

Unsettling the World Soundscape Project: Soundscapes of Canada and the Politics of Self-Recognition

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Abstract

Welcome to ***Unsettling the World Soundscape Project***, a new series in which we critically investigate the output of early acoustic ecology and assess its continuing value for today's sound studies. The writings and subsequent musical compositions of original WSP members like R. Murray Schafer, Barry Truax, and Hildegard Westerkamp have been the locus of much critical engagement;

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Welcome to **Unsettling the World Soundscape Project**, a new series in which we critically investigate the output of early acoustic ecology and assess its continuing value for today's sound studies. The writings and subsequent musical compositions of original WSP members like R. Murray Schafer, Barry Truax, and Hildegard Westerkamp have been the locus of much critical engagement; ubiquitous references to their work often contain tensions born from the need to acknowledge their lasting influence while critiquing the ideologies driving their work. Yet little attention has been paid to the auditory documents produced by the WSP itself as its members experimented their way through the process of developing methodologies for soundscape research. Drawing on the notion of "unsettled listening" that I wrote about [here on Sounding Out! last summer](#), we pay particular attention to issues of cross-cultural representation in the work of the WSP and ask how their successes and failures can inform new investigations into the sonic environments of the world.

In the first post **Mitchell Akiyama** unpacks the WSP's most ambitious piece, the ten-hour *Soundscapes of Canada* radio series produced for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in 1974. Akiyama situates the broadcast's innovative work historically and points to the problem of how to represent an increasingly diverse nation by way of sound while calling for new ways to think about what such a project should sound like in the 21st Century. Ultimately, he argues that what the broadcasts exclude is perhaps more important than what they include. In the following weeks, posts from myself and **Vincent Andrisani** will further the conversation geographically, temporally, and methodologically. It is our hope that this series will spark new interest in the output of the World Soundscape Project while prompting debate about how best their legacy can be made useful for today's researchers and practitioners doing critical work on the role of sound in understanding relationships between people and the places in which they live.

— **Guest Editor Randolph Jordan**

In October of 1973, two young sound recordists embarked on an ambitious field trip across Canada, traversing over 7000 kilometers to commit the national soundscape to tape. From St. John's, Newfoundland to the harbor of Vancouver, British Columbia, Bruce Davis and Peter Huse pointed their microphones at the things they felt best exemplified their vast country.



Bruce Davis recording in the field, June 1974

These recordings would become the backbone for *Soundscapes of Canada*, a series of ten hour-long radio programs carried across the country by the national broadcaster, the CBC. Conceived and produced by the *World Soundscape Project* (WSP)—a research group formed at Vancouver’s Simon Fraser University in the late 1960s and helmed by the composer and sound theorist, R. Murray Schafer—in its entirety *Soundscapes of Canada* was an impressively sprawling, eclectic document. Comprised of guided listening exercises and avant-garde sound collages, the program’s stated goal was to open the ears of Canadian listeners to the importance of sonic experience, and to alert them to what they warned was the degradation of the soundscape thanks to the mounting din of industrial modernity.

But there was much more happening out of earshot. Created at a time when Canada’s cultural identity was *rapidly changing thanks to an unprecedented swell in immigration from non-European countries*, the WSP’s portrait of the nation all but ignored its First Nations and its “visible minorities,” as they would come to be known. While the series was an important statement in the WSP’s larger efforts to bring sound to the forefront of cultural conversation, it is arguably more important to listen to *Soundscapes of Canada* for what it leaves out, for voices silent and silenced.

For Schafer, the industrialized world had grown measurably louder and qualitatively noisier, which troubled him for both environmental and social reasons. In his 1977 book, *The Tuning of the World*, Schafer would write, “For some time, I have...believed that the general acoustic environment of a society can be read as an indicator of social conditions which produce it and may tell us much about the trending and evolution of that society” (7). Given the worryingly poor state of the soundscape, for Schafer it followed that society was in bad shape. He was wistful for quieter times, for the days of Goethe, when the cry of the half-blind night watchman of Weimer was within earshot of every one of the town’s inhabitants. Unstated, but implied, here, was the notion that as communities expanded beyond every member’s ability to hear a familiar sound, their common identity would necessarily be eroded. And for Schafer, this was precisely what was happening to Canada.



Father Jean Racine, Percé, Québec, 1974

The WSP's discussion of "soundmarks" in parts three and four of the series was perhaps their most powerful statement about the stakes for preserving and promoting the nation's sonic heritage. A "soundmark" is, in the WSP's lexicon of neologisms, roughly analogous to a landmark: it's a sound that is supposedly instantly recognizable to members of a community, an irreplaceable acoustic feature of a particular place. In the conclusion to program three, "[Signals, Soundmarks and Keynotes](#)," Schafer intoned, "It takes time for a sound to take on rich, symbolic character—a lifetime perhaps, or even centuries. This is why soundmarks should not be tampered with carelessly. Change the soundmarks of a culture and you erase its history and mythology. Myths take many forms. Sounds have a mythology too. Without a mythology, a culture dies."

So it seems fair to ask: exactly whose mythology stood to be snuffed out? For Schafer, Canadian culture was (or ought to be) *synechdochal* with the land, with the nation's vast, largely uninhabited expanses that stretched all the way to the North Pole. Canadians were (or ought to be) a rugged, self-reliant people—stoic pioneers who shunned cosmopolitan (read ethnic) urban centers, opting for a quiet life in harmony with the country's settler heritage. This was certainly reflected in program four, "[Soundmarks of Canada](#)." Over the course of an hour CBC listeners would have heard an austere montage almost entirely comprised of mechanical alarms (foghorns and air sirens) and church bells. Each sound presented, carefully, discreetly as though displayed in a museum, free from any traffic noise or sidewalk bustle that might distract the listener. Anyone unfamiliar with the Canadian soundscape would be forgiven for coming to the conclusion that the world's second largest nation was a bastion of early industrial machinery, a sanctuary for quiet, self-reliant, God-fearing folk.

"Soundmarks of Canada" not only omitted the soundmarks of Canadian cities, it also excluded any sonic trace of the country's vibrant ethnic and First Nations communities. Produced in the years following the passage of the [1971 Multiculturalism Policy of Canada](#)—which had been adopted in response to a boom of immigration from non-European nations—their portrait of a pastoral, post-colonial British outpost shunted the country's sizeable non-Christian, ethnic population squarely out of earshot. It should also go without saying that the soundmarks they so prized were deeply entangled with a silencing of Canada's indigenous population; of a protracted, often violent and brutal, campaign of assimilation that replaced one set of sonic practices with another. For

generations of Indigenous Canadians, the sounds of church bells would likely not have connoted community or belonging, but would have rather reverberated with echoes of the “reeducation” in settler religion and language that many were forced to endure in Canada’s residential schools—church-run institutions to which countless children were spirited away against their parents and communities’ wishes.



Canada’s First Protestant Church Bell

This is not to say that any of this was intentional, that the WSP deliberately plugged their ears to Canada’s marginal communities, or that they intended to slight these groups in any way. It may be more accurate to ascribe ignorance and omission to the project, structural forms of inequality that dog even the most well meaning white settlers. Regardless of intent, however, the result is the same.

Soundscapes of Canada shows a troubling politics of self-recognition in action [that is far too common throughout the nation’s history](#). By disproportionately representing the voices and sounds of European Canadians the series necessarily supported the idea that they were, if not the only ones, then at least “ordinary” and incumbent. Projects like these promote and condition a sense of unity and similarity that constitute the nation’s imagination of itself. Benedict Anderson famously observed that nations come into being and are maintained through the cultural work that leads its citizens to identify with the state. Institutions and practices from censuses, maps, nationally available print journalism, etc. all allow people in far-off locales to imagine themselves constituting a limited and sovereign community. In his classic book, *Imagined Communities*, Anderson proposes that nations have also historically been conceived, created, and ratified through sound. Writing specifically of national anthems, Anderson coins the term “unisonance” to describe the power that sound can have to seemingly erode the boundaries between self and other: “How selfless this unisonance feels! If we are aware that others are singing these songs precisely when and as we are, we have no idea who they may be, or even where, out of earshot, they are singing. Nothing connects us all but imagined sound” (149).

It is significant that the WSP chose the radio—the CBC in particular—as the vehicle for their ambitious project. In the mid-1970s, not only did radio offer the widest reach of any sonic medium, but it also had a particular cultural resonance for Canadians. A nation as vast and varied as

Canada could have only come about thanks to mediation; its vastness has always required means of traversing or shrinking space to secure its borders, both psychic and geographical. The westward expansion of the post-indigenous nation was accomplished first by canoe, then by rail, and, beginning in the 1920s, by radio. Appropriately, it was the Canadian National Railway (CNR) that produced the first transnational radio broadcast in 1927—the national anthem performed by bells on the carillon of the Peace Tower—broadcasting the event to railway passengers and home listeners alike. Since the middle part of the 20th century, the national broadcaster has been understood as something of a bulwark against encroaching American culture.



Passengers listening to radio broadcast aboard train, location unknown, 1929

The history of the Canadian airwaves is profoundly mired in struggles to promote, produce, and foster content that might keep the national identity from being completely subsumed under the sprawl and heft of the American culture industry. Schafer had mixed feelings about the medium. On the one hand, he was skeptical of his one-time teacher and mentor, Marshall McLuhan's, analysis that radio, by its very nature, enfolded listeners in a shared acoustic space, effectively "retribalizing" society. Schafer felt that the airwaves had been packed to such a dense and frenetic level that they actually created "sound walls" that effectively isolated listeners in their own solipsistic, acoustic bubbles. But there was hope for the radio in that it could also facilitate a return to a more wholesome and connected state of being and of listening. Schafer noted this duality in his essay "[Radical Radio](#)," writing, "If modern radio overstimulates, natural rhythms could help put mental and physical well-being back in our blood. Radio may, in fact, be the best medium for accomplishing this" (209). Sonic technology was a source of ambivalence for Schafer; he coined the term "schizophonia" to describe the separation of sound from source that recording effected. He believed that it was problematic to populate the world with copies he deemed inherently inferior to the "original" sonic event. Given the opportunity to reach such a wide swath of the Canadian public, Schafer swallowed his distaste for the schizophonic medium and offered a sonic missive on how to compose a healthy and prosperous nation.

Forty years on, *Soundscapes of Canada* still stands as a unique experiment in imagining how to build and maintain a nation through sound. But in the same regard it also serves as a troubling reminder of how sonic media can work to occlude the voices of marginal citizens, thereby preventing them from fully finding the place in the national soundscape, simply by ignoring their soundmarks and aural practices. If a nation needs a myth, it can do better than telling stories about the necessity of shoring up a colonial legacy whose time has come.

Readers interested in listening to the full series can stream [all ten episodes](#) through the website of the Canadian Music Centre.

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Mitchell Akiyama is a Toronto-based scholar, composer, and artist. His eclectic body of work includes writings about plants, animals, cities, and sound art; scores for film and dance; and objects and installations that trouble received ideas about perception and sensory experience. Akiyama recently completed his Ph.D. in communications at McGill University. His doctoral work offers a critical history of sound recording in the field and examines an eclectic range of subjects, from ethnographers recording folksongs in southern American penal work camps to biologists trying determine whether or not animals have language to the political valences of sound art practices.

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