

# Creative Reception in Urban Space or the Art of Listening

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## Abstract

On January 15, 2011, a group of twenty Bangkok residents embarked on a guided soundwalk through parts of their city. The walk was designed as both instructional and experimental in ways that facilitated new and creative engagements between listener and place. In the middle of the walk, following a brief but serious medical emergency, it also became an exercise in responsive action, and offered the group an opportunity to reflect on the fundamental role of unpredictability in sensory experience. This article describes the planning strategies that went into developing the soundwalk, and summarizes the challenges and successes of the event as it occurred in practice. Finally, participant feedback and general recommendations for soundwalk designers are provided in the last two sections.

**Keywords:** *Listening, Bangkok, Soundwalk, Urban, Sonic, Ambience*

## Introduction

On January 15, 2011, a group of twenty Bangkok residents embarked on a guided soundwalk through parts of their city.<sup>1</sup> The walk was designed as both instructional and experimental in ways that might lead to new and creative engagements between listener and place. For reasons no one could have anticipated, it also became an exercise in responsive action, and offered an opportunity to reflect on the fundamental role of unpredictability in sensory experience.

The walk, which passed through several discrete geographic areas, had two related objectives. The first of these was pedagogical, aiming to instruct participants in becoming more knowledgeable auditors of their everyday environments. Listening, like playing an instrument, is a performance that benefits from training and rehearsal. With time and commitment, people can learn to more readily interpret the sounds around them, teasing out relationships between resounding bodies. We approached the development of these skills as one would approach any form of artistic development, emphasizing directed practice. Meanwhile, aware that this report would appear in a volume on the management of arts and culture, we hoped to make the point that listening is itself a creative act, in addition to being an important part of the shared experience of a community.

The second objective was to test and advance a set of methodological tools for the study of urban sound environments, including technique, vocabulary, documentation, and researcher grouping. Soundwalks take a great variety of forms, generally unrestricted (and with good reason) by *de jure* procedural guidelines. Unique imperatives arise based on location, participant makeup, technology, and many other factors. Because of such variables, to which designers must be responsive, soundwalks will likely always privilege creative, spontaneous engagement over the streamlined collection of “hard” data. However, we assert that methods can nevertheless be devised, tested, and refined in order to give soundwalking currency as a form of knowledge production, as well as to offer walk organizers a set of useful tools. The Bangkok walk proposed and tested several such methods in the field. The first (pedagogical) and second (methodological) objectives were related in that participant feedback was actively solicited and used to help evaluate the successes and failures of the methods employed.

The January 15 event was the first walk organized by our group in Bangkok, and the first time that this particular set of methods was tested in any location.<sup>2</sup> Therefore it is important to note that the results published here are highly preliminary, and directed toward the continued, collaborative development of methodologies for urban listening. Identity-based determinations of listening or bias are well beyond the scope of our work, although anecdotal note is made in places where native language or personal experience seemed to steer listeners toward particular modes of audition. More important for this article is to provide an empirical case study through which scholars and artists can better understand

listening as a skill, and simultaneously to contribute to the improvement of pedagogies of listening in a variety of fields.

### Soundwalk Literature

The concept of a soundwalk, understood broadly as an excursion on foot with the intention of listening closely to ambient sound, is too general to have any single point of historical origin, and the question of its invention would almost certainly be moot. What is clear is that today the practice is of interest to scholars in Sound Studies, Ethnomusicology, Performance Studies, Cultural Geography, and Anthropology, as well as to museum curators, artists and arts educators, and commercial advertisers. This section provides a recent historical overview of soundwalks, emphasizing academic and artistic discourses from the past 30-40 years. It is hoped that the results of the Bangkok soundwalk will be useful within an ongoing conversation comprised in part by this body of work.

A review of English-language literature from the 20<sup>th</sup> century suggests that the term “soundwalk” as we use it today came into fashion in the mid-1970s, and soon thereafter became common in pedagogical texts on topics as far-ranging as musical development, environmental awareness, and cultural heritage.<sup>3</sup> Composer R. Murray Schafer, leader of the World Soundscape Project since the late 1960s and author of the oft-cited 1977 Sound Studies text “The Tuning of the World,” used some of the best portable recording equipment available in those years to document and analyze the “soundscapes” of specific locations, with a focus on preservation.<sup>4</sup> Schafer suggested the idea of a “soundwalk” in his writing as early as 1967.<sup>5</sup>

By the mid-1970s, portable recording devices such as the Sony Pressman, released in 1977, made mobile recording of the sort Schafer had done a few years earlier into a mass-market endeavor.<sup>6</sup> Many of the earliest writings about the use of soundwalks as an educational tool recommended that participants bring a portable sound recorder with them as they walked. The availability of machines that mediated listening in strange and exciting new ways – a fresh set of ears, so to speak – may have facilitated this increased interest in sound as a meaningful dimension of human environments. Using the Pressman meant paying focused attention to an auditory event, and then possessing that event as an object of analysis and potential reproduction. The Sony Walkman, launched two years after the Pressman, lacked a recording function, but nevertheless may have contributed to the same effect of heightened auditory awareness. With listeners partially insulated from their immediate sonic environments by headphones, some began to consider what they were missing when they plugged in, and the sound of the world became an object of nostalgic value. Given these social effects brought about by the introduction of new technology, we might thus distinguish the modern era of soundwalks by understanding soundwalking as a practice inseparable (either as a collaboration or a counteraction) from specific technologies of documentation and mobile listening.

Perhaps the first person to theorize soundwalks in the modern sense was a member of the World Soundscape Project collective named Hildegard Westerkamp, whose 1974 essay “Soundwalking” appeared in the journal *Sound Heritage*.<sup>7</sup> Westerkamp was generally suspicious of the effects of modernity on “natural” sound environments. With regard to technology, her approach was strongly counteractive rather than collaborative, and her soundwalks were designed to recover lost sensibilities. She writes:

I suspect that the concept of going for a walk does not exist in nomadic tribes or in rural societies, as people are actively in touch with nature on a daily basis and their lifestyle is deeply integrated with the natural environment. In urban life, however, close contact with nature tends to be highly reduced. Nature ceases to be a companion with whom one lives and struggles day after day, and becomes instead a distant friend whom one likes to visit on occasion. Going for a walk is one way by which urban people attempt to regain contact with nature.<sup>8</sup>

In subsequent decades, much work in the field of acoustic ecology has made similar assumptions about sonic modernity, seeking justifications for the management of sound through biological and psychological studies that pinpoint the risks posed by noise to society, nature and human bodies.<sup>9</sup> The aims of such research are often closely in line with government and citizen groups focused on noise abatement in urban areas. Bangkok is home to, among others, the privately-run Quiet Bangkok Group, and the Department of Environmental Quality Promotion’s “noise mapping” project.<sup>10</sup> Comparable organizations are active in cities around the world.



Figure 1. The logo of the Quiet Bangkok Group, online at [quietbangkok.org](http://quietbangkok.org)

A related subset of literature positions soundwalks quite differently as a source of cultural knowledge and aesthetic awareness. The sound artist Janet Cardiff’s audio walks through London, Paris, and New York, for example, are discussed in Mirjam Schaub’s *Janet Cardiff: The Walk Book*.<sup>11</sup> In her participatory, site-specific projects, Cardiff equips listeners with recordings of her own voice mixed with layers of sound that together address issues of memory and place. People listen to these recordings as they walk in order to explore relationships between history and everyday experience.<sup>12</sup>

Scott Ruston, writing in 2010, groups technologically collaborative projects like Cardiff's into three categories: spatial annotations, location-based games, and mobile narrative experiences.<sup>13</sup> For Ruston, each of these represents a unique approach to the use of mobile media in the production of new narratives of place. In other words, by using apps or other connective platforms on smart phones and other mobile devices, listeners can hear stories, personal histories, and trivia about the places they pass through, adding fresh layers of interaction to urban experience. With the ever-expanding capabilities of mobile devices, the kinds of technologically-mediated soundwalks in Ruston's review have become more and more common.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, Sarah Pink is among the few scholars who discuss at length the walking element of soundwalking.<sup>15</sup> As she writes, "the idea that walking with others – sharing their step, style, and rhythm – creates an affinity, empathy, or sense of belonging with them has long since been acknowledged by ethnographers."<sup>16</sup> For Pink, listening while walking is a form of cultural inquiry that requires consideration of both mobility and audition as discrete but ultimately interrelated strategies of immersion. One potential ethnographic benefit of such effort, she argues, may be heightened belonging with local populations.

### Project Design

Bearing the literature above in mind, our soundwalk through Bangkok was designed as a fieldwork project to catalog sounds both familiar and strange in a busy section of Thailand's capital. Timing and location were rehearsed in advance, and structured activities were planned throughout the event. The best practices and recommendations offered by the literature reviewed in the previous section were integrated into the project's design wherever possible. Finally, the plan was reviewed by colleagues and friends for coherence, feasibility, safety, and bilingual legibility.

I am glad to report that much of this planning failed, for reasons to be described in the next section. In retrospect, these failures were among the most instructive and illuminating results of the experiment. Because the outing was described from the outset as an "experiment in methods," that which did not go as planned nevertheless became a teachable moment. Before discussing the breakdowns in detail, however, this section describes the original proposed structure.

Given the nature of urban sound, we deemed it important to build a certain degree of spontaneity into the project design. Urban soundwalks, like any human endeavor, rarely if ever yield what might be called comprehensive information. For all that is heard during a single walk, infinitely more sounds in the same area will go unheard or unnoticed. Therefore, sound in toto is not a practical goal for a data set. Instead, soundwalks allow listeners to attend to singular, often highly idiosyncratic sonic events that may or may not be indicative of abstractions like "Thai culture," "globalization," or "urban space." Thus, soundwalks benefit when designed to be creative and provocative – in effect, as compositions of listening that highlight, rather than foreclose, often unpredictable interactions between auditor and place. This is a method of qualitative investigation that



depends heavily on a critical grammar of emotional response. A set of vocabulary words provided at the beginning of the soundwalk thus included not only basic acoustical phenomena like echo and reverberation, but also concepts like anamnesis that foreground the listener's own interpretive position.<sup>17</sup>

On the other hand, sensitivity to place is critical. Soundwalks must not be deaf to the rich prefigurations of a location, including modes of language, transportation, commerce, laws and norms, identity, and labor. Sonic experience is undoubtedly inflected by locality, and while there is room for purely phenomenological listening, in general one should also know as much as possible about the community one hears.

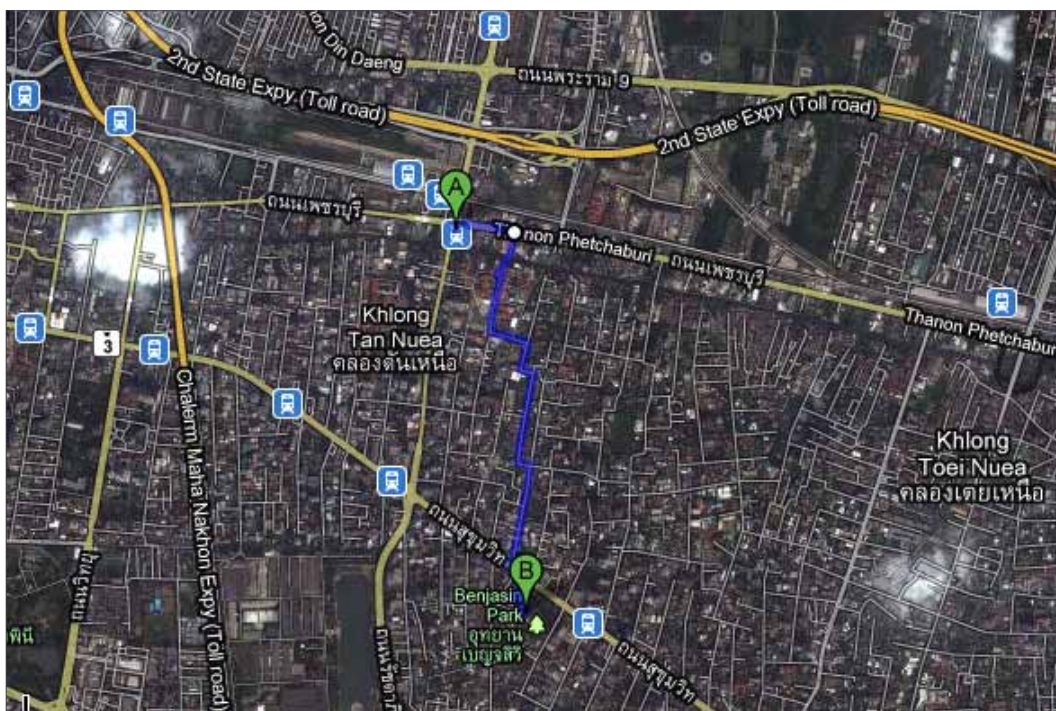


Figure 2. The route of the walk, which began at a commuter pier on Khlong Saen Saep near the Petchaburi MRT station, continued through a university campus and several neighborhoods, and finally reached Benjasiri Park along Sukhumvit Road. ©2011 Google - ©2011 Imagery TerraMetrics

The January 15 walk struck a balance between an embrace of idiosyncrasy and attunement to local sonic indices. The route included three areas – a canal pier, a road, and a park – selected because they staged deliberate juxtapositions between modes of mobility, class, and regulation in Bangkok. First, the pier serves commuters on khlong saen saep (Saen Saep canal), an old-fashioned but still vital transportation route that flows beneath and between a jumble of broad urban roads. The transition from reliance on boat traffic to motor vehicles is among the most important changes of the past century in Bangkok, and the first stage afforded us an opportunity to compare the environments of different transportation settings. Second, the route from the canal to the park was selected because it passes through different areas, including a university campus, a quiet, upscale ex-patriot neighborhood, and a noisy red-light district. This variability

privileged contrast, and told a story about the density of sonic environments in Bangkok. Third, the park was chosen because it is marked as a place of leisure and respite, a kind of antidote to the city's notorious gridlock and confusion – the very thing we had immersed ourselves in throughout the afternoon. The public park, in relief against the earlier stages, could also reveal something of the state's vision for an aural utopia. The relationships between the stages as imagined, of course, were not the only stories that listeners might have heard as they moved from place to place, but in their selection close attention was given to historical and political dimensions of Bangkok.

Before the walk began, participants were given a set of recommended listening strategies which were optional but suggested. The worksheet asked and replied:

*How will we listen?  
In groups of three or four.*

*During parts one and three, spend at least ten minutes in one place, listening from a fixed position. Then move around a little. During part two, move continuously.*

*During parts one and three, close your eyes for at least two minutes. How is hearing different with and without vision? Listen while looking, smelling, touching.*

*During each part, spend time listening for the pleasure of texture – water lapping on concrete, pages turning, food frying.*

*During each part, spend a moment reflecting on sound as a physical entity, atmospheric pressure traveling through the air and causing your body to resonate. Think about how parts other than your ears are excited by sound.*

*Consider how your thoughts filter what you hear.*

*Consider quiet. Where is it possible, and where is it impossible?*

*Listen alone. Listen in dialogue with your group.*

*These are just some ideas. You can and should create more of your own.<sup>18</sup>*

Using this worksheet, participants who preferred that their experience be dictated by structure could follow the instructions throughout, while others were free to imagine different modes of engagement.

A second sheet contained a list of vocabulary words. These were anamnesis, chain, cocktail party, cut out, Doppler, distortion, echo, envelopment, filtration, hyperlocalization, incursion, mask, phonomnesia, quotation, repetition, repulsion, resonance, reverberation, sharawadji, ubiquity, and wall.<sup>19</sup> This particular array of words was chosen to balance different disciplinary approaches to the study of sound, including acoustics, ethnomusicology, media studies, and urban studies.

Some concepts described the physical properties of sound, others psychological effects, and still others offered something more akin to poetics. Some of the words were likely familiar to most listeners, while others were probably new. It was hoped that having a shared set of terms available to describe sounds would engender mutually coherent analysis.

The schedule included a brief introduction followed by thirty minutes on and around the canal pier, thirty minutes in transit from the canal to the park, and at last thirty minutes in the park itself. Finally, each three-or-four-person team would gather together with the others at the end for a post-mortem discussion.<sup>20</sup> Given that the methods were largely experimental, participant feedback was critical to the project's final evaluation.

### Report on the Experiment

As mentioned above, much of the planning for the soundwalk broke down. One of the participants fainted on the sidewalk after the end of the first stage from an episode of low blood pressure, hitting her head, just as the group was walking away from the canal and preparing to embark on the listening-in-transit stage. At the time, we did not know the extent of her injuries, nor the cause of her fall, and we were all quite shaken. The woman came to quickly and showed normal vital signs, but had serious wounds on her face (which eventually required minor surgery), and was understandably frightened.<sup>21</sup> One of the participants helped her into a taxi and they went together to a nearby hospital.

At that moment, all of the planning for the walk had to be reevaluated. We briefly considered postponing the event until another day, but the majority of the participants voted to continue. However, we were rattled, our perceptual tendencies predictably altered, and the incident had thrown us significantly off schedule. Some people now had to leave early, requiring patchwork adjustments to tightly planned timing. Many people, including myself, had trouble returning to the contemplative posture of aesthetic consideration we had assumed before. I briefly considered - with a touch of irony - how my thoughts now "filtered what I heard," how the heightened awareness brought on by an emergency situation had so dramatically changed the way I heard my surroundings. We left the area near the canal and crossed a major road. I suddenly felt sharply attuned to the threatening growl of oncoming traffic, while *sharawadji*, or "the feeling of plenitude sometimes created by the contemplation of a sound motif or complex soundscape of inexplicable beauty," seemed well beyond the reach of my anxious mind.<sup>22</sup>

All of this is worth mentioning because it can be instructive for those who wish to produce similar experiments in listening. Incidents of a spontaneous and disruptive nature are in fact common when groups of people traverse public spaces in search of patterns of sensory experience. Typically, these are less dramatic than a medical emergency, but they may still affect our faculties in ways that frustrate even the best attempts to isolate sensory response in ethnographic settings. Consider aural incursions like sirens, shouts, dropped



objects, and screeching tires, and social interactions like seeing a homeless child or accidentally bumping into another person. Each of these is an unplanned outlier in everyday experience that one could not specifically predict, and yet none is especially rare. (Nor avoidable). Disruptions of this kind are in fact so frequent that we may wish to think of them as a dimension of data rather than noise. Everyday sonic experience is constituted as much by impulsive sound as by steady-state frequencies. So too is fieldwork constituted as much by surprise as by expectation.

Might it be possible, then, to design soundwalks that integrate, rather than filtering out, moments of disruption? To the extent that the January 15 soundwalk was conceived as an experiment in methods, the accident that occurred was an opportunity for us to consider how dealing with surprise can and should be understood as a form of knowledge. Perhaps listening, flush with chance, is well-suited to help scholars develop these faculties more broadly.

The remainder of the walk after the accident was an exercise in recomposing our collective ability to listen critically. For much of the second stage we disregarded the worksheets, at first discussing the incident and expressing our hope that the woman would be all right, and then actively searching for distractions in our environment. During the first stage, participants had seamlessly moved from group to individual listening, taking a few moments by themselves at the end of the pier as a boat pulled away and the rusty iron pier bobbed underfoot, then returning to their groups. But the accident seemed to have rendered all of us more social, more in need of one another's constant affirmation. The groups each moved in tight packs through the school campus, which on Saturday was largely devoid of student chatter but alive with the lumbering thud of a crane dropping cement blocks across the football field. We passed through the campus toward a comparatively quiet side road lined by tasteful, one-storey homes nestled behind landscaping and Japanese restaurants closed for the afternoon. Every so often a motorbike chopped past, and we came upon some men listening to luk thung music as their tools plinked away at an auto engine, but the traffic and street noise was otherwise minimal. The lull in the sonic environment for five or ten minutes was the thing that drew us back into a posture of focused attention. In my own group during this period, we discussed how architectural choices create corridors of reverberation at the level of the street (exactly as we passed through such a corridor), and subsequently how different cities can have distinct sonic styles. In Bangkok, we noted, drivers rarely honk.

As we continued toward Sukhumvit, a heavily-traveled artery, the noise began to pick up again. The air grew thick with both smog and sound, as the familiar rush-hour chorus of idling buses and taxis swelled all around us. The sound of air brakes pierced the upper register, and the sidewalk oscillated from so much tonnage on pavement. We walked along Sukhumvit in this environment for five to ten minutes, before crossing the busy road through a traffic jam toward the park. The volume, as well as the necessity of paying constant attention in order to avoid being hit by cars, motorcycles, and other pedestrians, made it very difficult

to focus on listening in the abstract during these few minutes. Participants tended to break from their groups and move alone until they reached the park. Most of the eventual comments about this stage of the walk elided the details, describing the experience quite broadly as one characterized by the burden of sonic excess. Participants seemed to have numbed their own awareness in order to lessen the impact of sensory exposure.

With only 20 minutes remaining in our scheduled time, we rearranged the park exercise so that participants could choose from among the listed rubrics for 15 minutes before regrouping for the post-mortem discussion. Those who had to leave early did so at this point, and the changed composition of the group compelled people to walk around with their friends rather than with those with whom they had been assigned. Understandably, everyone was also exhausted, so the park became not only an object of analysis but an important source of relief.

Benjasiri Park plays host to a variety of exercise activities in the late afternoon, on that day including skateboarding, aerobic dancing, tai chi, sepak takraw, jogging, and basketball. Some of these are soundtracked to music from loud stereo systems, but the park's dense, acoustically absorbent landscaping isolates each area from even its closest neighbors. The divisions between broadcasting spheres is sharply delineated, facilitating low-decibel pockets within ten or twenty feet of much louder areas. Although we did not analyze these properties using acoustical measurements such as dB(A) or impulse response, it was clear that the environment of the park negated much potential overlap of the sort we had heard both on the pier and in the street. A broad plaza to the north and large buildings on the remaining three sides effectively eased the inflow of traffic and other noises from Sukhumvit, making the space into a kind of oasis from the typically impulsive and potentially stressful sonic environment of the street. At exactly 5:58pm, speakers mounted on poles throughout the park began to broadcast a recording of the Thai national anthem, preceded by two minutes of introductory music and spoken announcements. At 6:00, police officers stationed throughout the park blew their whistles simultaneously, and everyone in the park stood at attention for thirty seconds as the anthem played, including the scattered members of our group. After that, activity resumed as normal.

At the end of the park stage, approximately 6:15pm, the remaining participants of about twelve of us sat on the lawn and discussed our experiences together. (Some of the responses are reproduced in the subsequent section). At the time, we had not yet thought to discuss the question of our own responsivity with regard to the accident. Not yet knowing the woman's status, there would have been something almost selfish about becoming reflexive, about turning our attention inward. In fact, it took several weeks and multiple conversations after the fact before it was even decided that the episode that punctured our plans should even be part of the walk's overall evaluation. This delay is itself worthy of comment as a part of the way we listen to the world; namely, audition is not only beholden to mood and fluctuating levels of focus under different conditions, but also to an ethics of attention that, at times, can render orders of aesthetic reflection distasteful. On

the park lawn, it was permissible to discuss issues of sonic management, rights, nature, and pollution. But it is not clear how the group would have reacted, in that still-sensitive moment, to a question about how our friend's trauma was brought to bear on their personal listening.

The unexpected events of our walk thus also raise the important question of what ethical or cultural limits we might encounter when interrogating our own sensory practices. Without attempting to answer this question beyond the scope of our experience on January 15, it is perhaps sufficient to say that future soundwalks might benefit from asking participants to take note of those moments where listening and its reflection threaten to become uncomfortable or inappropriate.



Figure 3. A participant listens and takes notes at the pier on Khlong Saen Saep

### Participant Comments

This section devotes space to the responses of participants, who were encouraged to take notes and then report on their personal discoveries. The selected four comments, reproduced unedited here, speak to issues of awareness, trauma, aural rights, and sound pollution. While all four of these themes come up often in discussions and analyses of sound in public space more generally, it should be noted that each of the comments is mediated in significant ways by the contours of our walk – the specific events and locations that constituted it as an experience. Future iterations of the same event structure, even along the same route, would almost certainly elicit different responses.

#### Response #1:

“Something that shifted for me, post-walk, is that I have not listened to podcasts or music while walking/boating/bussing since Saturday. For a long time, transportation

in Bangkok has been where I listen to various things that I have downloaded and not listened to – because where else but on a long bus ride in traffic would one have an hour and a half? But now I find myself listening to everything else around me -- this morning, even, I noticed the imam's very early call to prayer at a mosque nearby, the chickens, the different kinds of boats on the tributary that feeds into the Chao Phraya, and the sounds of cooking."

Response #2:

"It was extremely difficult to focus after our friend fell. My mind was preoccupied for the rest of the day – was she OK? I tried to temporarily forget what happened, but it was impossible not to come back to it. This affected my experience because I could no longer focus on listening as easily or as narrowly. And when I did listen, I had a touch of nervousness that wasn't there before. It's almost as if you hear a different set of sounds after something traumatic happens. Your brain readjusts."

Response #3:

"What I was struck by on Saturday was the aural shift between the canal and Suan Benjasiri. I did not realize how different class \_sounds\_, and how sound can signal the shift between two kinds of spaces, populated by different kinds of motion [and different people in motion]. And in this strange way, the sound in the canal actually felt more regulated than the Suan -- as though with class privilege one also has the privilege to claim sound [and well as physical] space. This was unexpected to me -- I don't know why, but I expected the park [where I used to run, although I was always listening to music, so I never noticed the sounds of/in the park] to be quieter than the canal. Some people are allowed to be loud, while others cannot be [are compelled not to be? although by what?]."

Response #4:

"As we stood on the pier, there was a great deal of noise pollution from motor boats, as well as the sound of cars, horns, and people shouting and having loud conversations. The environment was terrible. I think that if I was there for another hour, I would lose my mind! In the time between, as we walked to Benjasiri Park, the noise pollution along the street was tremendous. When cars were stopped at red lights, the sound of horns and engines were both quite noisy, and also gave off a foul smell. When we walked into the campus of SWU University, there was the sound of a building under construction - a jackhammer, a cement mixer, and some power generators, which were very loud. At the last stop, in Benjasiri Park, there was almost no noise pollution at all. You could hear some engines and horns, but if you went deep into the park there were none to be heard – just the natural sound of singing and insects, because in the park there are flowers, and animals big and small who come to live there."<sup>23</sup>

### Conclusion and Suggestions for Future Research

The comments immediately above suggest that several pedagogical objectives were met by the walk – namely, encouraging participants to think about new dimensions of their sonic environments previously taken for granted. These include broadcasting rights, issues of noise and class, the aesthetic value of attending to everyday sounds, relationships between sound, space, and

technology, and the material nature of the aural field. Each of these was alluded to by at least one participant as a fresh realization about sound or listening.

However, the sonic vocabulary provided turned out to be a less important basis for these realizations than was originally hoped. Participants tended not to refer to the words from the worksheet in their comments, either at the post-mortem or in emailed follow-ups. However, it should be noted that the vocabulary sheet was only distributed at the beginning of the walk, with no time slated for its discussion, and several of the definitions were quite complex. Future iterations of the same or similar walks may benefit from distributing vocabulary sheets with more appropriate language, and further in advance of the walk so that participants have an opportunity to look them over. Finally, it may be helpful for suggested activities to ask participants to listen for examples of particular sonic phenomenon referenced on the vocabulary sheet in order to reinforce their understanding of the concepts.

The incident that occurred during the walk was, as mentioned, among its most important results. The constitutive role of events that penetrate a veneer of predictable repetition in the analysis of everyday life should not be understated. This interruption was a reminder of the imperative to expect the unexpected in fieldwork settings, and indeed to welcome intrusion as a type of data that can tell us about the uneven nature of listening. Thus, rather than mobilizing methodologies that foreclose noise (meaning either errant sound or extraneous data), soundwalk designers might recognize themselves as having a unique opportunity to become acquainted with it.

At last, we wish to acknowledge the relationship between culture and audition.<sup>24</sup> From an anthropological perspective, it is likely that sustained review of listening practices in Bangkok would reveal certain biases that follow axes of education, class, and community affiliation. We do not doubt that ontological discourses and experiences shape the way listeners hear the world, nor that these discourses coalesce around what might be termed “culture.” However, given the complexity and fluidity of the boundaries around abstract groupings like Thai, farang, “hi-so,” kon baan-nawk, and so on, it is at this stage premature to make inferences about how listening might function idiosyncratically within a given community. Future soundwalks, however, could productively foreground this question.

## References & Endnotes

1. Special thanks are due to my hosts and mentors in Thailand, Dr. Pornprapit “Ros” Phoasavadi, and to Dr. Kjell Skjellstad of the *Journal of Urban Culture Research*, for encouraging this project and subsequent report. Also to Dr. Pornprapit again for providing access to graduate students as participant-listeners, to Dr. Shin Nakagawa for thoughtful advice on specific problems related to sound and listening in Bangkok, and to Dr. Jason Stanyek for insight and assistance when the article was first being imagined.



2. Preliminary investigation suggests that few public soundwalks have been undertaken at all in Thailand, at least after the Western fashion. Several academics with significant experience researching Bangkok's sonic environment, including Dr. Shin Nakagawa of Osaka University and Dr. Pornprapit "Ros" Phoasavadi of the Faculty of Fine Arts at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok were unaware of any that had occurred to date. A number of Thai academics and government agencies have investigated urban sound within a timeframe, and using instruments, not dissimilar from what has occurred in the United States and Europe. But no record could be found of organized soundwalks open to general participation. The issue, however, bears more scrutiny. Meanwhile, it is also worth noting that even English-language literature on soundwalks is rarely situated in Asia or elsewhere outside the West.

3. See Carroll A. Rinehart and Edith J. Savage, *Electronic Music* (New York: Macmillan, 1975). Rinehart and Savage ask listeners to "take a sound walk. Carry a portable tape recorder (a cassette-type will do) and a microphone to record sounds. You could walk in the country, down a busy street, into an office, or around your home." Their suggestion implies that a tape recorder would have been, for most readers, a household item. See also Robert Choate, *Beginning Music* (New York: American Book Company, 1970), and Sue Clark and Lee Emery, *Communicating Arts* (Melbourne: Australia International Press & Publications, 1979).

4. R. Murray Schafer, *The Tuning of the World* (New York: Knopf, 1977)

5. R. Murray Schafer, *Ear Cleaning* (Toronto: Berandal, 1967) and *The New Soundscape: A Handbook for the Modern Music Teacher* (Toronto: Berandal, 1968).

6. The 1940s and 1950s witnessed heightened interest in environmental sound recordings by European composers like Pierre Schaeffer, Iannis Xenakis, and Delia Derbyshire. In many respects, the programs of increased awareness to listening that were developed broadly in the 1970s mirrored the fascination that spread within much smaller groups of academic and professional composers, relying on what was at that time tremendously expensive equipment. Similar technology facilitated similar types of auditory attention in both moments, despite the decades and other contextual differences between them.

7. & 8 Hildegard Westerkamp, "Soundwalking," *Sound Heritage*, 3:4 (1974). The full text of the article is available here <http://cec.concordia.ca/econtact/soundwalk/Soundwalking.htm> (accessed March 5, 2011). The same essay is discussed in Daniel Makagon and Mark Neumann, *Recording Culture: Audio Documentary and the Ethnographic Experience* (London: Sage, 2009). The book includes a brief section called "Soundwalks and Sonic Maps," pps. 32-39.

9. See for example Kendall Wrightson, "An Introduction to Acoustic Ecology," *Soundscapes* 1:1 (Spring, 2000) or the journey for perfectly natural sound

documented in Gordon Hempton, *One Square Inch of Silence: One Man's Search for Silence in a Noisy World*. (New York: Free Press: 2009).

10. "Noise Mapping in Bangkok," [http://www.deqp.go.th/website/20/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=4015%3Anoise-mapping-in-bangkok-2001-&catid=117%3A2010-06-01-02-45-36&Itemid=89&lang=th](http://www.deqp.go.th/website/20/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=4015%3Anoise-mapping-in-bangkok-2001-&catid=117%3A2010-06-01-02-45-36&Itemid=89&lang=th) (accessed April 2, 2011). The figures and maps assembled by this project were published in a government report by the Thailand Cultural Environment Fund called "รวมไทยรวมใจ - ต้านภัยเสียง," or "Thais in Harmony – Combating the Dangers of Sound." The work of ethnomusicologist Steven Feld, including his well-known rainforest soundwalks, have also played an important role in the development of theories of natural soundscapes, though Feld's analysis is more complex and humanistic than the anti-noise literature, generally speaking. See in particular Steven Feld, recorder. *Rainforest Soundwalks: Ambiences of Bosavi, Papua New Guinea*. CD. Papua New Guinea, 2009. New Ear Records, as well as Feld's *Sound and Sentiment: Birds, Weeping, Poetics, and Song in Kaluli expression*. (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982.)

11. Mirjam Schaub, Janet Cardiff: *The Walk Book* (Koln: Walter Konig, 2005).

12. See Marla Carlson "Looking, Listening, and Remembering: Ways to Walk New York after 9/11," *Theatre Journal*. 58:3 (October, 2006): 395-416, in which the author reviews Cardiff's "Her Long Black Hair" along with two other New York City-based soundwalks meant to commemorate, in very different ways, the experience of the attacks of 9/11.

13. Scott Ruston, "Storyworlds on the Move: Mobile Media and Their Implications for Narrative," *StoryWorlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies*. 2 (2010).

14. For further commentary on soundwalking and narrativity, see Toby Butler, "Memoryscape: How Audio Walks Can Deepen Our Sense of Place by Integrating Art, Oral History and Cultural Geography," *Geography Compass* 1 (2007): 350–372.

15. See the catalogue for sculptor Scott Sherk's 2008 exhibition "Walks: Sound and Sculpture" at the Kim Foster gallery in New York City, in which the artist describes how he came to think of his soundwalks as a kind of "drawing in space."

16. Sarah Pink. *Doing Sensory Ethnography* (London: Sage, 2009): 76.

17. Anamnesis is "An effect of memory in which a past situation or atmosphere is brought back to the listener, provoked by a signal or sonic context." Jean-François Augoyard and Henry Torgue, eds. *Sonic Experience: A Guide to Everyday Sounds*. (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005): 21.

18. This worksheet was made available in Thai.

19. The second worksheet was also translated into Thai. Terms were selected from Augoyard and Torgue, with definitions quoted or in some cases adapted for brevity and simplicity of language.

20. A Sony PCM D-50 portable sound recorder was used to document some of the sounds in each of the three parts, as well as the discussion afterward, and a Nikon digital SLR was used to take photographs. A montage of sounds was produced by the author and sent to participants afterward.

21. The reader will be glad to know that the woman had no serious long-term effects from the fall, and that the episode was not related to any serious underlying condition.

22. Augoyard and Torgue.

23. Original quotation in Thai, translation by the author.

24. Among the reasons to consider such questions is the irony that most of the literature that dictated the methods of our Bangkok soundwalk came from the American or European academy. Might we have missed something in the Thai literature by using the wrong keywords, or by overlooking local concerns about the sonic environment?