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Abstract

Drawing on reflection, nonparticipant and participant observation, and introspection this article examines the performative dimensions of sound, arguing that sounds of both the nonsemioticized and semioticized variety function as acts, not unlike speech acts. Through a layered text, the article offers analytical reflections and evocative writing focused on the exploration of acoustic environments such as movie theatres, airplanes, street music performances, residential neighborhoods, and more. An important material property of sound acts, elocution, is identified, conceptualized, and examined. Elocutionary sound acts are also examined as social dramas, insofar as they constitute a crisis-ensuing breach of what the authors refer to as the somatic order. The maintenance of, or alignment on, the rules prevalent within a defined somatic order is also examined and discussed. As a whole, the sensuous performative dynamics that sound acts and somatic alignment entail can be referred to as instances of somatic work.

Keywords

aesthetics, everyday life, interaction, senses, social aspects, sound

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I sit back in my chair and close my eyes, immediately elevating my awareness of my soundscape. The longer I sit with it, the deeper into my awareness of the soundscape I penetrate, as if my ability to perceive sound were a slowly opening cone, expanding out in all directions. When I close my eyes my awareness of sound expands, and then the expansion expands, as if my awareness reaches out into the world, and after it is there perceiving for a bit, a more refined awareness expands further out ready to wrap itself around ever greater levels of detail. It is intense somatic work.

First, as I close my eyes, I hear the ticking of the clock. Tick, tick, tick. The word tick is a grotesque reduction of the actual sound, says little about it. There is something more about that sound; it is chunky and crunchy. I don't understand all the mechanizations of a clock, but I imagine little gears of metal in split moments of free fall, being caught, rhythmically, repeatedly, crunch, crunch, crunch, crunch. When I listen more deeply, it has a mini knock sound at the end of it, a slight reverberation, echoing out from the tail end of the strike. But then I am drawn away by another sound, claiming my attention. The wind chimes are beautiful; they please me. The tones are random, sometimes close together, sometimes far apart, sometimes high and pingy, sometimes deep and vibrating, almost gong-like; with many of the tones in between the sound that metal striking metal can make. Trill. Tiink. Tink, tink, tink, triill. Twiiillll. This sound is not reliably rhythmic; it is like a strange attractor, seemingly all over the place yet predictable within a range. The chimes are the private music of controlled chaos, which is usually playing, if I choose to tune in.

And there goes the furnace, muting the wind chimes. What a bully that blower is—a deep low vibrating bass that starts with a rattling din which speeds up quickly, cycling and expanding into an even, loud tone. There is something baritone and motor-like underneath the blowing sound; this sound is not steady, but makes loops. The furnace is so loud that if I am listening to the stereo or television I need to turn it up two levels in order to hear it again. When the heat cuts off, usually rather suddenly, I must adjust the volume back down or it hurts my ears. What a battle I wage, aligning with my heating system to maintain a desirable sense of sonic order!

Now the refrigerator kicks in. It is more than one sound, a series of muted hums and buzzings that harmonize and fluctuate within a predictable range. With my eyes closed I imagine being enclosed in a dark spiral, moving toward a center that never arrives—like someone's stereotype of an acid trip. I do not find it offensive, today. At other times I have felt like it too was a bully, second only to the thug that is my heating system, annoying, demanding my attention at times when I want to attend to other things.

There is another sound that, on occasion, trumps them all. It is the most elocutionary of them all. We live on a flight path. The planes fly overhead on a regular basis and it can be so loud that the house vibrates. It approaches like a storm in the distance, deep and rumbling. There are times where I assume, for a minute, that it is a storm brewing—thunder in the distance. If the path is directly over the house, the sound will arrive and dominate everything. I have sat down before, talking myself through the sound and vibrations, reassuring myself that I am not living a scene out of the movie *Donnie Darko* where a jet engine randomly crashes through the roof and kills the young man sleeping in his bedroom. I always laugh at myself when it is over, I try to never let others see me do this, yet, from time to time, I am seized, paralyzed, by the drama and dominance of the sound.

There are other sounds in the soundscape of my Memphis neighborhood: a cricket, distant traffic sounds, a train horn edging over the horizon, dogs barking, my husband coming into the house and urinating, and the tapping sound of these computer keys being pressed on the keyboard. I have come to the conclusion that my home is a symphony orchestra, blasting me with constant sound. But so is the world as a whole. I am engaged, constantly interacting with the sounds as characters, describing them, reacting to them, anthropomorphizing them. I have feelings, judgments, and opinions about them and the sonic world they perform into being. My home is not quiet, most often I just don't attend to it; I don't stop long enough to sense it and put words to it. When I attend to it, I am flooded with affect and meanings which seemingly arrange themselves across my consciousness. I am pleased, annoyed, filled with dread, and more; I make order of them by attending to them. This is not just my ears, but reflexivity at work, my mind interacting with my perceptions, my body acting back, imposing its sense of somatic peace on a world that always speaks back.

* * *

From the brash honking of a car horn to the insistent booms and bangs of pyrotechnics, from the refrain of our hometown's songbirds to the metallic lullaby of a muscle car's revving engine, sound constantly reverberates throughout the "interaction order" (Goffman 1983), forming "acoustic communities" (Schafer 1993), shaping "sensuous selves" (Waskul, Vannini, and Wilson 2008), and deeply touching bodies. As captured in Carol Rambo's opening fragment, sensory perception is experienced through "idealizing activities" (Dewey 1887/1967, 155)—ritualized somatic acts whereby meaning, affect, and memories are brought to bear on acts of sense making (also

see Waskul, Vannini, and Wilson 2008). But in spite of sound's omnipresence, ethnological knowledge about its significance is scarce. To be sure, research about music and speech—both sonic manifestations of human behavior—is immense across the humanities and social sciences. Yet we know infinitely much less about symbolic nonmusical and nonlinguistic sounds and about those nonsymbolic sonorous expressions (on this concept see Jackson 1968) that are produced by natural elements like thunder and the wind or technological artifacts like shotguns and lawn mowers or given off by humans through nonmusical, nonlinguistic processes like a sneeze or the rattling of teeth.

Although anthropologists have examined sound in a small but growing variety of cultural environments in the developing world (e.g., Bendix 2000; Chuengsatiansup 1999; Feld 1982; Helmreich 2007; Hirschkind 2006; Nuckolls 1996; Oosterbaan 2009; Panopoulos 2003; Stoller 1984; Sullivan 1986) sociologists and other students of North American and Western European societies have mostly confined their attention to issues of noise pollution and abatement (see, e.g., Bijsterveld 2000) and the production of modern and postmodern soundscapes, especially of the urban kind (e.g., Atkinson 2007; Beer 2007; Bull 2000, 2008; Bull and Back 2003; Corbin 1998; Schafer 1993; B. Smith 1991; M. Smith 2001; also see Rice 2003; and Sterne 2001 on sound in medical institutional contexts). Drawing from the sound literature and the anthropological and sociological work on the senses (Classen 1993; Csordas 1993; Geurts 2003; Howes 2003, 2005; Seremataki 1994; Stoller 1989, 1997; Synnott 1993), we build on interpretivist theoretical perspectives to analyze mundane nonmusical and nonlinguistic sounds as joint acts. We refer to these joint acts as *sound acts* and examine them as elements of performative processes of “sonic alignment” (Nuckolls 1996) and components of an interactional process we call somatic work (Vannini, Waskul, and Gottschalk, forthcoming; Waskul and Vannini 2008). Our writing is based on participant and nonparticipant observation as well as introspection. Over a period of six months the four of us have engaged—independently of one another and in different spaces—in acoustemological explorations of our physical and social environment (see Schaefer 1993). In what follows we report and focus on sensuous fragments from our observations. We represent our data through a multivocal “layered text” (see Rambo Ronai 1995).

The Performance of Sound Acts

By “sound acts” we refer to what sounds *do*. Sound acts are moves endowed with dramatic significance, that is, with the power to originate other moves

in a complex ecology of communication. Sound acts are related but not synonymous to speech acts. Thanks to the classic work of Austin (1962) and Searle (1968) we know that by uttering words people “do” things. This performative property of speech has three dimensions: the locutionary, the illocutionary, and the elocutionary. But according to Van Leeuwen (1999) any kind of sound, not only speech, is performative. Sound acts are therefore a broader category than speech acts. Speech acts are always symbolic, that is, their meanings are based on conventions that stipulate the abstract meaning of words and other utterances. Sound acts, on the other hand, may be non-symbolic and may also be involuntary and produced by nonhuman actors. Even though speech acts more commonly convey meaning and do things, sound acts are also of great significance. Take for example the involuntary cry of your baby at night, a loud bang from your car engine as you drive, or the piercing wail of a fire alarm. The locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary properties of these sounds should be obvious to anyone who has ever experienced them.

Not all sounds act. When sounds act, and whether they originate further action, is contingent on the convergence of various contexts such as the material properties of the sounds themselves, the auspices in which they materialize as well as the stocks of sonic knowledge available to the individuals who experience them, assign them meaning, and respond to them. The remainder of this article is focused on these three processes. From our interactionist and phenomenological perspectives we assert that sounds are sound acts when people bring them into conscious and reflexive awareness (see Csordas 1993), when they give them meaning or affect, and when they elicit some kind of manipulative response. These three dialectical processes embody somatic work. Thus, sounds never determine human behavior. Sound acts always have performative potential, but such potential is only actualized through somatic work. We begin by examining the material property of sounds we refer to as elocution.

Elocution

Aside from animal programming, few television genres produce a greater range of expressive, but often nonlinguistic, sound than children’s programs. Puppets and cartoons are, by definition, oversimplified and hyperstereotyped caricatures of their reality analogs. So too are the normative conventions of cartoon acoustics. Indeed, classic MGM cartoons often depict an entire story without any overt linguistic conventions at all—music, (melo)dramatic action, and expressive sounds are used to tell the entirety of the tale; *Tom and*

Jerry, Wile E. Coyote and Road Runner, and many of the early creations of *Merrie Melodies* offer classic examples of this unique and presumably universally interpretable style. Moreover, elocutionary sound acts are nearly as crucial as animation to cartoon drama. In other words, the dramatic qualities of animated cartoons are partly produced by staged elocutionary sound acts such as screams, gasps, boings, clangs, bangs, booms, beeps, zips, gongs, bells, whistles, and so forth. In the two-dimensional world of cartoons these sounds are not mere contour; they *are* transformative, dramatic action. Personally speaking, as much as I respect and admire the creative use of elocution in the acoustical dramas of cartoon animation, in all frankness, some cartoon acoustics are woefully aggravating—and, as far as I'm concerned, none are more so than *Dora the Explorer*. Such aggravation is the perlocutionary effect of these sound acts on me.

If a cartoon is a ridiculous oversimplification of reality then seven-year-old Dora Marquez succeeds in the absurdity of her representation. Simplistically sketched, Dora and the other characters demarcate a sharp, if not jarring, two-dimensional existence against a vivid three-dimensional acrylic backdrop. The narrow, slavish, adherence to a palette of mostly primary colors disturbs me deeply. Inexplicably, Dora's chief physical feature is her gargantuan football shaped head and equally massive half-circle eyes that are almost entirely consumed by her giant brown irises. Dora is chronically chipper and has lots of friends—but few are human; she prefers to spend most of her time with her best friend, an acrobatic monkey named Boots, and a loud-talking, gender-equivocal backpack.

During any given episode, Dora never fails to repeatedly solicit young viewers to assist in solving various problems she encounters on her adventures. To accomplish this Dora provides convenient pauses so that viewers can answer her many questions: "Do you see Swiper the fox? [Pause. Dora stands motionless, but blinks twice] Where? [Pause. Motionless. Blink, blink]." As a parent of children aged three and five, my sociological sensibilities are severely aggravated every time one or the other (usually both) speaks out answers to Dora's incessant questions. My children watch enough television as it is; speaking to televised characters goes too far—way too far. To boot, Dora's *voice* is maddening—she constantly yells. I've been in loud bars where it was necessary to yell to someone immediately next to me (sometimes directly into his or her ear); Dora speaks like this all the time. It must be a product of the obvious fact that Dora is hard of hearing; she constantly asks her viewers to "say it louder!" Hence a typical moment with my children and *Dora the Explorer*:

Dora: Do you see Boot's bouncy ball? [Pause. Motionless. Blink, blink]

My children: Right there, right there! [Seated on the couch and pointing to the television screen]

Dora: Where? [Pause. Motionless. Blink, blink]

My children: Right there, right there! [In a louder voice, and racing to the television screen to touch the exact spot where Boot's bouncy ball is "hidden"]

Dora: Say it louder! [Jumping with her arms in the air]

My children: RIGHT THERE, RIGHT THERE!! [Screaming loudly and pounding the television screen].

I find I must leave the room.

* * *

Sound acts have an intriguing material property, something we call *elocution*. The study of elocution allows us to focus our ears on sound acts as a form of drama and a type of interaction. Sound acts may be symbolic, but they are not necessarily a form of symbolic interaction. Elocution, in other words, does not need to rely on the power of convention and abstraction that is typical of symbolism. Traditionally speaking, however, elocution refers to the form characteristic of effective speech. A skilled orator is said to have the gift of elocution (Conquergood 2000), for example. But more generally many sounds can have elocutionary power. An elocutionary instance of sound is a particularly vivid, striking, evocative, and attention-grabbing one. Take for example a symbolic sound like a starting gun going off to signal the beginning of a 100-meter dash, or a nonsymbolic sound like a thunder startling us during our sleep. As these examples imply, context has a lot to do with elocutionary power. Consider for example the sonic environment of a rain forest. As Feld (1982) has shown in his ethnographic writing on the Kaluli people of Papua New Guinea, within a rain forest the constant singing of birds and the falling and streaming of water constitute a seemingly impenetrable wall of indiscernible noises. Yet despite being often unable to see the birds themselves the Kaluli can identify their presence simply by focusing in on the birds' momentary ability to "lift up" their singing over the sonic background. The "lifting up" of birds' sounds—their elocution—and their cultural significance are thus the dramatic effect of performance and the basis for the Kaluli's experience of its material properties.

As Van Leeuwen (1999) has pointed out, sound is dependent on pitch, tone, timber, dynamics, and other sonic material properties. Yet these properties are relatively meaningless unless individuals reflexively attend to them, that is, unless they are *minded*. Following the work of Mead (1934), we believe that meaning resides in the response to an act, as much as it does in the material and semiotic property of the act itself. Hence, elocution is certainly an important material dimension unto itself, but it is also greatly connected to perlocution—as the second author, Dennis Waskul, has noted in describing his emotional response to Dora’s voice. When subject to somatic modes of attention (Csordas 1993) elocutionary acts have the unique dramatic potential to “breach” (Turner 1988) the somatic order. This is an important property of elocution. Elocution is a way of making a claim for attention, a claim that originates an emotional response awaiting a manipulation of some sort (Mead 1934; Turner 1988). Such is their performative power. As Dennis narrates below, by standing out, lifting up, or otherwise by asserting their material uniqueness or difference from other sounds, elocutionary sounds make a claim for our attention, focus, and care.

* * *

I begrudgingly shell out the twenty dollars I’m charged for two small cups of popcorn, two small sodas, and one oversized box of candy that is large enough to share. Unfortunately these absurdly overpriced snacks have become an expected part of the contemporary movie theater experience. The comparative expense is exasperating, but it is a price you pay: some movies simply *must* be seen in the theater. Or so I have told myself on numerous occasions; I’m usually proven wrong and it is not the fault of the movie industry.

The climate-controlled theater is spacious and comfortable. The exceedingly high ceiling makes me feel small, but the dim lighting before and during the movie lowers the ceiling to a cozy atmosphere. The heavily cushioned, plush, dark maroon seating with handy cup holders are especially nice—but, per usual, there is no space provided to store the snacks; a likely explanation for the candied scat strewn about the floor. That, too, has become another accepted movie theater inconvenience: sticky snack ridden floors—complete with melting ice cubes and the puddle remains of tragically deceased beverages—that come to their fullest sonic life as you step on them, are as much a part of the movie theater experience as the overwhelming aroma of buttered popcorn.

Much to my disappointment, this movie experience begins just like all my other movie theater memories. Shortly into the film I start to hear it: *crunch, crunch, crunch*. It’s rarely very loud or obvious—not at the beginning.

Crunch, crunch, crunch. I ignore it at first, but my silent efforts fail with paradoxical results. *Crunch, crunch, crunch.* The more I try to ignore it [there it is again; *crunch, crunch, crunch*] the greater my perception of the sound. *Crunch. Crunch. Crunch.* Directly behind me I hear the not-so-faint sounds of a hand reaching into a copious bucket of popcorn for another godforsaken helping; I think to myself “God, I hope they didn’t get the large bucket of popcorn” but I already know that my prayers will not be answered. *Crunch, crunch, crunch.* The darkness seems to make the sound even louder. *Crunch, crunch, crunch, crunch* shortly followed by three smacking sounds—the telltale audio trace of the most animalistic method of cleansing one’s salty buttery fingers—then the distinctive rattle of ice cubes in a paper cup and the slurp of soda through a straw. *Crunch, crunch, crunch* again from behind me, but this time off to my left. The couple behind me is now rapidly joined with a chorus of hideous popcorn crunching that seemingly surrounds me. *Crunch, crunch, crunch.* Again I’m trying to ignore the racket, but the battle is already lost—the crunching sounds, not the movie, have captured my acute audio attention. *Crunch, crunch, crunch* from a person sitting a few seats to my right. The tempo is building into popcorn crunching crescendos—*CRUNCH! CRUNCH! CRUNCH!*—and my perception of the noise is amplified, heavy on the reverb, producing a nearly ceaseless echo effect. *Crunch, crunch, crunch.* A half hour into the movie, the crunching of popcorn has irritated me to the point of irrational anger that partly owes to the sounds themselves, but also to my own frustrations for letting it bother me so much.

I simply cannot concentrate (even on the pleasures of a movie) when surrounded with the audio ruckus of people who apparently never learned to eat with their mouth shut. The sound aggravates me so much that when I eat foods like popcorn and chips, I place them in my mouth and suck them until they are soft enough to eliminate any crunching noises at the inevitable moment of the decisive bite; I willingly dispense with the culinary pleasures of crunchy foods for no other reason than the somatic work necessary to prevent the noise. I sometimes fear my children will develop a neurotic eating disorder as a result of my frequent insistence that they eat with their mouth closed.

Slurping, gulping, glugging, swigging, swallowing, gnashing, mashing, crunching, chomping, cracking, gnawing, nibbling, biting, chewing—all eating sounds that have as much tact as starving pack of hyenas feasting on a freshly killed wildebeest. With certain foods, these beastly audio-culinary results are somewhat inevitable and thus easily justified: popcorn, chips, chicken wings, ribs, many raw vegetables, most cold breakfast cereals (until the milk has made them sufficiently soggy), and some fruits such as

watermelon, which is hard to eat—especially on the rind—without juicy chomping noises, often accompanied by an unappealing spittoon-ringing spatter of a multitude of seeds. Yet, for whatever reason, the consumption of these foods is substantially less bothersome, at least to me, than those who eat them in ways that magnify the consumptive clamor. The noise of chewing on barbeque ribs is profoundly less irritating than the commotion of those who also like to gnaw on the bone; the noise of crunchy potato chips is considerably less irksome than those who eat a single chip in three or four chomping bites; the nibbling racket of popcorn consumption is a lot less annoying than those who eat them without the aural courtesy of sealing their lips before the attention-claiming, elocutionary bite.

The Somatic Order

A somatic order is an aesthetic structure. It is a state of bodily feeling individuals and communities desire on the basis of aesthetic criteria, dispositions, intentions, and social norms. It is stable only as long as no infractions—such as breaching elocutionary acts—disrupt it for better or for worse. While a couple attempting to go to sleep on a shared bed, for example, may wish to have a somatic order characterized by silence, they may desire a radically different sonic order if they wish to engage in sexual intercourse. Elocutionary acts that breach the somatic order—such as a bed companion's sudden snoring, or a deadpan quiet sexual partner—commence meaningful social and somatic performances. Our tuning into and response to such sound acts is a unique social drama unfolding toward a process of redress and reintegration (Turner 1988) that we can call “somatic alignment.” In the case of sound this somatic alignment is directed at harmonizing and rearranging the *sonic order* preferred by individuals and/or by acoustic communities. We can understand the notion of sonic order as a sensual arrangement of sounds' material properties prevalent within a defined personal and/or social aural context.

The choice of the word *arrangement* is not accidental. Musically speaking an arrangement is a musical adaptation of a composition, something reflexively made by fitting parts, sounds, together. Any society arranges for a particular somatic order in any given variety of circumstances. Within North American society a particular sonic order governs such situations as the maximum decibel level of a rock concert, the cheering behavior of faithful fans at a ballpark, children's playful activity at home after eight o'clock or during school hours in the classroom, and so forth. Thus, sonic order is an instance of the interaction order that is focused on the somatic components of

interaction. Obviously no sonic order is homogeneous. For example, while youth may revel in the powerful roar of motorcycle engines, their anxious parents may feel sicker and sicker with fear as every motorbike drives by (Chuengsatiansup 1999; also see Oosterbaan 2009 on how public performances of different musical genres may constitute sonic, as well as ideological, battles for social and cultural supremacy).

* * *

When I moved from Santa Barbara to Las Vegas, it immediately became clear that settling here would require major adjustments, just in terms of adapting to the soundscape. Such adjustments are not without costs. Searching for respite, I would go hiking every weekend in Red Rock Canyon, on the northwest side of town, a forty-minute drive away from where I lived. On one of those first hikes, I discovered a spot which was invisible from the main trails, hard to reach, and wonderfully bereft of human noise. From then on, I would always start every hike by first going back to that spot where I could find that near-perfect natural soundscape, that natural orchestra whose main instruments were the wind whistling through thick desert shrubbery, an eagle shrieking, lizards crawling on dry twigs, rabbits scurrying through bushes, pebbles falling on boulders, and once, a rattle-snake announcing its presence. Sometimes, this concert would be interrupted by the faint hum of a plane flying high in the sky. But on one occasion, two middle-aged men almost discovered my secret spot, and most rudely violated it, defiling its sonic peace. One attempted a lame and drunken imitation of a Tarzan yell. The other burped loudly and smashed his beer bottle against a boulder.

My Hebrew name is Shim'on, a name formed by the three root letters *sh*, *m*, and a vowel which can take on different sounds, depending on its position in a combination of other letters. Together, those three root letters mean "hearkening" and, especially fitting the topic of this essay, "listening." I am typically considered a good listener, a disposition which has helped me quite a bit in those research projects for which I used in-depth interviews. Unless I am completely deluding myself, my experience has taught me that I can easily attune to others, experience empathy with them, put them at ease, provide them with supportive feedback, and facilitate their revealing personal issues. On the other hand, I am also hypersensitive to unwelcome sounds and I often surprise myself at the intensity of my reactions when the norms of the sonic order have been violated. My hypersensitivity to sound at times manifests itself even in welcoming environments.

“You’re making that face again!” Krystyna, my wife says, sounding a little hurt. “That face” refers to the facial gestures I (un)willingly compose when I am having an increasingly difficult time with the tone, flow, or volume of her voice. Early on in our marriage, she had called my attention to “the face.” At first I was surprised because I really did not know my face was transforming so visibly. Now, as I’ve become more aware of it, I try to anticipate this transformation, be aware of the precise movements the guilty facial muscles will execute, and try to control them. But I can also mobilize them at will, when I deem it necessary. Krystyna’s remark had also made me realize that—beyond the private realm of marital conversations—“the face” is only one of the mechanisms we use to negotiate the sonic order, to punish those who violate it and reward those who conform to it.

* * *

The embodied self is both the material basis and reflexive outcome of perceived sensations and sense-making practices. In this way, sensations and sense-making body forth a *sensuous self*: a performative, reflexive, perceptive, intentional, indeterminate, emergent, embodied being-in-the-world. Just as interactionists conceive of the self as an empirical and agentic product of action, experience, and performance, so too the sensuous self is emergent in somatic experience, fashioned in practices and rituals through which we gain a sense of ourselves and the somatic order in which we live.

The practices and rituals of the sensuous self abound in everyday life. These performances are often unrehearsed and fully improvised, yet carefully scripted by the nature of habit, memory, and past sensations, both dreaded and preferred. As a whole, this personal heritage constitutes a somatic career: a sensuous personal and social identity by which we recognize ourselves across situations and by which others recognize us. Whenever people harmoniously share aesthetic dispositions, that is, whenever they negotiate and recognize a common somatic order, they can be said to be part of an aesthetic community. Thus, achieving a somatic state of balance, peace, or order is an interpersonal undertaking dependent on cultural norms and roles, and a dramatic process unfolding through the idiosyncratic preferences and actions of actors playing their roles with their unique personal, situational, and collective identities.

* * *

I am sitting in an airplane, flying to Europe, reading a book instead of watching the featured movie. Every few seconds, a woman sitting a couple of rows

behind me chuckles a bit too loudly. I suppose she is amused by the infantile movie, but I notice that none of the other spectators are laughing. Hence, I conclude, she is not only laughing too loudly but also without sufficient reason. What are the sonic norms in an airplane? It seems a bit strange to find anybody's voice too noisy, considering the roaring of the engines, the clattering of plastic trays, the squeaking wheels of the food carts, the banging of overhead luggage compartments, the constant ringing of electronic bells summoning crew members, and the amplified voice of the pilot waking you up in the middle of God-knows-which-time-zone to proudly enumerate absolutely useless facts. But still.

I try to be patient and ignore her chuckle, but it is not working. This high-pitch sound is relentless. Exasperated, I rise up from my unbearably uncomfortable seat, turn around, and look with a displeased face back at the general direction of the chuckle. In an airplane, where all faces are pointing in the same direction, such deviant head movements draw attention. Several passengers indeed look up; their anonymous eyes meet mine, which I slowly direct toward the woman whose chuckle I find both too noisy and unjustified. The chuckling stops and I resume my reading.

* * *

The sound of barking dogs follows me like bad karma, and my reaction is often volatile. I am not sure why. It may have started when I was five or six years old. I would come home from school, open the heavy metal door to our apartment building, and inadvertently provoke the concierge's white French poodle to run out of her apartment and jump too close to my face, snapping and barking violently. It often took the concierge a long time to finally call her dog off. Ever since then, barking dogs have enraged me.

When we moved to our first house in Las Vegas, our neighbors' dogs—which were left outside in temperatures approaching 115 degrees—would bark endlessly throughout the day and the night. Unsurprisingly, these neighbors ignored my initial polite suggestions that they bring their dogs inside, then my subsequent frustrated requests that they do so, and finally my threats to call Animal Protection if they failed to comply. Once, storming angrily outside in the middle of the night, I slammed my front door so violently that its window smashed into a thousand pieces. The next year, we decided to move into a gated community whose regulations are comprehensive and unambiguous with regard to barking dogs. Unfortunately, my new neighbor did not seem to understand them, as he too had an enormous dog, who was left outside all day long in the hot Las Vegas sun, and who would bark aggressively

whenever we would step on our back patio or let our cats—Minou and Fidel—out for a stroll around the neighborhood. As repeated verbal and written interventions on my part failed to obtain his compliance with the sonic order of our community, one day, unable to take it anymore, I brought my electric guitar and amplifier out on the back patio, turned the amp's distortion knob to its maximum power, and unleashed a loud, screeching, and dissonant solo which must have forever changed his appreciation of the sonic terror I could unleash, literally at my fingertips.

My sensuous identity is partly responsible for these visceral reactions to what I perceive as too loud a voice or a noise. For as long as I can remember, my parents frowned on both, but for different reasons. For my father, calm and even voices distinguished us (the well groomed) from them (the uncouth), the well educated from the uncultured. Years later, I still catch myself judging acquaintances' speech with that same and now unacceptable equation. But while such distinctions sound unmistakably classist, carelessness with voice and the sounds we produce is also frowned on in the Buddhist and other traditions. Sound is sacred and significant. In the beginning was the word and Om is the sound of the world.

Loud noise and voice are often used as a tool of warfare, intimidation, and torture—from the walls of Jericho to the cells of Guantanamo. My mother associates loud voices with violence and terror. As she often tells me, after all these years she can never forget listening, terrified, to Hitler's vociferous rants broadcast over the radio when she was young. Her cousin, soft-spoken and easygoing Erwin—an Auschwitz survivor—was surprisingly intolerant of loud voices. I will never forget the tourist boat ride around Manhattan I took with him the first time I came to America. Sitting on uncomfortable benches on the top deck, his explanations of the various landmarks suddenly stopped as his face became noticeably irritated and anxious. "Something wrong?" I asked him. He did not answer but stood up and strode with uncommon resolve toward a group of young German tourists speaking loudly as they were trying to make themselves heard over the roaring of the boat engine. I do not know what he told them, but they became immediately silent. "Those Germans," he said, sitting next to me again, "they always have to shout. Makes me sick." Years later, I found that we can indeed reduce the noxious effects of adrenalin triggered by loud noise by physically intervening at the source.

* * *

Goffman's (1983, 2) interaction order posits a "body to body starting point" for unpacking the delicate dynamics of the fact "that, for most of us, our daily

life is spent in the immediate presence of others.” However, the interaction order is difficult to meaningfully isolate; it is mediated by the emotional and moral orders: “emotion, mood, cognition, bodily orientation, and muscular effort are intrinsically involved” to such an extent that “we are constantly in a position to facilitate this revelation, or block it, or even misdirect our viewers” (Goffman 1983, 3). So too are the dynamics of the somatic, and thus sonic, order. Sonic norms, as well as their policing, are part of the delicate balance of interaction that redresses the emotional and moral order and that inevitably strikes a compromise between self and others. They are also fashioned in time and space that include both the immediate local environments (such as an airplane or one’s neighborhood) as well as history and culture, and as Elias (2000) discussed, the civilization of bodily comportment. Hence, an increasingly narrow range of noise is publically acceptable within any given soundscape, many of which are regulated with both formal zoning ordinance (e.g., policies and laws regarding barking dogs) and informal mechanisms of control (e.g., the unambiguous dirty look of an offended citizen of sonic order). Somatic orders are never permanent as deviance from a somatic order is common. Furthermore, somatic orders are never stable. Preferences shift, as anyone who has tried to listen to the same—however beloved at first—tune will testify. As we discuss in the next section, whenever sound acts break a sonic order the process of sonic alignment soon follows.

Somatic Work as Sonic Alignment

Somatic work is the sensuous making of meaning (Vannini, Waskul, and Gottschalk forthcoming; Waskul and Vannini 2008). By engaging in somatic work people actively make sense of their physical and social environment. Making sense is a performative, hermeneutic practice of making meaning and simultaneously a somatic performance focused on engaging the world sensorially (Howes 2003; Rapaport 1994; Vannini, Waskul, and Gottschalk forthcoming; Waskul and Vannini 2008). Making sense is thus not only about somatically tuning into the world and interpreting it but rather about making it and remaking it into the shape we wish it to have. Making sense, in other words, is not just about representation but also about manipulative action. A crying child in the middle of the night, for example, is not just an elocutionary sound capturing our interpretive attention, and a perlocutionary act striking anxiety in us. It is also an act generating another act: our rising from the bed to attend to the child—either through a sound act like a “shhh!” or a different kind of response like feeding—to extinguish an unwanted sound and

return the world of the night to the desired sonic order. Somatic work in this case resides in singling out a particular sound amid others because of its elocutionary properties and perlocutionary effect and then acting on it. Our acting on sound is a way of negotiating and manipulating the somatic order of a particular situation. We can refer to such manipulation as sonic alignment.

Alignment can occur as a response to a breach of the somatic order and the ensuing crisis, that is, as an action that Victor Turner (1988) would qualify as a form of redress. But alignment is not just an answer to a negative state. A breach can be a positively valued act. A loud siren signaling the end of a hard-fought basketball game, for example, can bring much relief to an anxious fan rooting for the team ahead in the score. Alignment thus characterizes the state of “(re)integration”: a period marked by harmony and sought after by individuals or, as the first author, Phillip Vannini, describes below, by communities.

* * *

I live in a small British Columbia town situated on central Vancouver Island. As many would tell you, Ladysmith is not just a quiet place to crash at night but a safe and friendly place where police sirens still have the power to startle and where the squawking of seagulls and Steller’s jays are still one of the loudest noises to be heard. As the diversity of our fowl denotes, our town is also marked by a unique mix of marine and forest life. On a windy day the oyster-ish aroma of the low tide can be smelled all the way from the edges of the cedar-, fir-, and hemlock-rich forests that surround Ladysmith on its northern and western mountainous sides. Most of our neighborhoods sit on those sides, directly facing Oyster Bay to the east and an amalgam of islands and inlets to the south and the north. Oyster Bay is also where our town meets the ocean water and, slightly above the water, the noisy Trans-Canada Highway.

Many of us head out in the morning on that road to work elsewhere, but many stay back in town too—keeping a safe distance from what is seemingly the only domain where fracas is not looked down on. Only one block away from Highway 1, the much quieter First Avenue stores orderly bustle every day with the coffee- and donut-infused excitement of the errand and chore crowd, while more distant and farther up the hill neighborhood streets witness the punctual coming and going of school buses, corner-store-bound teenagers, dogs faithfully walking their retired masters, and lone earphone-encapsulated joggers. During the driest times of summer a cougar or a black

bear will venture out of the woods treating kittens or garbage cans as novelty prey. Aside from that and the Christmas Light-up Parade's fireworks, most of us need to venture well out of town for our bangs and kicks.

Born and raised in a town not so much larger than Ladysmith, right in the middle of the Chianti wine-growing region of Tuscany, I am used to the rituals and practices of small-town culture. But it wasn't until moving here five years ago that I became sensitized to a distinct and much underanalyzed sonic trait of Canadian (and perhaps North American) culture: the *culture of quiet* which neighborhoods like mine are carefully aligned to.

* * *

Stokes and Hewitt (1976, 838) explain alignment and aligning as "largely verbal efforts to restore or assure meaningful interaction in the face of problematic situations of one kind or another." But as we intend it, alignment is neither solely about verbal efforts nor necessarily about problematic situations. Alignment can be symbolic, iconic, and indexical and take place through nonverbal acts. Through the concept of aligning actions, we can hear how the shifting somatic order is constructed and reconstructed through sound acts to meet the needs of the moment. Sound acts continuously adjust and readjust the graphic equalizer of the somatic order in response to "actions that depart from cultural expectations or definitions of what is culturally appropriate" (Stokes and Hewitt 1976, 838).

Still, the concept of aligning actions allows us to hear the relationship between culture and conduct, more precisely in our case, between somatic order and sound acts, and the alignment between the two. In slightly different terms, this somatic alignment is a "joint act" (Blumer 1969, 17) that is based on "common and pre-established meanings of what is expected in the action of the participants." An aligning sound act is a joint act that enables participants to order their soundscapes and restore somatic order. Whether taking on the role of a specific other or the generalized other, participants may fit their sound acts to isolated situations or align them with each other. As Blumer (1969, 70, 71) writes of joint acts, "The participant is able to orient himself; he [or she] has a key to interpreting the acts of others and a guide for directing his [or her] actions with regard to them." Sound acts are part of an ongoing negotiation process whereby separate lines of action fit and merge. However, as Blumer points out, "the career of joint actions also must be seen as open to many possibilities of uncertainty." As a form of joint action, sound action is negotiated: it can be interrupted, abandoned, transformed,

misunderstood, or disagreed on, or it can give birth to new sonic situations that lack a preexisting somatic order.

* * *

On any given day, a brief glance at my acoustic field journal will reveal nothing but an appallingly ho-hum inventory of sonic indications of either human, natural (as in fauna and other environmental sources), or mechanic presence, including the raspy roar of lawnmowers, the distant grinding of chain saws and thumping of hammers, the raucous-yet-subdued walking home of high schoolers, the rolling by of large trucks, the occasional “Ribbit, Ribbit” of a frog desperate over a lost pond, or the frenetic fluttering of a hummingbird in search of a red treat: hardly the stuff of most ethnographers’ dreams.

As I walk back home in the dark today I choose to explore Fifth Avenue instead of Sixth. But no surprise awaits me there; for once again nothing is out of the sonic order of our neighborhood. Keeping me closest company in my soundwalk, as it has been for the last three months, is the rain. The tapping of the insistent drizzle on my coat and on the paved road, the steady gurgling flow of puddle water into the catch basins, and the occasional bout of wind—on one occasion causing the clasp clinching the Canadian flag to its rope to clash with the flagpole, resounding in a metallic clank—seem to be my main companions for the evening.

Other sounds require a deeper listening, and a flight of acoustic imagination on your part. Picture people and their noises inside their private homes and not out on public-yet-so-private Canadian streets. Picture dimly lit living rooms inside small but cozy houses visible from the dark street; picture inside a family around a table captivated by the sights and sounds of big city media with their chopper news and pistol tales. Imagine their car, faithfully and quietly waiting her call of duty out in front. Picture a wet mutt, fascinated enough by my approaching footsteps to stretch his chain all the way to the fence so as to get a loud whiff of me, yet confident enough to feel no need to bark. Imagine insulated family houses, all sonically disconnected from one another by ample paved driveways, heavy wooden doors—one, right ahead of me, without a functioning doorbell, at least judging by the insistent knocking of a visitor—and by windows free of shutters or loud venetian blinders. Picture short-lived, infrequent, but regular small driveway gatherings where the sonic imperative of absolute neighborhood silence is briefly suspended: by parents discreetly coaching their children into the car as the driver’s seat belt insistent *ping, ping, ping* hails them inside; by solitary preteens like my stepson Jacob scoring the soundtrack of his play fight with onomatopoeic

explosions; and by doorstep-bound nine-to-fivers slamming their hatchbacks and car trunks shut as they proudly manage to carry all grocery bags with two hands, letting out of a soft grunt as their heaving unfolds.

And imagine me, walking amid the reign of cars, my feet shuffling against loose gravel occasionally catching the curious looks of those inside. And of course picture the never-ending rock and roll concert of automobile traffic with its two sonic layers: the rhythm section streaming in the distance, humming on the highway—too far for me to determine the pitches and tones of the different instruments' makes and models—and an irregularly melodic layer closer to me, picking up tempo as I walk closer to the veins of its First Avenue artery and dynamically rising even more as I approach the crescendo of its highway heart. Ironically, in spite of its distant anonymous monotony, the sound of the former comforts me and gives me a sense of connection; together with the occasional propeller airplane roaring overhead toward the nearby small regional airport its presence is a constant reminder of regular movement, of life humming on as usual, of people moving—of life stable, peaceful, and in order, yet full of possibilities. In contrast, the sounds of the latter layer seem at once more menacing—constantly alerting me to keep to the sidewalk as the rolling sound of wheels on pavement gets louder in my ears, constantly posing, yet never materializing, the threat of a daring, scornful horn honk breaching so rudely the peace of my neighborhood.

Sure winter and silence are mixing and blending with each other today, but even if you add a few sonic ingredients for a spring or summertime recipe the overall sonic flavor of my neighborhood won't change much. Give it a try. Add the puffing and sputting of lawnmowers: together with sparrows and swallows marking and making a spring afternoon. Factor in the cheerful splashing of children's feet on ocean water down the street on the beach. Subtract howling winds, the teardrops of the rain gods, or the sporadic acoustic numbing of a snowfall meant for somewhere far away on the mainland. And throw in for good measure an additional dose of runners panting by, a few prams happily strolled by silent young mothers enjoying a reprieve from their babies' crying or nursery rhymes, Saturday afternoon handymen's various hammer, saw, soft-sponge, and Armor All affairs, and the occasional brash youth driving an old Chevy in need of a muffler job, and you have imagined/*heard* the sonic alignment of my neighborhood and the sound acts that it takes to create and maintain it.

Aural Bridges and Doors

Sometimes, when I (Simon Gottschalk) need a break from mental activity or feel inspired, I will take my guitar and find a spot outside to play. Depending

on my mood, it might be isolated or public, like a city park or a cliff overlooking the ocean. Playing in public is a very different experience because it enables me to interact with others through the music, to create moments when we nonverbally attune to each other and form a momentary acoustic community. They attune to the music I play, and I play music to attune to them.

Some people typically respond to the music by slowing down, lowering their voice, and directing their steps toward me. Some—especially those who are alone—often silently walk to where I sit, and stand a few feet next to me or behind me. Others will sit down and keep me silent company for a while. We rarely speak or make eye contact; the connection is elsewhere. I will acknowledge their presence by choosing songs and playing styles that I hope will resonate with them, or how I sense them. When joyful children run by, I will often improvise happy songs with a simple chords progression, like A, G, and D, and a bouncy Reggae rhythm. When teenagers stroll by, I first try to decode the subcultural identity they display, then play a “classic” of that subculture’s musical repertoire, trying to reproduce it as faithfully as possible, or giving it a new interpretation. For older people, I develop pieces with minor chords, a slower tempo, a more muted volume, and often switch from strumming to more complex and dexterous finger-picking.

“I wish I could stay here forever and listen to you play,” a short and sad-looking woman in her fifties who was standing behind me whispers. I had not noticed her.

“Thank you, I am glad you like it,” I answer.

She stays for a while, and then slowly walks away.

“It’s a give-and-take,” remarks a tall white-haired man in his seventies who had been circling around the bench I was sitting on, overlooking the ocean.

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“The ocean gives you inspiration, and your music sounds like the ocean. Give and take.”

“That’s exactly how I feel,” I answer. We then talk for a while about his hero, ‘ukulele giant Israel Kamakawiwo’ole.

“I used to play the ‘ukulele when I was young, but haven’t touched it in thirty years,” he confides.

“Maybe you should pick it up again,” I suggest, “playing music also improves mental functions.”

“You know what? That’s exactly what I am going to do,” he answers, “as soon as I get home.”

These spontaneous encounters never fail to occur. Soon, a young man replaces the old one, standing almost on the same spot, then a middle-aged couple with two children. Then a young shy woman who stands a good twenty feet away. Then two teenage punk surfers smiling approvingly. One day, a small child was running toward me screaming “ita,” “ita.” I smiled at him then looked at his father who was following him. “Yes. *Guitar, guitar,*” he repeated to his son. Looking at me, he then said, “This is the third word in his vocabulary.”

“Awesome,” I answered. “Glad I could be part of it.”

As the sun sets over the Pacific Ocean, swarms of insects which had been silent until then, awaken and buzz all around me. I carefully place my guitar back in its black hard case, shut its four locks, and listen for a while to the endless and constantly changing melody of waves crashing on pebbles. As I am walking back to my car, I remember one of Marcel Proust’s lines: “If the invention of language, the formation of words, and the analysis of ideas had not taken place, music would perhaps be the unique example of the communication between souls” (Proust 1982, 260).¹ Like musical harmony, the embodied deeply personal and social harmony of somatic order is improvised and scored, a negotiated give and take, and a dimension where both harmony and discord are possible. Sound acts, through elocution, may serve to both disrupt or align, to unmake and remake the somatic order. We engage in somatic work to align acoustic communities with one another by jointly participating in the sensuous work of making meaning of their shared soundscapes.

* * *

Throughout this article we have attempted to describe and examine how sounds acquire meaning in everyday life. Guided by our interpretivist perspective, we have tackled sounds as elements of a process mediated by the self’s meaning making and manipulative action (on the “philosophy” of such acts, see Mead 1938). Our main contribution to the growing literature on the sociology and anthropology of the senses resides in our characterization of sound acts as dramatic moves, part and parcel of an ecology of sonic communication—a communication that is not always symbolic and yet far from meaningless. Our analysis of sound acts pivots around the idea of a sensuous self and aesthetic communities, that is, a view of selfhood and group life that puts a premium on somatic, order. As sociological characterizations of selfhood and community that take into account the somatic dimensions of existence are still scarce, we hope that our research on sound acts and somatic

work in general will sensitize others to the importance of this neglected subject matter.

In focusing on elocutionary acts and their power to breach the sonic order, we intend to highlight basic processes of somatic alignment. To be sure, most elocutionary sound acts in the contemporary period seem utterly noxious. The activities of civic organizations like the Noise Abatement Society or the noise regulations stipulated by town and city councils across much of the globe lead us to think that whenever possible elocutionary sound acts ought to be marked by *eradication*. Bull's (2000, 2008) and Beer's (2007) research on contemporary city dwellers using earphones to drown out unwanted urban noise provides a handy example of how we orient sonic somatic work at silencing invasive, persistent fracas. But somatic alignment can also be marked by the *cultivation* (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981) of elocutionary sound acts, and thus at producing a sonic order through "positive" moves that reward what is desired. Simon's improvised and personalized concerts provide an easy example of the latter.

Cultivation and eradication are but ideal types of sonic alignment, however. Like all forms of order—whether personal or social—the sonic order is but a kind of "negotiated order" (Strauss 1978, 1982) that is necessarily the outcome of compromise, and thus hardly ever an ideal state. Indeed in practice most types of sonic alignment seem to be marked by *concession*. Dennis's return to the movie theatre after his latest sonic nightmare is easily explained by the pleasure he obtains from the sound of his children's laughter, a pleasant ritual in spite of the crunching breach enacted by snack foods. Similarly, Phillip's choice of community of residence is an obvious compromise between easy accessibility to an "outside world" characterized by untamable noise but also by life-supporting economic opportunities, and by the safety of a protected enclave removed just enough from the highway running through town. Whether driven by cultivation or eradication, the very fact that most forms of sonic alignment seem to be negotiated suggests that sound is a perfect example of what Simmel (1994) characterized as both a door and a bridge: a tool for building and maintaining (acoustic, in this case) communities, and a tool for disconnecting from others and affirming one's distinct (sensuous) selfhood.

Whether we use sonic alignment to build bridges or to shut doors, the meaningfulness of sound acts often results from boundary work by the self and by communities. As Oosterbaan (2009) has examined in the context of musical performance in Rio de Janeiro's favelas, sound acts are performances that people undertake to manifest a valued identity, sensuous and otherwise. Whether one seeks aural solace in the ruckus of a funk or a gospel

performance, in the peacefulness of one's home, in the silence of the desert, or in the natural lullabies of an island community, somatic work manifestations such as sonic alignment articulate the sensuous self's quest for a type of authenticity shaped by aesthetic value, feeling, and meaning (Vannini and Burgess 2009). Such an aesthetic component of authenticity goes a long way to explain how sensuous identities—personal or collective—and somatic orders interplay. And given its idealistic tendencies as well as its contradictory but-oh-so-human penchant for both connection and disconnection (Simmel 1994), such quest for aesthetic authenticity may also go a long way in explaining the inevitably negotiated character of all somatic orders, as well as their eternal fragility.

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1. Retrieved from the Web site <http://www.evene.fr/citations/> and translated into English by Simon Gottschalk.

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