

**ANTH 555**  
**Soundings: Audio Ethnography, Theory and Practice**  
**Winter 2021**

**Professor Diana Allan**

“To listen, as well as to look or to contemplate, is to touch the work in each part – or else to be touched by it, which comes to the same thing.”

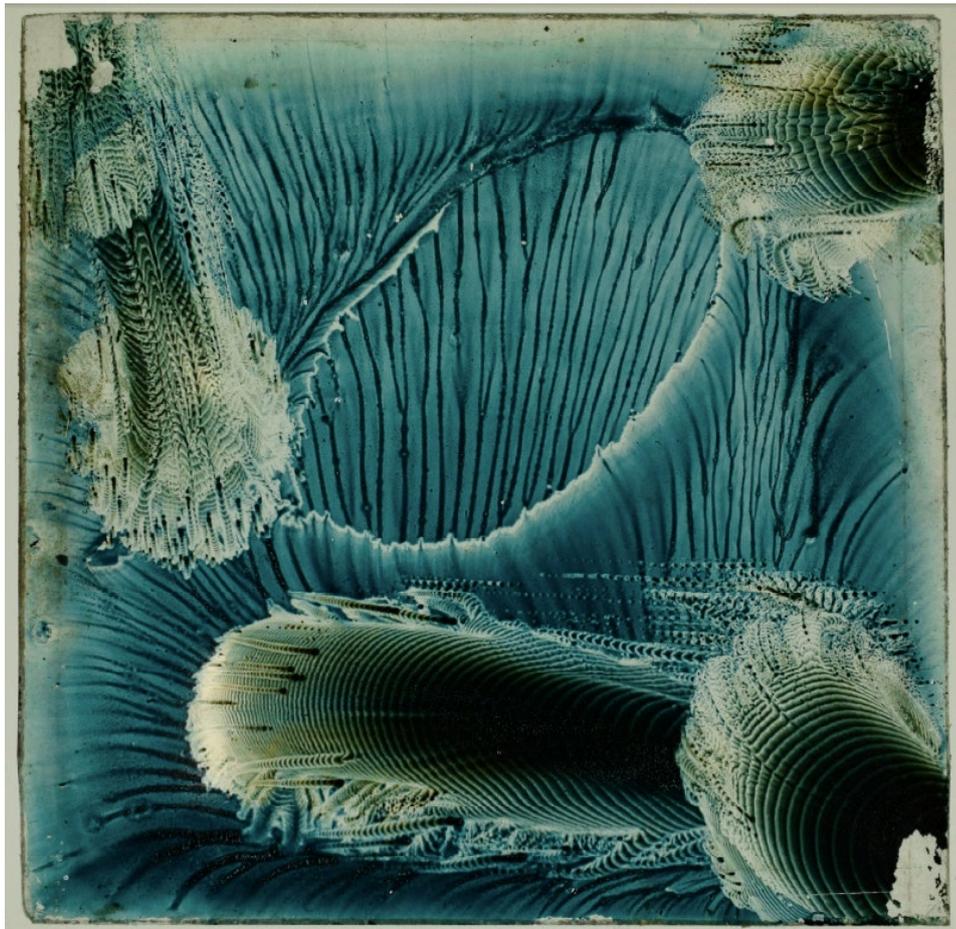
— Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening* (2007, 32).

“There is no such thing as silence, something is always happening that makes sound.”

— John Cage (1967, 117).

“Oh, if only we could take back with us the singing. Not the songs, but the singing.”

– Frances Flaherty on the making of the ethnographic film *Moana* (1923)



“Impression Figure”, glass plate and pigment, capturing the sonic textures of voice, produced by Margaret Watts Hughes using an “Eidophone” (circa 1890).

**Instructor Email:** [diana.allan@mcgill.ca](mailto:diana.allan@mcgill.ca)

**Office hours:** Monday 2:30 – 4:00 pm (Montreal time) via zoom. (Blocks of 15 minutes should be booked in advance).

### **Class time**

Friday 2:30 – 5:30pm (Montreal time), via zoom. Typically, class will not run the full three hours and I anticipate most classes will run from 2:30 – 4:15/4:30 pm. Occasionally, we will use the full 3 hours (for instance when we have a guest lecture or are listening to student recordings).

### **Instructional Method**

This seminar will be taught remotely over Zoom. The sessions will not be recorded to allow for freer discussion. Attendance and participation are therefore extremely important and students are expected to attend all sessions.

### **Course description**

While listening and hearing are fundamental to anthropological thought and practice, the discipline's engagement with sound, both as a subject of study and a medium of enquiry, has been surprisingly limited. As early as 1889, Franz Boas recognized the centrality of sound to culture, lamenting anthropology's "sound-blindness" (the very terms of his critique, a symptom of an ocularcentric problem). However, it was not until the end of the twentieth century that an "anthropology of sound" emerged as a distinct field, and the methodologies of sounding and listening brought into ethnographic research. Stephen Feld's (1982) seminal ethnographic study of the Bosavi rainforest, which explores the co-constitutive relationship of sound, human experience and the environment, launched the "acoustic turn", modeling an approach attuned to the phenomenological and relational dimensions of sound. As the vitality of this field has grown, so has its reach. The interdisciplinary breadth and diversity of sound studies in anthropology today ranges from sonic forms of power and agency, to sound's role in the articulation of selves, publics, and embodied experience, as well as the construction of nature, culture and race. As a vibration that registers materially, sounds mediate, connecting perception and matter; they locate and orient us in space, language, and social life. No longer limited to linguistic, spoken or musical registers, a diversity of acoustic forms is now recognized to be analytically central to many domains and dimensions of experience.

This practice-based seminar takes seriously Feld's call for a "sounded anthropology" – anthropology not only *of* sound but *in* sound – and sets out to explore sonic ways of knowing. Students will hone and refine listening skills and explore sound as subject and medium of anthropological inquiry through the production and critical analysis of ethnographic audio works. Through readings, recording assignments, screenings, collective listening and discussion of student work, as well as guest lectures with ethnographers, filmmakers and artists working in sound, we will explore key concepts in sound anthropology and cognate fields—including acoustemology, soundscape, voice, song, noise, silence, transduction, and debates around sonic naturalism. Technical workshops will provide students with basic instruction in recording techniques and open-access audio production and post-production tools. The recording assignments can be completed using a cell phone and no special recording devices are required (although students with access to pro-tools are encouraged to use them). While this class will be particularly relevant for students working on sound-related research, or who want to develop independent projects and practice-based approaches where sound is a key element, it will also be of interest to students with no prior experience of working in sound.

### **Learning outcomes**

This course is first and foremost about learning how to analyze and make ethnographic sound. The emphasis is on practice, rather than sound studies per se. The course will attune students to the sensory modalities of sound work and offer a creative collective space in which to explore and produce sonic ethnography. Students will critically consider the different ways anthropologists and ethnographically-oriented scholars and artists have engaged sound, and critically reflect on its disciplinary relevance.

### **Course requirements**

This course is intended for graduate students and for third year undergraduates who have already taken at least two 300 level classes in anthropology. Students wishing to take this class who do not fulfill these prerequisites should contact the instructor.

### **Course materials**

All texts for this course will be available on MyCourses. Please note this syllabus may be subject to change, depending on evolving interests.

### **Software**

The recording and editing protocols recommended for class will be discussed in class on January 22 and are freely available online. Students can use the recording device on their mobile phones for the assignments; those with microphones and other recording equipment are encouraged to use them. Optional equipment to purchase will also be discussed in the second week of class.

### **Course Evaluation**

#### **Participation – 10%**

Students are expected to post comments and questions regularly in the online discussion forum. Over the course of the semester all students must submit a minimum of 5 posts. These should be around 250 words. These are not summaries, but openings for discussion. All students should aim to review the online forum before class.

#### **Facilitation – 10%**

Each week one or two students will lead discussion on the assigned readings for that week. Facilitators are not responsible for providing summaries (all students are expected to have read the texts), but should point up key ideas and raise questions for collective discussion and should draw on comments from the online forum. The aim will be to build thematic threads between readings and across weeks.

#### **Recording assignments**

All the assignments for this class will explore a single field site. Students should identify a setting for their sonic ethnography that they will return to over the course of the semester. There are five projects for this class. Each assignment should be submitted in class as exported files on the due date, and should be accompanied by a short, written account of around 1-2 pages that reflects on the recording/editing experience and identifies elements that are particularly significant or problematic. The reflection paper submitted with the final composition should be 5-7 pages long

and reference a minimum of 4 class texts. All assignments will be discussed in more detail in class:

- #1 **Site recording** – choose a location in your neighborhood that you wish to explore. Spend time listening to the sounds you hear before recording. Think about the way sound situates and orients your perception, and gives shape to space, movement and time. Record some of the different sounds you hear. Select a **two-minute** segment which **reveals something about this site** to present in class. This is worth 15% of your grade and is due in class on January 29.
- #2 **Cut** – Return to your site and consider the different categories of sound you hear and how you categorize these sounds. What constitutes a communicative sound or sonic event (speech? song? car horns? a dog barking? bird calls? a door closing? etc.), what constitute the contextual or environmental sounds (or their absence). Record **two sonic phenomena** in your research site and create a **3-minute sequence** that brings these two elements together. Make the transition between these two sonic “shots” feel motivated and think about what is revealed through the cut. This is worth 15% of your grade and is due in class February 19.
- # 3 **A sense of place** – for this assignment you should produce a 3-minute edited portrait of your site that evokes a sense of place. You can either **a) produce a “static” portrait** that includes a range of different sounds, which can include multiple layered soundtracks, **OR b) produce a soundwalk** through or around your site, that provides an orientation to place through movement + temporal progression. This is worth 15% of your grade and is due in class March 12.
- #4 **Portrait of a person** – record someone in your field site. Think about the acoustic elements that define them: attend to their rhythms of speech, movement, breath, etc. Consider how pitch, timbre, silence inform our perception of them, and also the acoustic backdrop and recording “angles” you use and how this accentuates and “colours” your rendering of them. The portrait does not have to be logocentric (i.e. verbally driven), and you are encouraged to adopt an expansive approach that goes beyond language and normal documentary portrait convention (i.e. interview format, etc.). This should be around 3 minutes long. This is worth 15% of your grade and is due in class on April 2.
- # 5 **Final composition** – this should draw on the materials you have recorded over the semester, and can be an expanded reworking of materials from earlier pieces. 5 – 7 minutes. This is worth 20% of your grade and is due in class on April 16.

## Grading guidelines

Evaluation for this class will be based on the quality of your participation and the seriousness with which you undertake the assignments. The readings are required. If you don’t participate in the discussions and critiques of student work you will not receive an A. Your assignments will be assessed not on the basis of technical or conceptual perfection, but rather on your willingness to experiment and try things that may be outside your comfort zone. All assignments must be

submitted to receive an A grade for this course. Attendance is extremely important. Three missed classes will lower your grade by a letter; more than three absences are grounds for failure, unless you have made prior arrangements.

Participation	10%
Facilitation	10%
Four audio assignments #1-4 (each is worth 15%)	60%
Final composition + written assessment	20%

### **Late submission**

It is understood that life gets complicated and that there may be extenuating circumstances that necessitate absences from class, or where additional time is needed in order to submit work. Please communicate your concerns to me in a timely manner and we will work it out. Extensions will be only be given in advance.

### **Academic integrity**

The work you submit for this course must be your own; all sources must be appropriately acknowledged. Please review McGill's Academic Integrity Code: [www.mcgill.ca/integrity](http://www.mcgill.ca/integrity) for more information. The consequences of plagiarism are to be found under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures: [www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest](http://www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest).

*L' Université McGill attach une haute importance à l'honnêteté académique. Il incombe par conséquent à tous les étudiants de comprendre ce que l'on entend par tricherie, pagiat, et autres infractions académiques. Pour plus renseignements veuillez consulter le site: [www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest](http://www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest).*

### **Disability**

If you wish to request an accommodation due to a suspected or documented disability, please inform your instructor *and* contact McGill Office of Students with Disabilities office as soon as possible at 398-6009.

### **Language of submission**

As per university policy, written assignments may be submitted in French or English.

### **Extraordinary Circumstances**

In the event of extraordinary circumstances beyond the University's control, the content and/or evaluation scheme in this course is subject to change.

## **COURSE SCHEDULE**

- January 15    **Introduction: Listening**
- Steven Feld, "Doing Anthropology in Sound" (2004)
  - Salomé Vogel, "Listening" in *Listening to Noise and Silence: Towards a Philosophy of Sound Art*, Chapter 1 (2010).
  - David Toop, "Prelude: Distant Music (on the contemplation of listening)" in *Sinister Resonance: The Mediumship of the listener* (2010)

In-class listening: Excerpts from *Sound Safari* (2007) and *Voices of the Rainforest* (1991) recorded by Steven Feld.

January 22

**Sensory ethnography + audio technics**

**Recording and editing workshop with Ariane Lorrain**

- Selmin Kara + Alanna Thain — “Sonic Ethnographies and New Materialisms in Documentary.”
- David MacDougall, “Introduction: Meaning and Being” in *The Corporeal Image: Film, ethnography, and the senses* (2006)
- Erika Balsom, “The reality-based community.” *E-flux Journal* #83

Watch before class: *Leviathan* (2012) Lucien Taylor + Verena Paravel  
(This is available online through McGill Library).

January 29

**Field recording**

- Hildegard Westerkamp, “Soundwalking” (1974/2001)
- Allie Martin, “Hearing Change in the Chocolate city: Soundwalking as Black Feminist Method” (2019)
- Steven Feld, “Acoustemology,” *Keywords in sound*, ed. David Novak and Matt Sakakeeny (2015)
- Steven Feld, Interview in *In the Field: the art of field recording*, ed. Lane and Carlyle (2013)
- Stephanie Spray, “Aesthetic experience and applied acoustemology: Blue Sky, White River liner notes,” *Anthropology News* (2011)

Listening in class: Stephanie Spray

Film screening in class: 7 Queens (2008) Verena Paravel, 23 mins.

*Assignment #1 due*

February 5

**Nature immersive: *The Two Sights* + visiting artist Joshua Bonnetta**

- Stefan Helmreich, “An Anthropologist Underwater: Immersive landscapes, submarine cyborgs and transductive ethnography” (2007)
- David Michael, “Toward a Dark Nature Recording,” *Organized Sound* (2011)
- Penny Howard, “Feeling the Ground: Vibration, Listening, Sounding at Sea,” *On Listening*, ed. Carlyle and Lane (2013)
- Erika Balsom, “Double Vision: Joshua Bonnetta’s *The Two Sights*” (2020)

Watch before class: *The Two Sights* (2020)

(A link will be shared before class).

February 12

**Soundscapes**

- Murray Schafer, “The Music of the Environment” (1973)
- Mitchell Akiyama, “Transparent listening: Soundscape composition’s objects of study,” *RACAR: revue d’art Canadienne* (2010)

- Budhaditya Chattopadhyay, "Sonic menageries: Composing the sound of place," *Organized Sound* (2012)
- John Levack Drever, "Soundscape composition: The convergence of ethnography and acousmatic music," *Organized Sound* (2002)

Optional recommended reading:

- Alice Oswald, *Dart* (2002)

February 19 **Voice**

- Pooja Rangan, "Audibilities: Voice and Listening in the Penumbra of Documentary" (2017)
- Genevieve Yue et al, "Wild Sound and Women's Voices," *Discourse* (2017)
- Mladen Dolar, "The linguistics of the voice," *The Sound Studies Reader* (2012/2006)
- Roland Barthes, "The Grain of Voice," *The Sound Studies Reader* (2012/2006)

Watch before class: *In my language* (2007) Mel Baggs, 7 mins.

Film screening in class: *So Dear, So Lovely* (2018) Diana Allan

*Assignment #2 due*

February 26 **"Expedition Content": Visiting artists Ernst Karel and Veronika Kusumaryati**

Please note that "Expedition Content" this film will be screened directly before class in the Anthropology Speaker Series. **It is required that all students attend this event, which will be over zoom.**

"Ear Room Interview" (2013) Ernst Karel + Mark Peter Wright  
<https://earroom.wordpress.com/2013/02/14/ernst-karel/>

March 5 ***Spring break***

March 12 **Sound Publics: Citizen Sound Archive + Visiting practitioner Dr. Tom Western**

- Tom Western, "Listening with Displacement: Sound, Citizenship, and Disruptive Representations of Migration," *Migration and Society* (2020)
- Brandon LaBelle, "Unlikely Publics: On the Edge of Appearance."

*Assignment # 3 due*

March 19 **Rethinking 'soundscape'**

- Mitchell Akiyama, "Unsettling the World Soundscape Project: Soundscapes of Canada and the Politics of Self-Recognition" (2015)
- Stefan Helmreich, "Listening against soundscapes," *Anthropology News* (2010)

– Tim Ingold, “Against soundscape,” *Autumn Leaves: Sound and the environment in artistic practice* (2007)

March 26     **Music + Visiting artist Julian Flavin**  
**In-class screening of *In The Sweet Arms* (2021) Flavin.**

– Terre Thaemlitz, “Please tell my landlord not to expect future payments because Attali’s theory of surplus-value-generating -information economics only works if my home studio’s rent and other use-values are zero.”

April 2        **Sounding the Archive**

- Diana Allan “What Bodies Remember: Sensory Experience as Historical Counterpoint in the Nakba Archive” (2018)
- Tina Campt, “Quiet Soundings: The Grammar of Black Futurity,” in *Listening to Images* (2017)
- Anne Stoler, “Colonial archives and the arts of governance” *Archival Science* (2002)

Film screening in class: Excerpt from *Partition* (work in progress).

*Assignment #4 due*

April 9        **Sonic Naturalism**

- Jonathan Sterne, “Hello!” *The Audible Past* (2003)
- Annie Goh, “Sounding situated Knowledges: Echo in archeoacoustics,” *Parallax* (2017)
- Marie Thompson, “Whiteness and the ontological turn in sound studies,” *Parallax* (2017)
- Christopher Cox, “Sonic realism and auditory culture: A reply to Marie Thompson and Annie Goh,” *Parallax* (2017).

Listening in class: Selection from *Airport Symphony* (2007) and Chino Amobi’s *Airport Music for Black Folk*.

April 16      **Soundings + Endings**

Listening to final projects

*Assignment #5 due.*