion engine, an electrically powered engine is nearly silent. While this might be understood as a good opportunity for reducing urban noise pollution, EVs have raised fears about being too silent to signal their presence to people moving without a protective shield—pedestrians, generally, unaccompanied children, or the visually impaired. The future of transport will, obviously, reshape the street and its sounds. The case of electric vehicles highlights the intimate link between sound and power hierarchies; a noisy engine has been an aural manifestation of the dominant role of cars in the urban hierarchy. Now, with this vociferous noise disappearing, certain power structures also become more contestable and negotiable. Is a noiseless car a more modest inhabitant of the city, or is it a silent killer that must be regulated, as observed in European Union legislation that requires EVs sold after July 2019 to be fitted with a device that emits a warning sound?

When the sound of a car is detached from the mere technical necessities of the internal combustion engine, it loses its aura (cf. Benjamin 1968b), becomes arbitrary and contingent, but also symbolic. Through sound, cars can be marked as potentially dangerous, but they can be attached other characteristics as well. A “mix of tonal sound and white noise” (Adams 2018) has been accepted as a standard that not only seeks to replace the implied warning signal of the internal combustion engine, but at the same time to do so better. In a news article, Chris Hanson-Abbott, a representative of the safety products distributor Brigade Electronics writes: “White noise is very pleasant. It’s the sound of falling water. It’s a huge improvement on the noise emitted by petrol or diesel vehicles because its sound source is directional” (cited in ibid.).

When noise becomes a thoroughly commodified and contingent object that can be modulated and rationed into the urban space at will, one could ask if the concept of noise

makes sense at all in future cities. Silence and noise are subjective and such labeling can burden a certain sound. The composer Michel Chion claims that we should do without using the word “noise”: “Acoustically as well as aesthetically, it is a word that promotes false ideas” (Chion in Thompson 2017a: 1). Noise itself is a noisy word that can be used to describe almost anything that has no clear structure: “Noise is both obvious and evasive” (ibid.). Sounds have meanings, but they also have functions and they have effects. They have the capability to do things, bring about events, alter the course of events, or suppress events. Still, we cannot, nor even attempt to seek to, escape the responsibility of interpretation. Rather, our experiment was about the conditions on which an interpretation happens, and the processes and conventions that shape that interpretation.

We began the chapter by underlining the supposed dominance of traffic sounds and noises when picturing the ordinary street life of a city. Similar to the idea of the “beach under the cobblestones”—a motto of the revolting students in Paris of 1968—there are always innumerable actual and potential aural regimes concealed behind the ubiquitous hum of motors. All sounds and noises are related in total apperception, even if they occur completely randomly and independently. Streets in urban surroundings are usually lined with buildings, but sometimes streets and buildings enmesh, and we do not know where a street (sound) begins and where it ends. Sounds are also always in excess; there are more things to hear than we can possibly concentrate on:

Even though the recording has a feeling of space and one can hear the sounds moving on some kind of a multidimensional plane, it is difficult to say and to mentally map where exactly the cars are coming from or where they are going ... the sonic representation as transformed by the recording technology and the listener’s limited cognitive capabilities is just too simplified: the sound arrives and then goes away. There is constantly way too much information to pay attention to all the details or to be able to write everything down during the first listening.

(Soundnotes, Ljubljana)

Aidan Southall has observed that “the great city still exerts magnetic attraction” (1998: 408). City space, the space of freedom, the space of utopian imagination and dystopian fears, from Plato and Campanella to the *Situationist Internationale*, Fritz Lang, and William Gibson, is never silent and cannot be deserted. The city with its “social practice of communing,” as David Harvey would have it (2012: 73), defines streets not only as public space, even if the city authorities often assume streets as their property, enclosing them with regulations and licensing, but as the most vital place of *commoning* (De Angelis 2017) with bodies moving in the common place, producing common sounds. Similarly, Peter Marcuse (cited in Mitchell 2011: 319) argues that what “the right to the city” actually implies is not the right to the current city but to the future one: the right to reshape urban life according to “our hearts’ desires” (ibid.).

In this chapter, we have provoked our habits with a radically refocused relistening to interview tapes. Instead of relying primarily on interview-based verbal narratives of and what has been heard on the streets, we approached the recordings of sensobiographic walks as “aural dérives” (cf. Debord 1958): as experimental and playful encounters with

streets through moving around with a small group of people, with a collective and living sensory research unit, an activity that already transcends the individualist notions of sensory sense-making. We played with different ways of textualizing the sonic aspects of the street, but at the same time, we critically reflected and rethought this very process of converting the aural into the textual. Furthermore, we “troubled” (cf. Haraway 2016) the hero narrative of anthropology by adding a layer of collective *transmediation* and *transcorporeality* (Alaimo 2012) to the aural environment by diving into walks in which we did not originally participate and whose language (in the sense of spoken words) we did not understand. This rendered the street sounds a bit less human dependent and a bit more autonomous. When the semantic meaning is missing, the spoken words, screams, whispers, and talk descend to the same level as all the other sounds heard.

Sounds of skating are constant, breakable, extremely dynamic, and unpredictable. Bang and weep-like. Not much screaming from skaters. Swearing, perhaps, occasionally. Yelling. Laughing. If you don't know the context of the laughter, it becomes meaningless.

(Soundnotes, Turku)

What paths are for the forest and nature, and roads are for countryside, streets are for cities. The main problem in writing this chapter was not how to transform the experience of street walks into a narrative, but how to translate sonic material into text that excludes the narration of walkers. It is not possible not to place oneself in the recordings and write about sounds and noises objectively. The vocabulary we used in the initial soundscript was deeply personal; it reflected the very being of the listener.

Is it indeed possible to completely exclude meaningful conversations as the most typical sounds of human interaction? Does this action open perspectives beyond representation? Perhaps. However, here, at the end of this chapter, we still use words and other symbolic means to communicate. Perhaps we should not aim to textualize less, but to textualize more and in different ways; to let the matter of text intermesh freely with the matter of sound.

