

Listening to a Tram: Sonic Assemblages and Auditory Horizons on Helsinki Public Transportation

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Introduction

There is a classic Finnish joke where two men go fishing, and one of them asks the other how things have been going. A few hours later, his friend answers, “Did we come to talk, or to fish?” Various versions of this joke are told by Finns as a way to make sense of the importance of silence in Finnish culture. The most important aspect of this is not that Finns are always silent, but rather, that silence is acceptable, and even encouraged in social situations.

In this collaborative autoethnographic study we explore soundscapes, and their accompanying sounds and silences, on public transportation in Helsinki, Finland. Our understanding of place and space are translated into an account of relational listening experiences. We are two researchers with vastly different cultural backgrounds, in that one of us grew up in Finland, and one in the United States. This research is part of a developing collaboration where we consider the role of silence in Finnish culture from our differing perspectives. This article is our first attempt to document our discussions about cultural meanings and productions of silence using collaborative analysis and autoethnographic methods (Chang, et al 2013; Chang 2021). Our aim is to engage and expand reflective peer feedback discussion on personal findings/experiences (Lapadat; Wyatt et al), through our collective exploration of the subjective experience of sound.

We are drawn to autoethnographic collaboration as a means of documenting what Jacqueline Allen-Colinson refers to as our “lived-body

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experiences” (Allen-Colinson 2013, 3). We are curious about using sound to explore embodied research practice on public transportation, mainly by focusing on listening, but also by taking the multi-sensory nature of sensory experience into account. The concept of assemblage (Bennett 2010) helps us to conceptualize the character of soundscape on public transportation, and to better understand the multi-vocality of our data. Following Bennett, we understand sonic assemblage as consisting of producing, arranging, and layering a multiplicity of sounds of human (e.g. voices, interactions, announcement, moving around) and non-human (e.g. ambient, mechanical, and digital sounds) actors.

Jane Bennett uses assemblage and the concept of vital materiality to theorize vibrational ontology. Bennett calls our attention to the omnipresent vibrancy of matter and to non-human things and their thing-power, “as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own” (Bennett 2010, 9). Vital materialities form heterogenous assemblages: formations where human and non-human (sonic and thus vibrating) agents inhabit common sonic place (public transportation). Assemblages might be understood as, “ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts” (Bennett 2010, 23) in intersubjective relation to each other creating and performing shared, overlapping, competing, and colliding sonic spaces.

Our primary research questions are: What do we hear, how do we hear, and how does it make us feel? In other words, what is the affective result of sound in our experience of public transportation in urban Finnish space? Our key concepts in this study are sound/silence, listening, and the horizons of audition (also understood as auditory reception and mediation).

In what follows, our discussion of soundscape analysis frames three examples of recordings we have collected on Helsinki’s public transportation system. The data (sound files) in this essay was collected over a period of one month on Helsinki public transportation, including buses, trams, and the metro. While there are multiple recordings, for the purposes of this article we have chosen three on which to focus our analysis. All sound recordings were made on an iPhone using the voice notes app.

The genesis of this article was an ethnographic game that Elizabeth started to amuse herself while taking the metro in Helsinki: how many consecutive minutes of silence could be recorded on a phone’s voice notes while riding public transportation? The game quickly evolved into cultural observation, because it turned out that recording five, ten, or even twenty minutes of silence on the bus or tram or metro was no challenge at all.

This is not to say that Helsinki public transportation is never noisy. We do not mean to make such absolute statements with this study. There are certainly times when, for example, one individual is speaking loudly on a phone, or a group of children just released from school runs through a train car, laughing and shouting. But these are anomalous, rather than common occurrences. They stand out precisely because silence is the norm, as we discuss in more detail later in this study.

Our collaborative analysis of our recordings utilizes our field notes, which are reflections of our embodied experience during the act of active listening, and the affective results of our engagement. In the spirit of dialogue, we used three different approaches to our reflections. In our analysis of the first recording, Jouni responded to Elizabeth's notes. For the second recording, Elizabeth responded to Jouni's notes. And, for the third recording, we listened to the audio and wrote our notes together as we discussed what we heard.

Returning to our primary research questions, we listened to these recordings with an inherent curiosity about what we hear, how we listen, and how it makes us feel.



Recording 1: Tram 6¹ **March 27, 2024**

Elizabeth's Field Notes

I rode the Helsinki tram number 6 from my neighborhood of Arabianranta to the Hakaniemi stop. This tram ride takes around 10 minutes, which is roughly the length of my recording. As with all of these recordings, I was focused on capturing "silence," or what might be better expressed as the lack of human voices or recorded music.

I've gotten used to lowering my voice, and now speaking loudly in public feels awkward, like an offense. I didn't even realize how loudly I used to speak until I spent time in Finland, and I don't think I actually spoke that loudly before. But it is true that public silence is the norm here. When one voice is heard over the others it stands out.

The silence of Helsinki's public transportation is particularly notable for me as a former resident of New York City. The only time that silence was likely on the subway or any public transportation was during the pre-Covid morning commute hours, when everyone stood stony, lost in their heads on the way to some office. The rest of the time, the sounds of public transportation might have ranged from lively banter to insane ramblings to public dance performances. In Helsinki, I can record silence at any time of the day, on any form of public transportation. Musicians on a train are largely non-existent, I've seen disruptive, intoxicated people quickly escorted off the train

¹ Listen: <http://liminalities.net/20-4/1-Tram.mp3>

by station police, and even someone speaking loudly on their phone is a noticeable anomaly.

The lack of talking and other human-generated activities allows me to listen more carefully to the mechanical sounds of the tram. Occasionally, people speak, or the shuffling of shoes is heard as people enter or leave the train, although these human sounds serve mainly as punctuation for the symphony of the tram's machinery.

The mechanization of public transportation makes its own sort of music. I hear the music of the tram, in this case, as a multi-layered composition. When the tram comes to a stop, there is a high-pitched hum that signals a slowing down, perhaps through the application of a braking system or an acceleration pedal. The doors open and close each time in rhythm, with a percussive effect. The hum of the tram's motor rises and falls between stops, and contains lower tones as well as higher, almost overtones. The pre-recorded voice announces each stop in two languages, first Finnish and then Swedish: Sörnainen, Sörnäs. The voice has a simple yet recognizable melody that rises and falls in a pattern that is similar to the other rhythmic sounds I've described above. Finnish and Swedish are the official languages in the Helsinki region, although closer to the city center the announcements are also in English, which is an unofficial language. As the demographics of Finland change, so does the language landscape.

Jouni's Field Notes

It is easy to agree with Elizabeth's note about the music of the tram. The soundscape is padded by the low-frequency hum of the tram's electric motors, which rises slightly in pitch as the tram accelerates. The sound of the engine is in itself soothing, even soporific. It is broken by the grinding and clanging of the rails on the curves and the sounds of oncoming trams, which create an arbitrary counterpoint to the steady hum and its rhythm.

Listening to the tram, it is easy to notice how listening/hearing and other senses are so interconnected and how they affect and enrich each other. The vibrations caused by motors and movements of the tram are echoing and even amplifying the sensory experiences belonging to auditory domain. The multimodal experience though felt, heard, and even seen vibrations animate the vehicle, causing a rich embodied sensory experience.

The intervals between stops, which give a sense of the rhythm of the tram's journey, become shorter as it approaches the center. This also increases the intensity of the soundscape. The presence of people is more audible than at the beginning of the journey. Passengers get out of their seats, and get off and get on the tram. Coughs and short bursts of conversation are more frequent.

Still, the absence of human voices is very present; the lack of speech and other human noise. It is easy to imagine passengers sitting in their thoughts, staring at their cell phones without disturbing others. Respect for other people's private auditory space is clearly noticeable, let's say audible. If someone speaks or laughs, they do so quietly, occupying as little sonic space as possible, thus avoiding sonic intrusion into others' private auditory space. It is a feature of auditory culture to create a relatively clear distinction between private and public sonically defined domains. One, however, must keep in mind that boundaries between private and public are always flexible and under cultural negotiation. My pondering was stopped by the tram stop announcement in multiple languages. Passengers on the other hand remain silent in at least two languages - probably a few others as well.



Sound as Knowledge and Cultural Experience

We approach collected sound recordings from the viewpoint of a listener's sonic experience. We focus on sonic ways of being in public transportation; the presence and use of human voice, as well as other sonic features, elements, and/or characteristics. Thus, in our study, acoustemology is the concept we use as a frame, as it observes the critical role of sound in human life and its interactions with surroundings.

Anthropologist and ethnomusicologist Steven Feld coined the term acoustemology in 1992 to refer to sonic experience as a way of knowing, and a fusion of 'acoustic' and 'epistemology.' Acoustemology examines how knowledge and understanding are derived from auditory experiences and explores various ways in which sound and listening shape our knowledge, culture, and cultural practices. Of particular relevance to our research, acoustemology emphasizes the relational nature of knowledge production i.e. contextual and experiential knowing. Due to the relational starting point of acoustemology, its conception of knowledge is always "experiential, contextual, fallible, changeable, contingent, emergent, opportune, subjective, constructed, selective." (Feld 2015, 12-14.)

Acoustemology and sonic assemblage serve as conceptual frameworks for the way we understand our field recordings as both data and listening material. Australian composer, artist, and scholar Lawrence English explains that the paradigm of field recordings has increasingly moved away from the traditional ethnographic goal of objective recording towards the subjective interpretation of field recordings. Active listening is seen as, “an agentic and affective” act, where creative practices and processes take place (English 2017, 128). This kind of approach to field recordings and their analysis supports our aim to address cultural and social meanings of sound and non-sound on public transportation, and compliments autoethnographic methodologies.

Our focus on perceived soundscape on Helsinki public transportation is a shared experience that is at the same time culturally constructed and constructive. Inspired by the turn toward relational listening, in this project we have moved away from the challenge of simply recording silence and turned our attention to the recordings themselves. We are interested in the question of what is actually being recorded, in that silence?

Sonic Spaces, Places, and Horizons

Sonic events always take place in temporal and spatial compositions, with important distinctions between place and space. We can think of (sonic) *place* as a zone and a lived-in, affective atmosphere that is framed within space(s) and location (English 2017, 131). Listening occurs in the zone of place, whereas atmosphere conveys resonant ambience floating within space(s) of location (English 2017, 132). The atmosphere envelopes a listener, creating conditions for an attentive and affective mode of listening (see more English 2017, 133; Morton-2007). However, the listener’s perception of place and its affective capacity is not enduring or repetitive; rather, it is temporal and exists moment to moment. (English 2017, 133; Morton 2016.) The area, or rather, the volume of the space or spaces occupied within the atmosphere is defined and modified by the sound volume, intensity, temporality and spatiality, and perceptibility of a given sonic phenomenon.

Our listening philosophy derives from a phenomenological way of listening, focusing on sound as lived-in phenomenon and listening as an embodied experience (Ihde 2007). Phenomenological listening draws from acts of intentional and conscious listening; how we focus and shift our foci between different sounds and how we can sense sonic phenomena in multisensory ways, so that our listening experience is multi-sensory. This method of listening allows for better sonic immersion. Ihde (2007) draws our attention to how technology and technological mediation change our auditory experiences and ways of listening.

The concept of relational listening takes into account the mediated quality of technology, and the horizons of audition related to the listening act. Shifting horizons within the trajectory of listening suggest possibility and what might be uncovered in different listening environments. By soldering conscious and embodied ways of listening together through technological mediation and

horizons of audition, we hear and understand the multiple layers and agents involved in sonic spaces. Exploring the shifting nature of auditory reception helps us understand sonic space as an ever-changing assemblage.

These sites of sonic experience represent a convergence of two horizons of audition (audition, in this case, refers to auditory reception; both human and technical). Horizons are significant to our project both mechanically and ontologically. Mechanically, the concept of the two auditory horizons by English explicates the relationship between organic ear and prosthetic ear, which in our case are a microphone and a recording device (see English 2017, 134-136). Ontologically, horizons offer potentiality for envisioning that which has not yet arrived (Muñoz 2009). In our case, the ontological experience of a listening horizon offers a glimpse into what might be uncovered by considering our ways of being in varying listening environments. As our listening context shifts, possibility shifts.

The relational approach engages horizons of listening when field recordings are carried out and analyzed. In our view, the two-horizon audition of relational listening is a useful method, given the numerous variables involved in the listening process (microphone selection, location within the place, surfaces, attention, and the natural characteristics of human hearing, such as sensitivity to the frequencies present in human speech) and its emphasis in phenomenological approach to experienced sounding events.

In addition to the two horizons discussed above we propose a third and fourth horizon. These additional horizons of audition arise when recording is conveyed to listeners' ears. The third horizon is again technical and crucial for the listening experience. The playback device, and the whole sound system has a profound impact on how recorded sound is experienced. Equally as important is the listening environment. We listened to our field recordings on cell phones, laptops, and in the studio environment. In the end, we decided to pay most attention to laptop listening because we assume that in most cases that will be the listening device utilized when reading/listening to the article. However, we want to emphasize that especially in the controlled listening environment in the studio the sonic experience was vastly different: more nuance, wider in terms of frequency band, and more enveloping.

We find it very important to include technological dimension in acoustemological, sonic ways of being and knowing, because in many cases sonic information is technologically mediated. Anthropologist Thomas Porcello suggests the term *techoustemology*, "to foreground the implication of forms of technological mediation on individuals' knowledge and interpretations of, sensations in, and consequent actions upon their acoustic environments as grounded in the specific times and places of the production and reception of sound" (Porcello 2004, 270). Techoustemological understanding of mediation surfaces both in second and third horizons of audition.

The fourth horizon, like the first, is again related to listening. It engages with a listener's aptitude regarding attentive listening and listening practices and skills. The listener is always the "end user" and the experiencer of the process that starts from the birth of the sound and ends in the listening. This

complex process involves several practices, technological, cultural, cognitive, biological as well as factors emerging from place, location, spaces, and the atmosphere. The third and especially fourth horizon are in many cases beyond control of the person(s) who carried out field recording, apart from e.g. sound art in which case the third horizon (technology and listening environment) can be designed in detail.

On some occasions the experience may be of a different medium and sensory domain which complicates things even more. For instance, in our study, we translate our lived-in affective, genuine auditory experiences into textual descriptions of our impression. This kind of shift of domain adds an additional interpretative layer to the study of sound.



Recording 2: Metro²

March 14, 2024

Jouni's Field Notes

The soundscape of the metro sounds much more industrial, or perhaps more technological, than that of the trams. The sound of the metro's engines, especially when accelerating, is almost irritating. Its sound has much more intensity, and you can hear the power and speed of the metro train. The Helsinki metro is only a little over forty years old and I think its soundscape is somewhat different from that of older metros, where the mechanical sounds, as well as vibrations of the metro car structures, are more pronounced. The most mechanical sounds in the Helsinki metro come from the doors opening and closing, otherwise the sound is a low and mid-frequency dominated hum, punctuated by the occasional screeching and people talking or moving around.

Although the silence, the paucity of human voices, is a notable feature of Finnish public transportation, I have noticed that people's talking activity varies quite a lot between generations. The most talk is heard from children and young people and from people well past middle age. The quietest passengers are typically middle-aged. This may reflect the fact that many young people were born in the city or in other urban environments, and their acculturation to the traditional culture of silence is different from that of middle-aged people who have moved to the city as young adults or even later.

² Listen: <http://liminalities.net/20-4/2-Metro.mp3>

People are generally not disturbed by quiet conversation but by loud and abrupt conversation, laughter or other (human) noise. Quiet conversation is safely situated within a culturally defined and shared notion of how to behave sonically in a shared acoustic space. In contrast, loud human-caused sounds like coughing, laughing or talking loudly in a cell phone are easily interpreted as a sonic intrusion, which violates not only the cultural presumption of a soundscape but also the sense of privacy.

In my opinion, the soundscape of the metro is not only more technological than that of other public transport, but also colder and more estranging. The soundscape on the metro, on the other hand, may reinforce (sonic) boundaries between passengers more strongly than on other modes of transportation – the tram in particular. The soundscape of a metro is in some ways more alienating and distancing. It's easy to feel like putting on headphones and closing yourself off in your own sonic space, closing your ears and blotting out the shared technological soundscape buzzing around you.

Elizabeth's Field Notes

Why am I surprised to learn that the metro is only forty years old? I know that Helsinki is almost unrecognizable from what it looked like only a few decades ago, so this information about the metro is really a reminder of how quickly this city has grown.

Not to be that annoying person who compares everything to the US, but it is true that my standards of comparison come from living in Boston and New York. Relative to that, the Helsinki metro feels like a warm hug to me, so I'm intrigued by Jouni's experience of it as cold and isolating. I have never once seen anyone screaming that they are going to kill everyone on the train on the Helsinki metro, or anyone sleeping on the train or in a station with all their belongings. It's rare to see any garbage, even.

At the same time, I do understand that the tram has a more beloved place for people who live here. It does feel like you are stepping back in time when you get on a tram, like old time train travel with little tables between some seats for your things. The sound of the tram conjures a much older history, whereas the sounds of the tram, as Jouni notes, are indicative of a much more recent period in Finland.

I can understand how the more modern aesthetic and sounds feel colder if you were more familiar with the earlier transportation.

Jouni's comment that it's the abruptness of a loud sound that disturbs really resonates with me. Often on Helsinki transportation there is a very low buzz of conversation, although it's unusual to hear one voice over the rest. On a recent visit from my brother, he repeatedly self-corrected his volume when he realized how quiet everyone else was on the tram. We laughed about being the loud Americans that we had always tried to avoid becoming, and he said it felt like we were speaking in whispers.



Sound, Silence, and Performative Affect

Sound is ubiquitous and it has an endless number of roles in human life: it is used in artistic expression, as an instrument of power and communication, a way of knowing, and even a weapon (see e.g. Goodman 2010). Perception and interpretation of sound is a complex process that occurs at the intersection of the physical world and the human mind. Physically, sound is the perception of changes in pressure waves, or sound waves, transmitted to the ear. Upon reaching the ear, the waves cause the eardrum to vibrate, which in turn stimulates the tiny hair cells in the inner ear. These hair cells convert the vibrations into electrical signals that are sent to the brain, where they are interpreted as auditory sensations.

As the interpretation of auditory sensation, sound is profoundly influenced by cultural factors. Sound plays a pivotal role in communication, cultural expression, and entertainment. Furthermore, sound and listening to sounds are intricately intertwined with religious and secular rituals, ceremonies, and traditions. (Cullen Rath 2018, 78-79; see e.g. Hendy 2013.) These interactions can evoke a myriad of emotional responses, affects, and a sense of community and belonging.

Although sound is widely considered to be a cultural product, its counterpart, silence, is also imbued with cultural value and meaning. Drawing on Susan Sontag's iconic essay, "The Aesthetics of Silence," Claire Macdonald reminds us that silence, "exists not in a literal sense, but as an experience" (Macdonald 1999, 111). The question of how we experience supposedly silent spaces is central to our inquiry in this study, since silence is often perceived as the absence of sound. This is true, but only to a limited extent, as there are a multitude of sounds that exceed the human hearing range (20 Hz-20 KHz). Many non-human animals use extremely low frequencies (infrasound) or high frequencies (ultrasound) for their communication purposes. Humans are increasingly aware of these sounds and can access them using special

microphones and other technologies. This will eventually change our comprehension of the sonic world surrounding us and lead us to a more holistic conception of sound. Steven Goodman explains this vibrational ontology, observing that, “If we subtract human perception, everything moves. Anything static is so only at the level of perceptibility. At the molecular or quantum level, everything is in motion, is vibrating.” (Goodman 2009, 83).

Thus, absolute silence is an illusion, an illusory perception, caused by the limited hearing capacity of humans. We might more productively consider silence as a performative act, as a way to understand the affect of silence on and in cultural space (Hao 2011; Macdonald 1999; Erancin 2016). We might also reframe our limited hearing capacity as, instead, possibility, and explore what exists in the spaces between “hearing.” Silence thus offers us a unique horizon of experiential possibility that resonates with Keith Nainby’s concept of it as, “what is left unplayed, unsaid, and unexplored” (Nainby 2014, 328).

What sorts of cultural representations exist regarding silence? Silence is usually represented by and is often associated with a sense of stillness, tranquility, and calmness. Silence can be also uncomfortable, especially when it is framed as passive and unconcerned (Gingrich-Philbrook and Gray 2013; Kanngieser and Beuret 2017). Silence might also have “sinister resonance” to use the term of audio culture and music professor David Toop (2011), since silence can also be a sign of danger, fear, insecurity; in some other cases, silence can be intimidating, embarrassing, and awkward. Finally, in the introduction to a special issue on silence as resistance published in this journal, Serap Erancin writes that acts of quietude demonstrate, “the richness of possibilities silence and stillness afford different groups and individuals around the world in creating acts of peaceful resistance” (Erancin 2016, 6). We offer this wide variety of examples to illustrate the performative affect of our shared experience of silence.

By way of another example, it is almost impossible to write about silence without mentioning the work *4'33* by the American composer John Cage. First performed in 1952 at Woodstock in upstate New York, the ‘composition’ (the piece has no notes or deliberately produced sound) drew attention to the surrounding soundscape and the relativity of the concept of silence. A work consisting entirely of silence can be performed with any composition; the important thing is that the performers are silent throughout the piece. In this way, the audience’s perception focuses on the alleged silence, which is not so silent at all, because silence is not just an absence of sound, but also attention to the volume of sounds being produced. What comes to the forefront are the various sounds (such as people coughing, the sound of ventilation or traffic coming from outside) that occupy the lived-in atmosphere of the place. The relationship between silence and sound becomes redefined, as the performance is newly co-constructed by the context.

Because Cage’s work asks an audience to listen for the sounds of silence, or perhaps more accurately, the sounds in between perceived silences, the act of listening becomes an act of engagement with our environment (Rooney 2022; Gann 2010; Vandsø 2023, Woodward 2023). Our recordings on

Helsinki public transportation are exercise in such engagement, or what Anette Vandsø calls, “the interplay of attention and intention” with regard to strategies of public silence (Vandsø 2023, 37).

Silence is a matter of the limits of perception and, on the other hand, a matter of cultural and individual interpretation. Indeed, there are an infinite number of silences, because silence is a relative concept, and a product of individual and cultural experience. The perception of silence and, more broadly, any given soundscape, is socially and culturally constructed and carries with it the values, norms and practices of the time (Ampuja 2017, 22).

Silence does not only refer to an external silence, to the auditory sensation that usually can be perceived as silent (i.e. >45 dB (A)). Silence can also be internal silence, and such internal silence does not require external silence. The experience of internal silence can occur, for example, in the middle of a city or at a loud rock concert. However, in the light of research interpreting the responses to the Suomalainen hiljaisuus (Finnish Silence) survey, it can be concluded that external silence contributes significantly to, and enhances the experience of, internal silence. Several responses indicated that, for example, the external silence experienced in the forest led the experiencer to perceive in the sounds of nature something greater than themselves, an eternal, mystical connection to nature, spirits, and forces. (Ampuja 2017, 50-52.)

As silence and quietude are also very often associated with the experience of the sacred, many cultures and religions interpret silence, as well as certain sounds and sonic qualities, as something that enables us to connect with higher powers (see e.g. Hendy 2013). One deep experiential dimension of silence may be ethereal: A transcendental sacred or mystical experience for which silence or other sonic phenomena has acted as an enabler. This kind of experience of silence can be multi-sensory. In addition to auditory experience, the experiencer may feel affective sensations such as frisson sensation (psycho-genic shivers), euphoria, or other synesthetic sensations. These kinds of auditory perceptions are often acousmatic in nature. One in which the source of the sound is not perceived, and one does not necessarily know how to make a meaningful interpretation of the sound. A characteristic of acousmatic sounds is that they strongly feed the auditory imagination, which influences the interpretation of the sound and the sonic experience.

These interpretations are by no means exceptional, since historically people in all times and different cultures have felt a strong connection with nature precisely through the experience of silence, both external and internal.

Finnish Silence and Quietude

Now to the point of the particular Finnish cultural ethos of silence. Helsinki, the capital of Finland, is sometimes said to be a city of silence, because Finnish culture values silence (Berry 2015; Carbaugh, Berry, & Nurmikari-Berry 2006; Roxborough 2023). In suomi, the most commonly spoken language in Finland, silence is perhaps best understood through the concept of *rauha*. In English, *rauha* translates to, peace, or quietude—a state of calm, tranquility,

and repose. In the context of silence, the concept of *rauba* (peace, quietude) emerged frequently in the material. The Finnish word for peace is a Germanic loan. In modern languages, the German word *Ruhe*, also meaning peace and quiet(ude). (Kotus 2024: Rauha) The Finnish word *rauba* is semantically closely related to the idea of inner peace, balancing quietude and serenity (Nissilä 2022) and is very often equated in speech and thoughts with silence and experiences of nature (Ampuja 2014, 260).

Personal space, a quiet environment, and the ability to go about your day unbothered by others are key aspects of a Finnish ethos and cultural aesthetics (Grimley; Yamaguchi). Silence on public transportation is indicative of the larger cultural emphasis placed on quiet and solitude. Of course, the notion of a public soundscape has changed since people began the common use of headphones/ear buds. It creates a possibility to create private sonic spaces within public sonic environments, including public transportation changing the notion on public and blurring the border between the public and private. While the now common use of headphones and earbuds has shaped this silence, in the Finnish context, it has only made it more pronounced.

Finnish attitudes about silence have been extensively surveyed in the 2011-12 *Suomalainen hiljaisuus/Att uppleva tystnad (Finnish silence)* writing competition, which collected people's experiences and memories of silence. A similar competition, *Muuttuva suomalainen äänimaisema (Changing Finnish Soundscape)*, was held in 2014-2015. The material from both writing competitions has been extensively researched. For the purposes of this article, the most relevant studies are Outi Ampuja's *Hysä hiljaisuus (Good Silence)* (2017) and *Äänimaisemissa (In soundscapes)* (2016), edited by Helmi Järviluoma and Ulla Piela, both of which deal with the characteristics of the Finnish soundscapes based on competition materials, as well as *Huutoja hiljaisuuteen: ihminen ääninympäristössä (Cries for Silence: Man in a sonic environment)* (2014) edited by Outi Ampuja and Miikka Peltomaa.

Composer, writer, and environmentalist R. Murray Schafer approaches silence as a natural soundscape. He further conceptualizes the natural soundscape by calling it a hi-fi soundscape. In such a soundscape, individual sounds stand out clearly, whereas in an information-laden lo-fi soundscape, individual sounds are lost among others; in his words "in a low-fi soundscape individual acoustic signals are obscured in an overdense population of sounds." A hi-fi soundscape provides a pleasant experience for the listener. A lo-fi soundscape is rather noisy and distracting. A natural, hi-fi soundscape represents silence (Shaffer 1993, 43).

It is clear from the Finnish data that many Finns experience silence in exactly the way Schafer describes it. For the vast majority of the participants, silence means precisely the silence of nature, which lacks human sounds and the sounds of human activity (Ampuja 2017, 43). In the study we have cited, typical places for experiencing silence without anthropogenic sounds were forests and seaside or lakeside. It is worth noting that the city was mentioned in relatively few responses. In these cases, the respondent was typically much younger than the average age of the respondents (Ampuja 2017, 30, 47-48).

More than 60 percent of Finns live in an urban environment, so it is to be expected that experiences of urban silence will increase in the future.

Although silence, peace, and quietude are most commonly associated with nature and its tranquillity, as mentioned above, silence can also be experienced in noisy and seemingly restless environments. The experience of silence can be an inner silence or even just the absence of human voices. Public transport is a typical example of a situation where we often find ourselves in a very noisy environment. There are the sounds of the vehicle itself, the sounds of other vehicles and the sounds made by fellow passengers.

From an anthropological point of view, unwanted sounds, i.e. noise, can be interpreted as “dirt”. This “dirt” means that the sounds are heard in the wrong place, they do not belong to the expected soundscape of the given place and disturb the culturally constructed order and norm. (Uimonen 2014, 308-309). At the same time, however, it is necessary to point out that no sound is inherently 'dirty' or 'pure', but its nature is determined in relation to the listener and the culture (Uimonen 2014, 304). This statement problematizes the automatic interpretation of noise as a negative, culturally unwanted, sound. Noise refers to sounds that may not yet have cultural meaning, assumed relevance, or interpretations, and are considered odd and out of place. Noise, however, like any sound, is a signifier. The signifier may be empty, floating or stable containing meanings and carrying knowledge. In all those cases noise can potentially act as an enabler for new cultural changes, values, and/or artistic possibilities.

Interestingly, the sounds that “pollute” the soundscape are quite often sounds produced by other people: conversations, arguments or sounds related to people's bodily functions. Also in Finnish discourse, it is most often the sounds produced by fellow passengers (or neighbors etc.) that are perceived as more disturbing than other sounds in the soundscape (Ampuja 2017). Despite shifts in communication practices and cultural attitudes, silence can still be understood as having a high value in Finland.



Recording 3: Bus³

March 28, 2024

Collaborative Field Notes

After listening to the third recording together, we decided to focus on three elements: human voices, the technological sounds of the bus, and the movement of the passengers.

As previously discussed, the so-called silence of Finnish public space is often more of a quietude than an actual absence of sound.

³ Listen: <http://liminalities.net/20-4/3-Bus.mp3>

This is a particularly accurate way to describe the human voices heard on public transportation. It's not that there are no audible voices, but rather, that people tend to speak at a low sound volume, which minimizes the spatial volume of the sonic space they occupy. This creates a sort of choral effect, of a low and mid-range humming of voices. In this recording, the only voice that stands out to us is the child who is repeating, "aiti, aiti," which means "mother, mother." As children often have less sense of social protocol, it's not surprising that the child's voice is heard above the quietude of others speaking.

The bus sounds in the recording are most noticeable as what we would describe as acceleration and deceleration. As the bus slows and speeds up, there is a mechanical rise and fall of sound, which presents as a humming sound and mechanical vibration. Each time the bus stops, the door opens and closes with a swishing noise, adding repetitive sequences to the sonic assemblage. Similar to other modes of Helsinki public transportation, there is a recorded voice that announces upcoming stops. When a passenger presses a button near their seat, a bell signifies that a stop has been requested.

The sound of passengers entering and exiting the bus sounds almost choreographed. The first time we listened to the recording, we had trouble distinguishing between the shuffling of passengers' feet and the sound of the road noise made by the bus. After a second time listening, we were able to hear that the shuffling of feet was more noticeable during a stop, as people entered and exited the bus.



Concluding Thoughts

While the impetus for this project was to explore silence in cultural space, we quickly became intrigued by the complexity of our aims. As we have discussed in this study, silence itself is an impossibility, as there is no true absence of sound in either built or naturally occurring environments. Inspired by vibrational ontology, we were led to question what, then, was occurring in the supposed silence we were attempting to record on Helsinki's public transportation.

Our study highlights how technological mediation alters our auditory experience. Methodologically, our study expands the conceptual framework of the horizons of audition from two to four, examining relationships among space, place, and auditory perception. Acknowledging that shifting contexts transform the sonic experience, we were able to trace a trajectory from the originating listening and recording environment to the ending zone of our

listening space. However, because technological mediation alters the auditory experience, the very idea of an “original” sound is contested, because what we hear is determined by where, when, and how we listen. In our case, the playback of our recordings changed our understanding of sonic assemblage in the recordings themselves.

There were a number of methodological considerations we encountered in our study. Closely related to mediation, we often need to describe our field recordings and experiences in written form, for example, by writing this article. The complexity of field recordings as a data collection method as well as how those recordings can be analysed at a later stage, presents specific challenges. This is due to changes in our listening experience (in terms of sonic qualities, locations and places, as well as multi-sensory perception). When we are doing field recordings we are doing them in a certain sonic space and place. It is a unique and multi-sensory experience. But when we are later analyzing those recordings they’ve gone through technologically mediated horizons of audition. Thus, our analysis is informed by completely different sonic and sensory settings, which influences our listening experience

Perhaps the most profound question we developed after beginning our research regards how we were affected by being in “silent” spaces, and how that made us feel. Contrasting the soundscape of three different transportation modes revealed important distinctions in how we experience our environments. For example, the sounds of the bus seemed to us the most “clinical,” the subway was marked by a sense of alienation, and the tram evoked a feeling of coziness. The intersection of context and experience in auditory reception is complex, and requires further consideration. There is certainly much more to say in our future work about the performative affect of quietude on our lived experiences.

As collaborators, our differing understandings of the sonic cultural norms have strongly informed our inquiry. Our interpretations are strongly tied to our positionality as researchers, and as individuals or persons and a “product” of our culture. Just as we have co-created this collaborative autoethnography, so do people co-create the soundscape of a given space through their actions. People in the same space are forced to share a common soundscape while contributing to its production. Silence is one of the *materials* of cultural production of the soundscape. At the same time silence entails a norm, which can be violated by unwanted sounds producing auditory “dirt.” Sound phenomena always take place in a space, whether the space is shared or not.

Our particular concern in this study is public transportation as a location filled with various overlapping and sonic spaces. Public transport also imposes certain cultural expectations on the soundscape, meaning, which sounds are expected to be heard and which are not. In our interpretation, just as in an apartment building, for example, the sounds produced by people in public transport, such as the loud speech or other sounds of passengers, i.e. the sonic “dirt,” not only undermine the norms of the soundscape, but also the balance between public and private. Sound intrudes into a space perceived as private, a kind of privacy bubble in a public space thus breaking the experience of

silence, quietude, and peace. In future studies we intend to pursue our inquiry into the cultural affect of quietude in shared sonic space.

We conclude with a consideration of the horizons of possibility afforded by listening to recordings of “silence.” Listening deeply, or, ontologically, allows us to explore the sounds embedded in silence as a key part of our shared cultural experience. For example, terms such as “noise” and “dirt” usually imply annoyance and waste. But, as we have noted previously, noise often means sounds that do not yet have cultural meaning. What if, similar to reframing our limited hearing as possibility for new ways of experiencing sound in space, we were also able to think of these so-called disturbances as new horizons in our sonic assemblages, and points of interest in our future listening inquiries? While we were at first focused on human voices in our recordings, the sounds of machinery on trams, trains, and buses turned out to be one of the most interesting elements of our listening session. What other mechanical music might be available to us by recording public space in both built and naturally occurring environments that we inhabit?



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