Suddenly cities in southern British Columbia (BC) sounded differently. On March 17, 2020 the BC Provincial Health Director called a public health emergency of the pandemic. Public and postsecondary schools were suspended, gatherings of more than 50 people were banned, non-essential businesses and services shut down, outdoor recreation facilities were taped off, non-essential travel was discouraged, and physical distancing guidelines were issued. As with the rest of the province, residents of the three largest urban centres in BC were advised to remain at home. Unlike residents of cities in Italy, Spain, India and elsewhere that were under strict lockdown orders, we were never strictly forbidden by government orders to leave our homes and places of shelter. Regardless, the shift away from normal everyday mobility to the public health-regulated immobility was sudden and drastic for much of the urban population. Within a matter of days, Kelowna, Victoria and Vancouver became urban spaces void of visible and audible human activity in an unprecedented way -- or, as we’ve come to learn, empty of particular human activity.
Anthropologists of sound, Alex and Sue, moved quickly to curate the historical shift in the sound environments. Inspired by Cities and Memory #StayHome Sounds project, which documents “sounds from the global coronavirus lockdown,” we scrambled to create a crowd-sourced digital record devoted to local and regional geographies of pandemic-inspired sound. [https://citiesandmemory.com/covid19-sounds/](https://citiesandmemory.com/covid19-sounds/).

Our twofold rationale was simple: To create digital space for the documentation of sounds at a particular moment in the province’s history and also an invitation for residents to re/consider sounds around them. We wanted to think about the pandemic through sound and also to think about sound through the pandemic. By April 5th, the website was up. Before this project Sue had not gone on a soundwalk in her own city. With her two children, Alexandrine experienced new forms of interacting with social spaces she used to visit daily. What sounds did they take for granted? Their own forays into listening for an abnormal sonic environment immediately brought this question to the foreground. Underpinning the project’s question, what does BC sound like under the conditions of a pandemic, was a more fundamental one: What did our urban spaces sound like “normally”?

*Sue’s soundwalk, April 5th, 2020, Kelowna, BC*

I left my townhouse, located on a newly developed parcel of land that was once an orchard and remains unceded territory of the Syilx (Okanagan) Peoples, with i-phone in hand. Early evening, around dinner time, I strolled through a subdivision next to Okanagan Lake composed of houses with tidy sculpted yards encircled by a brick wall. Lilac bushes were blooming. The street was silent to me except for bird sounds (songs?). When I say “except for” I am referring to the absence of usual sounds for that time and space. Normally the urban park alongside the lake would be alive with human activity centered on leisure and recreation-- skateboarding on the sidewalks, family gatherings on the manicured lawn next to the beach, the
unloading of bikes off the back of SUVs. That evening, to my ears, the hushed absence of people at the park was filled in with a new avian sonic atmosphere. Bird songs like I had never heard before.

Link to sound clip: https://soundcloud.com/user-222259547/southwind-dr

Continuing on, I turned to walk along the lakeshore drive that runs parallel to some of the city’s most massive lakeside homes. Newly intense sounds of nature coming from the gated subdivision yards ended abruptly, replaced by the not entirely unpleasant noise of traffic. I was surprised by the presence of the familiar din. Why so many cars during stay at home orders? Not only noise, can traffic sound reassuring? I stopped to record the rhythmic hum of tires whizzing across the pavement, moving people back and forth to and from homes in this wealthier neighbourhood. As much as I wanted to make sense of the traffic sounds as noise or, even, sonic violence during a time of health-mandated mobility restriction, I found them lulling.

A little further up the lakeshore main corridor road, I came to a parking lot. Normally full of parked cars on a beautifully warm spring evening when people would be accessing the green space for recreation, the paved lot had become a site of new sociality. While this scene would become more common over the coming weeks, that early April evening was the first time I came across a COVID-19 tailgate party. Faintly, behind the steady whooshing of corridor traffic, young people’s voices echoed out between the open trunks of their vehicles, like a mini-amphitheatre. Parked a few feet from one another, the friends listened to music, entertained themselves on their phones, and conversed with one another. The sounds felt life-affirming, exuding a creative energy. Yet, at the same time the privilege of the young people’s cars as containers where they could safely physically distance chafed at me. Within urban neighbourhoods in Kelowna which kids had tailgate parties and revelled in social interaction and which kids did not?
Photo 1: Skateboarders hanging out at Kerry Park, in the centre of the tourism action of downtown Kelowna. Normally, pedestrians and people to and from the nearby restaurants would drown out these sounds. Tonight, the space is all their’s. The sound makes the space. Photo by Sue Frohlick.

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Alex’s soundwalk, April 16th, Victoria, BC.

While sitting on a floor of wood chips with my year-old daughter, I observed the gentle flapping sounds of yellow banners wrapped up all around the swings, slides, and poles of my neighborhood’s playground. No
one was to be seen except us. It felt strange to witness this usually swarming section of Tolmie park almost abandoned of human activity. Located two blocks from my house, I had been walking to this park with my dog every day since my daughter was three months old. But since the pandemic, the park felt totally different: the atmosphere was almost eerie. As we walked back towards the parking lot we noticed the presence of many crows perched in the weeping willow. My daughter often imitates their noticeable calls. We both responded back as they flew over our heads. I did not have my recording equipment with me so I decided to go back to the park by myself, just after 7:00PM. Later that evening, a few minutes before I arrived at the park, I heard people clanging on pots and applauding the primary care workers.

Photo 2: The sound of the swings hitting the banners in a rhythmic way took a special meaning. Photo by. Alexandrine Boudreault-Fournier.
As I ventured towards the swings where I was standing earlier that day, I heard the flip-flap sound better. I sensed the wind on my face and hands. I looked around to see if someone was looking at me. I felt I was breaking the law as I touched the swings and gently pushed them towards the banners. The swings swayed in a rhythmic pattern and touched each side’s banners. Their movement created a subtle friction: flip-flap-flip. I decided to record this specific moment because it made me reflect on what’s expected of me (us) during the pandemic, a period made up of unprecedented restrictions and limitations. The park had suddenly become a space where I did not feel so welcome.

Link to sound clip: [https://soundcloud.com/user-222259547/park-covid19-2](https://soundcloud.com/user-222259547/park-covid19-2)

The absence of particular loud sounds caught my attention that evening. The passionate pickleball players were usually noisy. The municipal authorities recently installed a sound barrier noise wall at the back of the pickleball court to limit sound contamination. They received many complaints from the park’s neighbours. But now, the court is empty and it felt so quiet. It made me smile to think that the wall had now lost its purpose as there was no sound to block anymore. Bird chips, a police siren and cars in the background are the only detectable sonic signals I recall from that strange evening. I asked myself: “Will I get used to this?”

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By mid-April, the BC COVID-19 soundwaves project caught the attention of an anthropology student, Celeste, who joined Alex and Sue in collecting and curating the submitted sound files.

**Celeste’s soundwalk, April 16th, Victoria, BC. (unceded Lekwungen territory)**

I went on my first soundwalk in mid-April, shortly after joining the project. I wanted to collect audio clips to contribute, so I set off to find ‘sounds of the pandemic’ to record.
On my walk I found many viable sights of the pandemic: hearts in peoples’ windows, a taped off playground, the empty recreation centre parking lot, people wearing masks, a gas station sign showing gas had dropped to under a dollar…Yet I couldn’t identify any specific “pandemic sounds.” The question of “is this really a pandemic sound?” overshadowed many of my first attempts to think of the pandemic and my neighbourhood in sound. Yes, there were sirens blaring by, but I live close to a hospital. The neighbour at the end of my street was coughing every morning, but he smokes and has coughed like this for years. The birds were singing loudly, but it is spring and I live under a canopy of trees. All the sounds of the pandemic others were suggesting seemed to be business as usual to me.

Doing anthropology in sound required me to shift from thinking of the pandemic as a single causal event and sound as a discrete entity. I had been dividing the sounds of my neighbourhood into clear cut “before” and “after” objects: Did this sound exist before the pandemic? What did the pandemic do to this sound? This perspective allowed me to record a few audio clips: cheering for healthcare workers at 7PM and a public health announcement over the radio, for example. But I remained feeling dissatisfied and limited.

While sound is a physical entity it is experienced and interacted with socially. Likewise, although the coronavirus is a biological entity, the pandemic we are experiencing and interacting with is largely social: constructed through government regulations; new social norms and practices, cultural narratives and moralities, and our individual thoughts and feelings. Realizing this allowed me to see more of the relationships of sound and the pandemic to the social and political contexts they exist in.
Photo 3: Listening to the 7PM cheering of healthcare workers in the neighborhood. Photo by Celeste Macevicius.

Link to sound clip: https://soundcloud.com/user-222259547/7pm-our-house

Another similarity between the pandemic and sound is that they are both immersive. I am immersed in sound when I go for a walk (birds in the trees, garbage being picked up, a bike passing by) just as I am
immersed in the pandemic (keeping 6 feet apart, avoiding touching anything). Sounds and the pandemic are part of an entire sensory, affective, and social experience. In this reckoning, I was able to recognize the ways sound and the pandemic are permeating into thought, emotion, memory, and our other senses rather than existing as singular experiences. As I shifted my thinking, I began to consider how the sounds in my neighbourhood during the pandemic had arisen from the neighbourhood itself. I appreciated how I was not encountering sounds or the pandemic, but living in this emergent sound- and pandemic-scape.

To illustrate: I initially did not consider the construction behind my house to be a “pandemic sound.” Yet it continued to come into my consciousness throughout the day. Over time, I came to realize the pandemic and this sound were interacting in ways I previously had not recognized. The noises of the workers and machinery were amplified by the silence of other activity and extended to longer hours due to a relaxation of construction noise bylaws eased to allow for more physical distancing of workers. To my neighbours and I, the experience and meaning of the sound was also intensified – we were at home all day and thus were getting no reprieve. Further, there was a certain intensity to hearing such busyness and human interaction during the shutdown (indeed, the government’s choice to classify construction as an essential service was contentious). Here the pandemic, sound, and my neighbourhood are existing as more than a simple virus, acoustic wave, and physical place. Government regulations, new social practices, moral judgements, and emotions interacted together to produce a neighbourhood in a pandemic and in sound; a sound in a pandemic and a neighbourhood; and a pandemic in sound and a neighbourhood.

This shift to thinking of the pandemic and sound as social and immersive opened up new opportunities for me to capture sound, the pandemic, and my neighbourhood.

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REFLECTIONS

As the three of us began to take note of the changing sonic environments around our own neighbourhoods, sounds from other residents began to appear in the project inbox. Many of the initial submissions were of pleasant and happy sounds, sounds that were celebrated widely across the province and in social media, too, in those first few weeks of the province’s “soft” lockdown. People sent us sound clips of the pot clanging and serenading of the healthcare workers that had become a new routine in BC’s towns and cities, of the song birds taking over many of the otherwise noisy trafficked streets, of the quiet in a provincial park closed at a time of year that would see frequent use, of the quietness experienced on dog walks that has become a new normal for people working from home or unemployed due to pandemic-related closures, and of the somehow reassuring COVID-19 updates on the radio offered daily by the major provincial state actors in the pandemic, notably Dr. Bonnie Henry, the Provincial Health Officer.

Amidst the sounds that might be considered an absence of noise (quiet, song birds, reassuring voices), more troubling sounds were also submitted to the project. The sounds of an outdoor hand washing station made by a harm reduction team in Victoria to serve the residents of a “tent city,” an impromptu village of homeless people living in tents in urban parks, underlines the pandemic’s disproportionate impact on marginalized populations. A sound of caring, the homemade water pumps are one of many efforts undertaken by outreach groups and peer workers to meet the exacerbated inequities and increased risks faced by those experiencing homelessness in the pandemic – including a lack of access to clean water. A recording in a grocery store of the voice telling shoppers how to stay safe and keep others safe—benevolent, on the one hand, but also a slightly eerie aurality marking human bodies, consumers, as dangerous, in new ways. A fight outside an apartment, troubling enough we felt compelled to protect our listeners whose emotional reactions might be disturbing for them. Also, these challenging sounds of a disturbance are a reminder that social distancing is
a privilege and that for many people the pandemic also meant an increase of stressful factors and sources of conflict.

At the same time as cities in BC “open up” (a euphemism for consumption to resume?), anti-racism protests against recent and historical police brutality against Black residents of Minneapolis and other cities across the U.S. created sounds of civic activity that stand in harsh contrast to the quietude of Sue’s own suburban neighbourhood in Kelowna, a city marked by whiteness and the aestheticization of colonial settlement, and the bird songs she recorded. Eventually, our collection as well as our analysis will pay attention to the location of the cities where the curated sounds came from (Kelowna, Victoria, Vancouver) in unceded Indigenous territories. Vancouver and Victoria are among the most expensive cities for housing in Canada and urban populations are marked by increasing socio-economic disparities. In the last three months, more people died of opioid-related overdoses than COVID-19 in BC and there has been a rise in overdoses since the pandemic outbreak.

The reflections that motivated this project speak about our own privileges and the ones of some of our interlocutors. Enjoyment of the emergence of pleasant atmospheres, and the decrease of invasive and annoying sounds, is indicative of our socio-economic condition. The assumptions about a “natural BC sound” is steeped in a dominant narrative about safe and green urban spaces and of a multicultural diversity of social landscapes exceptional to the racial injustices experienced south of the border. Of course, this is not the case. Incidents with Canadian police patrols involving Indigenous peoples and racialized marginalized subjects, such as Black youth, emerge in the media to remind listeners that Canada is not exceptional but rather has enacted white supremacy for years. Being acute to the sounds of nature and the new state of quietness instead of how the pandemic increased sonic contamination and noise pollution might be indicative of where we stand rather than representative of a widely spread
condition experienced by everyone. The silence versus noise contrast encourages us to reflect on our own privilege and the ones of our interlocutors.

RE-SOUNDING: NEXT PHASE OF OUR PANDEMIC SOUND PROJECT

While the province of BC moved from phases one and two and most recently moved to phase 3 of the public health plan of efforts to curb the pandemic, the sounds noticed by urban residents shift again. As anthropologists of sound, we want to be responsive, quick, nimble. We re-invited the public to share their impressions of their sound environments as a “new normal” is in the making. In addition to the sound clips, in a new section of our website called “re-sounding” we welcomed (and continue to welcome) written impressions about the sounds of the pandemic (https://bccovid19soundwaves.wordpress.com/re-sounding/). We hope to encourage people to share their thoughts about new sonic impressions even if they could not record them. As the project unfolded—quickly—along with the timbre of the pandemic, we soon realized that listening to the sound clips and reading the short blurbs shared by the interlocutors on our website did not alone satisfy our curious minds. We want to know more about the interlocutors and the sounds they posted on our website. How did they come to realize that the ambient sounds around them in their daily lives had changed since the pandemic started? How did that realization influence their perception of normalcy and disruption in social and private spaces? In order to dig deeper into such questions, we decided to apply for ethics to our provincial Human Research Ethics Board. And now, we are experiencing stumbling blocks. As researchers of sound, we have found that the pandemic is affecting methodologies we used before without thinking twice. Ethnographers are used to mingling with research participants “in the field;” thinking about ways of conducting research exclusively online is challenging and presents additional layers of potential exclusion (of some participants without computers, access to wifi or without mobile devices, for example). It forces us to rethink how we envision our work, and more specifically in this case, how we can discuss the subtleties of sonic ambience and memories through the exclusive prisms of online
communication platforms. Yet, we believe that this is worth pursuing and hope that the sound clips shared by the interlocutors will help them recall memories of aural experiences, which will bring further nuance to our documentation project.

URBAN SYNCOPATIONS

The anthropology of sound encourages listening carefully to hear sounds, noises, ruffles, cadences, utterances, blasts, reverberations that form the aural environments of the everyday. Yet, the new normal we are occupying right now also presents opportunities to interrogate, from a sensory way of knowing, forms of dominance and power that persist and where the spaces are for social change. Sound provides an alternative way to reflect on our changing world and the syncopation caused by the turbulences of the pandemic provides an opportunity to listen more carefully and critically to the soundwaves of our evolving environment.