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The Case of the #AUCdiaries Project

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[See table of contents](#)

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Reflections on Evaluating Soundscapes and Gathering Sounds in Cairo: The Case of the #AUCdiaries Project

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INTRODUCTION: The Cairo soundscape

The melding of the sounds of mechanical engines from cars, motorcycles, buses, and other wheeled vehicles is one layer of the audible drone of Cairo traffic. Another element is the voices: conversations at varying levels mixed with street vendors seeking clients. It's not uncommon to also hear the hooves of horses pulling carriages or donkeys with a cart in tow. It's not enough to say that there is hustle and bustle in Cairo, Egypt because you can see and, more importantly for this essay, you can hear it. It's a full-on immersive experience.

Sadly, the data on noise pollution in Cairo is scant, with an oft-cited 2008 National Research Center report saying that the average noise level is 85 decibels and comparable to the sound of a freight train (Slackman). That sonic experience leaves an indelible mark on visitors (O'Grady et al.) and is ensconced in my memory of my first days in downtown Cairo. However, for my students, it's not quite the same. They don't lean into this robust aural cacophony, perhaps for different reasons like locality. My university's campus relocated from the heart of Cairo to the suburbs more than ten years ago and, with that move, many families also sought to remove themselves from the noisiness of the city centre. According

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to Noor Salama's master's thesis, they say "keyfaya dawsha," Arabic for "enough with the noise" (2), and since they have the financial means to uproot their family history, they do for a more quiet life on the outskirts of Cairo. Sure, there's traffic in the suburbs, but some of my students have a shorter commute to campus than I do, and they are less likely to hear the horses and the street vendors that are commonplace in the densely populated city.

Consequently, Cairo has experienced several moments when its vibrant soundscape was quieted, such as when the government-imposed curfews following the 2011 political revolution. The same thing happened two years later in 2013. Malmström details the sound of silence in Cairo and how it impacts the body (25). This "public affect" is rarely noted in the aurality of everyday life (Malmström 24).

Kim reflects on teaching students to listen to the sound of Cairo

As a media professor, educating students to be future media practitioners takes skill along with a well-crafted curriculum. In my audio production class, the goal is to not just teach students how to create content but to hone their listening skills as well. Over the years, students have produced a number of sound-specific projects where listening to their environments is the preeminent goal as well as documenting those spaces. Gathering natural sounds on campus as a small team is the first assignment. If the students encounter an empty hallway, it's always interesting when they say there were no sounds there, and I challenge them to "listen" to what is there: what does it "sound" like? Capture the sound of that space and then also describe the space: how does emptiness sound?

After a few weeks in the course and work on other audio projects, students begin to craft their #AUCdiaries. This is essentially a diary of their daily life, both on and off campus, in audio form. My suggestion is that they gather as much sound from their day (or days) as possible since they will use the audio clips to create their narrative.

Nearly every student submits the sound of their phone alarm waking them up, but some capture the sound of the birds in the morning. Cairo has a vibrant birding community, but by, say 8 a.m. the sounds of the birds aren't as prominent as at perhaps 6 a.m. It's refreshing that the students find value in birds chirping as a natural alarm.

Kim's reflection as an interdisciplinary activity

Assignments involving listening to Cairo's soundscape and gathering natural sounds intersects with anthropological methods to understanding communities. With Cairo as such a sound rich city, this assignment immerses students in their environments. As sound surveyors, they eventually come to the realization that the sounds surrounding a person's life—no matter how mundane—produces a wealth of information about lifestyles, social status, and the struggles that people may face (Fahmy 52).

In my courses I often have a teaching assistant (TA) and typically my TA is a former student who also has experience with my course assignments and their emphasis on listening. That was the case for Reem Elmaghraby. She will share her thoughts on the #AUCdiaries assignment as both a student and a TA.

REEM ELMAGHRABY is an award-winning audio storytelling and multimedia journalism graduate. She is passionate about teaching and using creative mediums such as audio and writing to tell stories that leave an impact.

Reem reflects on #AUCdiaries as a listening practice

When I first started working on the #AUCdiaries assignment, I worried about how I was going to convey a day in my life using sound, especially since the pandemic was at its peak in the autumn of 2020 and I was mostly stuck in my dorm.

I decided to remain positive and attempted to listen to my life instead of only observing it. I quickly noticed how sounds affect me on a daily basis and how reactive I am to them: phone notifications make me reach toward my device, the microwave beeping means I can eat my food, and water boiling means I could pour it into my cup.

Listening to my surroundings made me realize that despite living in an area that was far away from the apex of Cairo traffic, my days still resonated with sound because most of my actions created sound or was a result of a sound.

After gathering my audio recordings—which included a fire alarm in my dorm, writing on post-it notes, and frying chicken—I wrote a few words to complement the sounds; however, delivering my narration was a challenge. I wasn't confident in the sound's ability to convey certain aspects of the story and constantly tried to use my narrative as a crutch. My audio diary was repetitive, and the immersiveness that I felt when listening to the sounds I recorded disappeared.

So, I rewrote my narration similar to how I spoke, used vocal variety throughout the piece to convey the scenes and emotions I wanted the

listener to feel, and added descriptions of the environments so the listener could imagine where these sounds took place. I also decided to trust that the listener will be able to pick up on some of the natural sounds without indicating what they were directly. As a result, I was able to use some of the sounds to move my story along rather than just complement my narration. For example, instead of mentioning that I was attending a Zoom class, I added in the chime that occurs when someone leaves or enters a Zoom call and then mentioned what class I was attending.

The #AUCdiaries ended up being one of my favourite assignments because it taught me how powerful sound can be when used as a storytelling tool, no matter how quiet or loud the environment is.

Reem reflects on teaching #AUCdiaries as a listening practice

In my experience as a TA, the first reaction students have when presented with the #AUCdiaries assignment is that they have no sound rich events to attend, such as weddings or concerts, and they fail to realize that sound exists even in the ordinary. The students are advised to actively listen to the everyday noises that they have grown accustomed to or have overlooked due to the constant presence of vociferous soundscapes in their lives. They are also encouraged to understand that sound is “a part of the world we live in, intervening in the world directly” (Herzogenrath 1).

Additionally, students need to consider ethics while collecting natural sounds by letting other people around them know that they are recording. The next step is for students to write out the details of their day and then combine both elements in a way that makes the listener feel like they are present in that moment. So, vocality and speech performance end up playing an important role as students need to convey emotions in their narration to keep the listener interested. For example, it will sound odd if a frustrating situation is narrated using a cheerful tone. Paying close attention to the pitch, tone, and articulation of their voice while they record their narration could help them keep the listener engaged in the audio diary.

Upon completing the assignment and comparing it to what their classmates produced, students begin to notice how subjective sounds can be and realize that they created their audio diary based on their personal perception of the sounds around them and the environments they're in. Students end up with a better understanding of how to listen to soundscapes as well as how culture and social class can affect sounds. They are

also keenly aware of their role in contributing and reacting to the sounds around them.

Conclusion: What did we hear?

The ability to appreciate and analyze our personal soundscapes is not as innate as it might seem. Think of the recent silence that was thrust upon us during the early curfew-induced days of the coronavirus pandemic, when Cairo was eerily quiet at times when it would normally be thriving. That unimagined Cairene soundscape created a layer of fear and uncertainty, and it wasn't long before people, my students included, yearned for the familiar sounds—the cacophonous Cairo that they love to hate.

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