Article:

The City Under COVID-19: Podcasting as digital methodology

Abstract

This critical commentary reflects on a rapidly mobilised international podcast project, in which 25 urban scholars from around the world provided audio recordings about their cities during COVID-19. New digital tools are increasing the speeds, formats and breadth of the research and communication mediums available to researchers. Voice recorders on mobile phones and digital audio editing on laptops allows researchers to collaborate in new ways, and this podcast project pushed at the boundaries of what a research method and community might be. Many of those who provided short audio 'reports from the field' recorded on their mobile phones were struggling to make sense of their experience in the COVID City. The substantive sections of this commentary discuss the digital methodology opportunities that podcasting affords geographical scholarship. In this case the methodology includes the curated production of the podcast and critical reflection on the podcast process through collaborative writing. Then putting this methodology into action some limited reflections on COVID cities under lockdown and social distancing initiatives around the world are provided to demonstrate the utility and limitations of this method.

Introduction

This critical commentary reflects on a rapidly mobilised international podcast project, in which 25 urban scholarsi from around the world provided audio recordings made about cities in Australia, Canada, the US and UK, India, Iran, Germany, Singapore and New Zealand. The contributions included a mix of personal and academically-grounded readings and personal in-the-moment reflections on how their respective cities were being impacted as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. City Road collected and edited the audio files - what we term podbites - into a structured 30 minute podcast. The project was completed in 12 days and had three key outputs: i) an edited podcast broadcast on ApplePodcast and on community radio in Australia; ii) an associated podcast/radio write up of the project on the City Road Podcast website; and iii) a public-facing online media article published by The Conversation with the podcast embeddedi.

The podcasting methodology discussed in this commentary focuses on two key issues: 1) the planning and production of the podcast; and, 2) the iterative critical reflections on the podcast process and content that actually underpin this commentary. Dallas has used collective biography and digital storytelling methodologies since 2014, and Dallas and Miles have been thinking through the methodological utility of podcasting since starting City Road in 2017 (Rogers and Herbert 2019). Building on this earlier methodological work, an initial draft of this critical commentary was developed by Dallas and Miles before it was circulated to those who contributed audio recordings to the podcast project, inviting them to make comments or edits on the initial draft which was hosted on GoogleDocs. This enabled an interactive collaboration whereby various colleagues' contributions helped augment, refine and strengthen the overall structure, style and narrative of this commentary.

Moreover, various comments posed by the podcast contributors became an integral part of this critical commentary in that they are included as either direct quotes and/or part of the overall narrative within the paper. Ultimately, this commentary reflects a multitude of voices - many in tune with one another but also some in tension—not only in terms of direct quotes (cited as per comms below) but also authorship. This somewhat unorthodox collaborative academic approach to writing is emblematic of the methodological potential of podcasting and reflective of our exploratory foray into listening to and hearing about the unfolding impacts of COVID-19 on cities (hereafter COVID-19 cities) around the world. Rather than presenting this co-authored commentary with a single voice,

these quotes bring to light the critical debates that took place and the tensions that exist between the authors, and while somewhat unorthodox, this is more representative of this final output of the COVID City podcast project.

The City Road project

City Road Podcast is an interview-driven podcast which is also broadcast on the 2SER community radio station in Sydney, Australia. Community broadcasting is Australia's largest independent media sector, a key pillar in the Australian media landscape, and recognised internationally as one of the most successful examples of grassroots media. 6 million Australians tune in to over 450 not-for-profit, community-owned and operated radio services operating across the country each week. These stations provide programming that caters to the needs of their diverse local communities, and many have strong traditions in social justice broadcasting. City Road podcast fits within Australia's strong tradition of community radio. The show is produced by Dallas, an academic who has been a community radio maker for 5 years, and Miles, a Walkley Award-winning journalist and PhD candidate researching podcasting and micro-publics. In addition to a community radio audience, City Road's podcast audience largely comprises built environment professionals and urban academics in Australia (about 75%) and around the world (about 25%).

Academic podcasting has become a new means for academics to communicate theory, methods and findings beyond the academic audiences of scholarly conferences, journals and books (Llinares et al. 2018). For Paul Maginn, the podcast signifies a means of opening up the so-called 'ivory tower' of academia and the paywalled protection of academic knowledge by allowing academics to broadcast directly to wider publics. The release of the podcast via The Conversation, albeit an academic clearing house, facilitates access to the wider world that paywalled journal articles and prohibitively expensive academic books can never do. Academic podcasting, as a form of scholarly output, also speaks to the policy and public 'impact agenda' that confounds contemporary academic research and praxis within academic evaluation systems such as ERA in Australia and REF in the UK. However, the core objective of the City Road project was to better understand the experience of City Road listeners in COVID-19 cities.

The COVID-19 city is a global phenomenon. City borders, urban infrastructure and people's homes quickly became the frontline in managing COVID-19 around the world (Connolly, Keil & Ali 2020). The epicentre of the outbreak was Wuhan, a megacity of 11 million people located in the middle of China (Ren 2020). Wuhan was placed in complete lockdown and other cities around the world soon followed. We know viruses do not respect roadblocks, train cancellations, airport closures or national borders (Connolly, Keil & Ali 2020), and scientists initially questioned the efficacy of quarantining an entire city by cutting Wuhan off from the rest of China and the world (Ren 2020). Nonetheless, in social terms, quarantining whole or parts of cities (Ren 2020), and self-isolation and physical-distancing more broadly (Ricco 2020), gained various degrees of popular support in many countries, with varied and uneven impacts on communities within cities. Jean Luc Nancy (2020) argued that the emergent COVID-19 city heightened the capacity for solidarity (Quarshie 2020) and care (The Care Collective 2020) during the health crisis, but concerns were also quickly expressed about the virus' impact on the global economy, and the flow-on impacts on local solidarity and care networks (Davies 2020). That hardships and risks in COVID-19 cities were likely to be experienced disproportionally by those in the Global North and South (Farha 2020) was also highlighted, noting that the global north/south bifurcation can also obfuscate the inequalities that exist within cities.

There are rich histories on hygiene, disease, quarantine, social control and the urban environment from various cities around the world (McNeill 1976). In these narratives about the past there are stories that sound—at least on the surface—eerily like the present (Badiou 2020; Thomas 2020). City Road wanted to explore contemporary stories about the most recent pandemic through podcast, so Dallas and Miles asked academic colleagues from all over the world to open up the voice recorder on their phones and record a two-minute report from the field about their city that City Road could broadcast on our podcast/radio show. The reports from the field were published under creative commons by the media organisation The Conversation, and we refer to excerpts from these public domain sources in this commentary (you can listen to the reports from the field in full from: https://theconversation.com/what-does-the-coronavirus-pandemic-sound-like-the-voices-of-people-struggling-secluding-and-surviving-around-the-world-13553). Many of those who responded to the call to submit reports from the field were struggling to make sense of their experience in COVID-19 cities. The resulting stories reflected on more-than-human cities, social solidarity, quarantine, social control and the urban environment in cities around the world, but they also discuss the themes of inequality, positionality, privilege and voice below.

Potentials of academic podcasting

New digital tools are increasing the speeds, formats and breadth of the communication mediums that are available to researchers. This has allowed researchers to collaborate in new ways, and this podcast project pushed at the boundaries of what research method and a research community might be. The sonic geographies literature shows social, cultural and environmental sounds can be captured, shared, and processed by podcast producers in close to real-time (Gallagher and Prior 2014). Thus, at City Road, we were interested in the ways that audio editing might be conceptualised as having analytical qualities that complement the more conventional analysis and textual writing up of research material, such as personal stories recorded on a phone. A key claim here is that research outputs themselves can be sonic and textual, and that the intersection of sonic and textual outputs can open up different questions and discussions about positionality, power, place and people (Gallagher and Prior 2014; Rogers and Herbert 2019); themes we collectively explore below.

More broadly, this podcast project fits within a genre of digital media/academic projects that aim to use sound (and image) to critically reflect on the nature of power and politics within cities. The Cities and Memory project and the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project (also see the Allegra Lab's (2020) Corona Diaries) offer different approaches to bringing a geographical sensibility together with sound. The Cities and Memory project is "a global, collaborative sound… mapping project [that] covers more than 95 countries… [where] anyone around the world" can send them "a sound recording... tell us a little about how things are wherever you live" (Cities and Memory 2020: n.p.). They place these stories on a GIS web-based map and invite others to "listen to the sounds and read the stories" on the map. Similarly, "The Anti-Eviction Mapping Project is a data-visualization, data analysis, and digital storytelling collective documenting the dispossession and resistance upon gentrifying landscapes [in] San Francisco Bay Area, Los Angeles, and New York City" (Anti-Eviction Mapping Project 2020:n.p.), who partner with a range of organisations to analyse the audio material they collect and map, such as oral histories (Graziani and Mary 2020). In this case the audio editing suite is a key tool in the analytical process. We are interested in the idea of audio editing as a form of urban critique at City Road too, and so we asked people to send us mobile phone recorded audio clips about their cities.

The method of producing the podcast

Call for audio stories

When Dallas and Miles were planning their monthly episode of City Road in March 2020 they were in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic in Sydney. They discussed the role of academic 'experts' in the debate about COVID-19 and cities to date, such as academic experts' radio commentary on COVID-19, and how academics might separate their expert role from their personal experience of being locked down in their cities and homes. We suspected that this was a question other academics might have been struggling with at the time. City Road has always found the work of Tanja Dreher (2010) to be instructive at moments like these (Harvey 2020). Tanja's work reminds us that sometimes it is more important to listen to the stories of those in our cities than it is to speak at people about their cities. Tanja submitted an audio piece to the project in which she talks about the importance of listening at this key moment.

"… listening for solidarity… is not an end in itself, the aim is to listen for calls and cues to action, this might be direct or indirect, also to privilege and amplify the knowledge of those most impacted and most committed to social solidarity, and to keep listening, listening as a continuation, keep listening to better understand how to work for more just futures beyond the contemporary crisis." Tanja Dreher, Wollongong, Australia. Play audio: https://soundcloud.com/user-283789701/47-listening-to-the-city-in-a-global-pandemic-1#t=9:20

With this in mind, we asked academics from around the world to send us a report from the field about their city. We wanted to know more about academics' experiences as they confronted the many social, political, economic and material implications of COVID-19 in their city (Butler 2020). So we put out the following call on Twitter to ask our academic audience if they would work with City Road on this project.

<INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE>

As can be seen from Figure 1, we did not explicitly ask for academic reports from the field on the topic of COVID-19 and cities, but many contributors took COVID-19 as the context nonetheless. In fact, City Road gave prospective contributors very little instruction at all, choosing instead to allow contributors the freedom to experiment with the broad and purposely vague questions. Some participants asked for more clarity about the audio recording process and questions, and City Road offered advice on a case-by-case basis. For one contributor, the wording of a follow-up Tweet by Dallas (Figure 2) made the opportunity to submit an audio clip...

"a much less intimidating prospect—as it was immediate, 'quick, dirty and direct', a snapshot of the city… I interpreted it as you seeking (and us easily being able to assert) our expertise about our (everyday) experience of our place—to which we could lay unique claim" (Pill; per comms).

<INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE>

The different types of audio submissions

A total of 25 academics[i] submitted reports from the field recorded on their phones. City Road received well over an hour of audio content and Dallas and Miles decided to edit and produce the audio material more than they had initially planned. The audio reports from the field also operate as important stand-alone vignettes about COVID-19 cities, so City Road provided them in full on the City Road website.1

As noted above, City Road gave the contributors a lot of freedom when it came to what their audio piece might sound like and a wide range of audio styles were submitted. For example, Natalie says, "you almost discouraged sense-making in your instructions-—I'm thinking of how you told me not to 'overthink' it" (Osborne; per comms). Some had no prior experience of podcasting but summoned the courage to "go for it" and to grab the opportunity of "making sense" of and "reporting" about their city (Alam; per comms). Some of the contributions were raw and noisy, others were academic and narrated, and others were free-flowing but analytical. In our discussions about this writing project, Carolyn talked about a difference between speaking as a "civilian" rather than "academic";

"I was just focusing on what I was seeing and not seeing out my window. It mapped well on Eugene's framework [which we discuss below], but in that case, I [became], so to speak, a data point being fit into a post-facto theoretical framework" (Whitzman; per comms)

One of the more, if not the most, academically reflexive contributions to the podcast was submitted by Eugene McCann. Other contributions ranged from more general free-flowing, off-the-cuff observations to deeply personal reflections such Roger Keil's. Keil's contribution was recorded on the front step of a friend's house whilst in lockdown and implicitly encodes his academic work on infectious diseases:

"I approached it in a naïve way, almost unthinking of the context, the medium, the potential audience. I did it as an individual who stepped outside literally for the first time, in the middle of a two-week period of quarantine, to speak into a phone. Despite the fact that I had spent more than 15 years since SARS in Toronto in 2003 studying infectious diseases in cities, very little in my contribution was premeditated." (Keil; per comms)

Beth Watts talked about some of the contributions being "personal and immediate" (Watts; per comms). Madeleine Pill talked about the contributions operating as metaphorical sonic time capsules:

"What I find interesting is that it provides a snapshot of a moment in time—and enables you as a researcher to therefore travel back in time to reflect on your feelings and understanding of that time, and how these have subsequently changed. Capturing the moment enables you to revisit it as a resource for reflection; it also points to productive possibilities for longitudinal research—of how your own experiences and understanding of these changes." (Pill; per comms).

Listening to others' contributions can also lead to self-reflection, perhaps even anxiety:

"On listening to the edited version, [I] was struck by the contrast between the 'academic' and 'personal' interpretations of the brief…. should I have been 'more academic'?" (Watts; per comms)

We had two very interesting contributions whereby Tooran and Deepti talked about the cities and people in the Global South they care about from afar;

"… people like Kurt and Tanja who talked about people outside our academic bubbles, and how this huge pandemic may impact their lives… [and] academics who talked about far away lands, Iran and India, to share the stories of people and places that otherwise would have been missed in this collection". (Alizadeh; per comms)

In fact, all of the reports from the field blended 'academic' and 'personal' interpretations of the COVID city, but these were expressed in different registers of oration.

"I accepted Dallas's invitation not because I had done years of work on infectious disease or because I was a sonic geographer but because I was a captive in isolation in my own hometown, but not at home. Speaking into my phone helped me find the ground I needed to stand on, the terrain I needed to re-familiarize myself with." (Keil; per comms)

While everyone approached the report from the field audio recording task in a different way, there was a shared view amongst those involved in writing this commentary that the podcast project was underwritten by our various positions of privilege and that the structural capacities of these positions enabled us to have our voices heard.

Curation of the audio contributions

Paul Maginn, who has written on qualitative methods (Maginn et al, 2008a; 2008b), posed a pertinent question after having reviewed the first draft of the commentary:

"Is it the case that the podcast—the whole process from commissioning to publication—is in fact a methodological and empirical tool of 21st century academic praxis?" (Maginn; per comms).

Dallas and Miles were keen to explore the methodological and collaborative possibilities of this new form of academic praxis through the podcast project. As the producers at City Road, Dallas and Miles were pivotal to the practical organisation of the podcast project and the conceptual organisation and presentation of the final podcast product. Dallas and Miles initially positioned this podcast project as a 'collaboration', but through our discussions about this writing project we felt that it was not a 'collaboration' in the traditional sense of the term. Beth Watts captured this point when she said;

"A particular kind of collaboration—you guys were the lynchpin, we haven't had any dialogue (as far as I'm aware) between the individual contributors. You have played an important curatorial role— worth recognising the specific kind of collaboration? I think to involve so many people so quickly it HAD to be like this, and actually at the time, a more onerous collaborative process might have put me off given the other pressures." (Watts; per comms)

Dallas and Miles are interested in the sonic geography work of people like Gallagher and Prior (2014: 268), which shows "that audio recording produces distinctive forms of data and modes of engaging with spaces, places and environments which can function in different (and complementary) ways to more commonly used media such as written text, numbers and images". There is an emerging body of scholarship on using radio and podcasting as a research method in media studies (e.g., Tomalin and Crandall Hollick 2002; Rayner, 2016), and in Dallas and Miles' recent work they have argued that podcasting is being used in academia as an "engaged research methodology, as a research dissemination medium, as a pedagogical teaching tool, or as an assemblage of these" (Rogers and Herbert 2019: 4).

The City Road 'brand', as an assemblage of teaching, research and dissemination, is important to how Dallas and Miles organised and edited the reports from the field into the final podcast product. After Dallas heard Eugene McCann's report from the field Dallas asked Miles, who audio edited the podcast, if they should use the four "dialectical assemblages" outlined by Eugene in his piece to organise the rest of the contributions: namely: i) invisibility and visibility; ii) privilege and privation; iii) selfishness and solidarity; and iv) absence and presence. Interestingly, Eugene said, "I was 'primed' in what I said in the recording by the teaching I'd been doing", and his four ideas went on to frame the podcast:

"One of my favourite urban books is Marshall Berman's dialectical investigation of urbanism, called All that is solid melts into air. A key recurring device in the book is Berman's use of the phrase 'and yet' to complicate our understanding of what we think we know about cities. There is never just one thing going on and we shouldn't assume that what we see is all that's going on—there is one thing going on in front of us, 'and yet', there is much more we can't see; and none of it is permanent. I've been thinking about cities as dialectical assemblage this week as Vancouver has shut down…"
Eugene McCann, Vancouver, Canada. Play audio:

https://soundcloud.com/user-283789701/47-listening-to-the-city-in-a-global-pandemic-1#t=1:43

The Preface to the 1988 Penguin edition of Berman's (1982/1988) classic book reads:

"[O]ne of my book's central themes … [is] the importance of communication and dialogue … In a world where meanings melt into air, [communication and dialogue]… are among the few solid sources of meaning we can count on… We need to make the most of these possibilities; they should shape the way we organize our cities and our lives." (p.8-9)

Berman's (1982/1988) dialectical thinking on cities was characterised by an attention to the complexities, ironies, and potentialities of modernity, broadly defined. He was suspicious of narrow orthodox thinking and lamented what he saw as the loss of nineteenth-century thinkers' willingness to be "simultaneously enthusiasts and enemies of modern life, wrestling inexhaustibly with its ambiguities and contradictions" and the replacement of that sensibility, in the twentieth century, with a lurch "far more toward rigid polarities and flat totalizations". He regretted "[o]pen visions of modern life hav[ing] been supplanted by closed ones, Both/And by Either/Or" (p.24). His attempt to retrieve the both/and approach leads him to repeatedly use 'and yet' as a rhetorical device to undermine points he has just made and propel his narrative on to as-yet-unexplored interpretations.

Figure 2 below provides an illustration of how Miles used Eugene's four dialectical assemblages, as drawn from Berman, as a means of thematically organising the audio edit and the submitted audio material in the podcast. On seeing this visualisation of the audio editing process, Eugene reflected:

"I was also thinking about that screenshot and how it shows that editing sound is a spatial(ized) activity, whereas we maybe tend not to think about audio as spatial. So, does that software's spatialization of the audio across a grid have an impact on the way storytelling happens?" (McCann; per coms)

<INSERT FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE>

Arguably, a geographical sensibility is at work here at a number of levels. First, Berman's ideas and theoretical insights were used by Eugene to organise the insights in his audio contribution to the project, and second, that Dallas and Miles further used Eugene's Berman-inspired framework to organise the audio editing sessions and the presentation of all the audio contributions. But not everyone was convinced of this:

"Arguably, this is a theoretical sensibility, not necessarily a geographic sensibility. I would argue that you, Dallas, sought to find a framework to make sense of what you were hearing from different data points (the fact that they were from different cities mattered less than they were from different genders, ethnicities, and in rare cases such as students or sessionals, economic classes). Eugene contributed that framework, just as a great quote from an interviewee sometimes frames an article!" (Whitzman; per comms)

Madeleine Pill, a City Road listener, further complicates the claim this could be solely understood as a geographic, analytical sensibility, suggesting that there were 'branding' issue at play too:

"Perhaps some recognition that you selected the contribution of a senior academic to provide the analytical frame for others' contributions—used in an 'academic' rather than personal way for the structure… Did using this frame give you confidence about City Road pod's 'brand'?" (Pill; per comms)

The answer is, "yes".

Finally, the soundscapes of cities often take on a familiar, stereotypical aesthetic. Most people, if asked, "what does a city sound like?", will most likely make reference to the sound of cars, buses, trucks, trams, trains, and people in heavily trafficked and populated areas. These cityscape sounds are representations of what we think cities sound, look and feel like, and City Road were interested in probing if COVID-19 cities sounded different. As Susan Smith (1994) reminds us, soundscapes enable us to foreground the relevance of 'experience and emotion' in place. Miles allowed lots of 'space' between the audio excerpts in the final podcast to allow the listener to listen to the soundscapes in each city. We turn to the four key observations in the podcast next.

Four key observations about COVID-19 Cities

This final section uses the podcast editing framework from Eugene's report from the field to present a set of key observations about the podcast project.

Invisibility and visibility

"[I] think a lot about the sound of the city having changed so much, plus (and very much related) the lack of people in our cities. What is a city without traffic and noise and people? A very uncanny, weird, eerie place. It's like a civilisation abandoned—not because the people have been driven out by war, but because they're hiding from harm in their homes. Strange, strange, strange. Sort of cinematic in its weirdness." (Watts, per comms)

What was fascinating about some of the reports from the field was that the COVID-19 containment measures had altered the soundscape of the city, in some cases quite drastically, as the following comment about an absence of familiar sounds in the city suggests.

"It emphasises what we have taken for granted in cities, that they are peopled social places… but suddenly, what we find is that the cities that we know are suddenly different… But it is not just a physical emptiness… but a quietness". Eugene McCann, Vancouver, Canada. Play audio: https://soundcloud.com/user-283789701/47-listening-to-the-city-in-a-global-pandemic-1#t=3:11

Listening is important because there are significant structural and political questions at stake here. This reporter from the field is listening to and engaging with the quietness of the city, and this listening reveals an absence of people and other sounds that are otherwise familiar to this city. The audio clip captures this quietness in a way that text cannot (listen via the link above). Although as Carolyn Whitzman noted:

"To be fair, you asked for a quiet place! Certainly it was easier to find that quiet place in the COVID City, but… that will only reinforce the anti-density discourse that is emerging out of COVID—ignoring overcrowding in homes due to insane rents and focusing on re-establishing the privilege of the quarter acre block". (Whitzman; per comms)

It is true there is a politics to the quietness of cities, and that we asked contributors to find a quiet place to record. Nonetheless, Cameron Murray reported from Brisbane that his city was quieter;

"… it's rather pleasant with a little more peace and quiet in the middle of the city, but it's noticeable, the change it definitely feels a lot slower, a lot quieter, a lot less hustle and bustle." Cameron Murray, Brisbane, Australia. Play audio: https://soundcloud.com/user-283789701/47-listening-to-the-city-in-a-global-pandemic-1#t=4:55

The sound of the city we hear throughout the broader podcast is almost defined by an absence of the familiar; and this opens up the possibility for thinking about different futures. The sounds of birds that are present in many of the recordings are not necessarily new to the city. These birds have perhaps always been there. However, the social distancing and lock down measures have changed the urban soundscape in such a way that some reporters from the field could now hear these birds and spoke about hearing them; "you can hear birds, the noise travels further, because you don't have the hum and hisses of traffic on... the streets." Jason Byrne, Tasmania, Australia. Play audio: https://soundcloud.com/user-283789701/47-listening-to-the-city-in-a-global-pandemic-1#t=26:05

Thus, the familiar anthropocentric sounds of the city, which are produced by the presence of people and their technologies in cities—such as people in cars, buses and trains—are temporarily suspended and replaced by a new more-than-human set of urban sounds. These less familiar sounds are revealed through an absence in the soundscape of the city; a sonic window, perhaps, into a different urban future where non-human forms of life can strive in new ways in our cities (Houston 2019); "Well, yes", says Carolyn (Whitzman; per comms), "coyotes have made it into my downtown-adjacent neighbourhood". Our anthropocentric cities have been designed to allow people to occupy urban space in many forms, from owning private property in the form of housing, to separating children and adults through school and workplaces, to congregating in a shared park at lunchtime, to traveling on public transport to and from work. As COVID-19 changed the city socially and structurally it was registered in sound.

"In [my] soundscape, you can hear me typing, my toddler babbling, my 9 year old practicing the violin, and my neighbour's daughter outside on her deck singing really loudly. I recorded it in a moment of frustration: I was unable to concentrate." (Dombroski, per comm).

Privilege and privation

Dreher (2010) argues that scholars and the wider public need to attend to the politics of 'speaking' and 'listening', because an "attention to listening shifts the focus and responsibility for change from marginalised voices and on to the conventions, institutions and privileges which shape who and what can be heard" (2010: 100). The transformation of parts of the urban soundscape, from hustling and bustling, to noisy and chaotic, to quiet, subdued and eerie, also represents a displacement or reduction in the sounds of capitalism.

"The capitalist soundscape is exemplified by, for example, the thousands of people who travel into our cities each day for work, or who interact with one another—socially and professionally—to the beeping of EFTPOS machines and the ringing of tills as people purchase everything from a coffee to designer clothing." (Maginn; per comms)

Some scholars may see COVID-19 cities as a relegation of neoliberalism. Perhaps there will be some kind of structural transformation, but how deep and transformative that will be is an open question. In the short-term:

"… we've seen here pictures of people panic buying toilet paper and other staples in supermarkets, large numbers of people still gathering on beaches and in parks, not to mention incredibly distressing images of thousands of people queued up at [social security] branches trying to access desperately needed income support …we're struggling with the effects on our members with the increased stigmatization of communities of colour…who are being blamed for the transmission of the virus …" Kurt Iveson, Sydney, Australia. Play audio: https://soundcloud.com/user-283789701/47-listening-to-the-city-in-a-global-pandemic-1#t=13:30

Kate also pointed to a new short-term 'normal' in an increasingly sanitised city;

"…at the top of Swanson St trams are pulling in to be met by a team of cleaners with masks and gloves smelling of chemical sprays as they methodically wipe down every surface every door every handle before the tram moves on again with no passengers on board…" Kate Murray, Melbourne, Australia. Play audio: https://soundcloud.com/user-283789701/47-listening-to-the-city-in-a-global-pandemic-1#t=4:04

The retreat or reduction of the sounds of capitalism, however short-lived, amplified the sounds of homelessness, unemployment, inequality, disadvantage, and overcrowding in Global North and South cities:

"… the overpopulated slums who unfortunately are going to be the most affected by this virus. There are cases where the poor Indian workers in these informal settlements who initially migrated to the city for work are now basically piling back to their villages because of the strict COVID-19 measures…" Deepti Prasad, reporting on India from Sydney. Play audio: https://soundcloud.com/user-283789701/47-listening-to-the-city-in-a-global-pandemic-1#t=22:30

"… just imagine going through the health crisis in Iran. You live in a country that the economy is already broken, decade-long economic sanctions have put Iran's government in a position that no stimulation package can be offered…" Tooran Alizadeh, reporting on Iran from Sydney. Play audio: https://soundcloud.com/user-283789701/47-listening-to-the-city-in-a-global-pandemic-1#t=23:18

The sounds are "symbolic of social structures that send ripples of anguish and anxiety throughout the city within particular groups; the poor, Indigenous peoples, single parents, and especially women, refugees, asylum seekers, sex workers and more" (Maginn; per comms). Elle Davidson, an Aboriginal urban planning academic, talked about the effects of COVID-19 on her family living in regional Australia (listen here: https://soundcloud.com/user-283789701/47-listening-to-the-city-in-a-global-pandemic-1#t=14:42). Tanja said;

"… we can listen to the most impacted, where the First Nations people massively over represented in prisons, or asylum seekers in immigration detention, or people without a home, and also refusing the voices that would claim that quarantine in luxury hotels is just like prison. Listening as social solidarity also means listening out, listen out for the structural changes underway…" Tanja Dreher, Wollongong, Australia. Play audio: https://soundcloud.com/user-283789701/47-listening-to-the-city-in-a-global-pandemic-1#t=9:15

Thus, while this pandemic caused suffering for professionals, including academics, there were also classed, racial, gendered and other dynamics related to who can and cannot, for example, stay at home (Valentino-DeVries et al. 2020). The urban soundscape, as a fundamental aspect of society, pointed to some of these structural issues.

"I was… reflecting on my privileged position two storeys above the street… I was contrasting it with folks who are still crowded in shelters, long-term care, etc., whose health and safety is even more acutely compromised in the COVID City." (Whitzman; per comms)

In the podcast, Beth said,

"… I also saw four people begging on Princes St, I doubt earning very much money from that, at the moment, given the streets are so very empty and there were also either police or community support officers… speaking to some of them, and I wonder if there is a bit more of an assertive response at the moment given concerns about people being out and about…" Beth Watts, Edinburgh, UK. Play audio: https://soundcloud.com/user-283789701/47-listening-to-the-city-in-a-global-pandemic-1#t=20:15

And like all structural conditions, we made this podcast with multiple layers of sound from each city. Some of these sounds were brought to the fore while others were pushed to the background, some can be heard by many people, but others can only be heard by those attuned to them; attuned to 'hearing' their structural meanings. These soundscapes are dynamic and temporal, and will vary across time, space and population. Eugene put it like this, "Who is heard (literally and figuratively) in this city is classed, racialized, etc." (McCann per comms), while Carolyn said:

"This [podcast] is great, but again, is it not the sonic space of privilege—those who have the technological education and equipment that allow them to share their stories. Does COVID-19 not further invisibilise (or, more precisely, make more voiceless) those who are on the street / under the bridges / without a political voice?" (Whitzman; per comms)

Information about COVID-19 was highly mediated and people were heavily reliant on the media for information about the pandemic. People could not understand the pandemic through their own individual, direct sensory experience alone. Thus, it was a strange juxtaposition that voice was further removed from some marginalised people during the pandemic at the very moment they became more physically visible and exposed in cities.

Selfishness and solidarity

"Selfishness and solidarity can be seen in the contrast between people hoarding toilet paper, in buying it up in large amounts and stores for example, versus the various acts of mutual aid." Eugene McCann, Vancouver, Canada. Play audio: https://soundcloud.com/user-283789701/47-listening-to-the-city-in-a-global-pandemic-1#t=12:50

During COVID-19, many people were unable to move through or gather in cities in the ways they had in the past, and they were now gathering in different sonic domains in new ways, such as though digital audio and video platforms, such as Zoom, and using their voices and embodied sonic capacities to occupy the city in new ways. Around the world—perhaps more often in middle class neighbourhoods (Valentino-DeVries et al. 2020)—people opened their windows or sat on their balconies to make noise or to create music to acknowledge the essential health workers who were on the frontlines of the health crisis.

"Normal forms of communication or collective action are protests, 'sit ins', gatherings of various kinds. What's unique about sound is it can bring us together across space; it's our weapon against social distancing." (Watts, per comms)

We hear this in the podcast too;

the Lincoln Cathedral *"has been lit up with a blue light in the evening... meant to coincide with the nationwide movement to clap for the National Health Service workers who have been on the frontline of the coronavirus pandemic at eight pm and this was described as a very visual way to show them the city's thanks for the sacrifices they're making and saving lives during this crisis..."* Creighton Connolly, Lincoln, United Kingdom. Play audio: https://soundcloud.com/user-283789701/47-listening-to-the-city-in-a-global-pandemic-1#t=11:25

When research and other urban scholarship is represented in journals through text alone, this form of scholarship "does not account for the body, or the sounds of the body" (Harter, 2019: 126). Harter (2019: 126) argues, "[p]odcasting stretches the tendencies and capacities of academics toward multi-sensorial forms of inquiry" and this allows the sounds of the body to be more fully incorporated into the research process and outputs. Harter (2019) further argues that more conventional research outputs are often "limited in their ability to register the visceral experience of suffering and resilience" (p.127). Harter is referring to the participants of research in this quote, but we suggest it might equally apply to those involved in this podcast project and we encourage you to listen to the audio links provided herein. There were lots of references to the visceral experience of being in COVID-19 cities in the reports from the field, including this comment by Kate Murray:

"I can hear birds, prominently, usually the birds in this neighbourhood are drowned out by the footsteps and bicycle bells and cars, trucks, motorcycles, construction sites. But today it's like the shutting down of all this industry and business, the hustle and bustle is all swept away and it's revealed underlying layers of sound that we had forgotten in the city" Kate Murray, Melbourne, Australia. Play audio: https://soundcloud.com/user-283789701/47-listening-to-the-city-in-a-global-pandemic-1#t=5:33

You can hear people sharing positive messages across urban space in several reports from the field, and there was a strong sense in which the academics were talking to each other in their reports too:

"Keep listening to better understand how to work for more just futures beyond the contemporary crisis". Tanja Dreher, Wollongong, Australia. Play audio:

https://soundcloud.com/user-283789701/47-listening-to-the-city-in-a-global-pandemic-1#t=12:12

Another post-podcast reflection captured the sense of positivity and solidarity as such:

"If this lockdown continues for a few more days we, pedestrians, joggers, cyclists could perhaps reclaim our suburban streets from automobiles; many small selfless acts of care are already emerging around us either through crowdfunding on Facebook or students volunteering for delivery services to the doors of the old and frail. I sense that the COVID city is filled with care-full possibilities." (Alam; per comms)

Absence and presence

The immediacy and intimacy created through the collaborative podcast project, as people shared their experiences of the COVID City, as viewed from their verandah/porch, garden, second floor apartment, bike ride or car journey, seemed to bridge the tyranny of physical distance. This underscored the importance of podcasting as a process rather than a final product (Harter, 2019).

"But listening to the podcast did remind me of the pleasures as well as the scary aspects of silence. I think Beth's comments remind me that we need to pay heed to the absences and silences. We didn't really listen to what people who aren't us had to say. We didn't listen to the places where front-line workers were trying to carry out business as usual in dangerous conditions (taxis or supermarkets).

We need to reflect on our geographic and class privilege in being able to reflect on altered soundscapes." (Whitzman; per comms)

Over the course of the 30 minute podcast City Road used sound in an effort to paint a somewhat textured soundscape for the listener to illustrate the changes taking place in cities around the world. In developing and broadcasting this soundscape City Road sought to offer an alternative take on COVID-19 cities, such that it would provoke people's sonic and visual imaginations. The empty and eerie sounds of cities that were, at this moment in time, often absent of people and technology revealed just how seriously everyone was taking the invisible threat of this virus.

"The church bells down the street have taken on a new meaning, a kind of an eerie presence in a soundscape that has fundamentally changed". Matt Novacevski, Melbourne, Australia. Play audio: https://soundcloud.com/user-283789701/47-listening-to-the-city-in-a-global-pandemic-1#t=28:41

The COVID-19 city had its own urban soundscape that was directly linked to the global circulation of COVID-19 and any sound that managed to cut through the COVID-19 city was a reminder of the *danger:*

"The threat of the presence of the virus in the air between and around us emphasises the invisible circulations that flow through our biophysical existence. We are more aware of the invisible". Eugene McCann, Vancouver, Canada. Play audio: https://soundcloud.com/user-283789701/47-listening-to-the-city-in-a-global-pandemic-1#t=24:45

There was also an attentiveness to each other:

"… there's not very many of us out here in the streets but those of us who are we are so attentive to one… if someone sees me coming they give me a wide wide berth, they'll take an extra step in order to maintain as much distance as they can… every movement that I make has an opposite, has a reciprocal movement in someone else, we are paying so much attention to each other whilst also being very far apart." Natalie Osborne, Brisbane, Australia. Play audio: https://soundcloud.com/user-283789701/47-listening-to-the-city-in-a-global-pandemic-1#t=17:00

And there was an attentiveness to non-human others, and a listening out to the more-than-human city, that we noted above:

"… I'm not sure if you can hear it but there is a red kite whistling… this time of the year always brings new life and a lot of joy to people, as the grass starts to grow, and the trees grow leaves again, and the bees are out finding new hives and the birds are busily singing. It's eerily quiet… it doesn't really feel like a pandemic…" Em Dale, Oxford, UK. Play audio: https://soundcloud.com/user-283789701/47-listening-to-the-city-in-a-global-pandemic-1#t=6:09

And finally, for some, there was a sense of lockdown déjà vu:

"… I think because Christchurch has gone through this before with the earthquakes in 2010 and 2011, with a day-long lockdown with the terrorist attack last year, we know what we're doing. People here know that you just have to hunker down… and we're just going to wait it out." Kelly Dombroski, Christchurch, New Zealand. Play audio: https://soundcloud.com/user-283789701/47-listening-to-the-city-in-a-global-pandemic-1#t=27:56

Conclusion

This critical commentary, and the rapidly mobilised international podcast project that it reflects upon involved 25 academics from around the world. City Road asked academic colleagues to open

up the voice recorder on their phones to create a report from the field about their experience in their COVID city. The podcasting methodology presented here covers the curated production of the podcast and critical reflection on the podcast process through collaborative writing. Therefore, this commentary was a key part of this broader methodological endeavour. The methodology may seem unorthodox to some, but it represents a development of existing qualitative methodologies (e.g., digital storytelling, collective writing and collaborative biography) rather than a break from them.

Put simply, the podcast represents more than just an audio output. As an exploratory, curated academic project the podcast, along with academic podcasting in general, extends the methodological tools available to researchers to collect and analyse oral/aural data alongside text. It enhances the methodological tools available to us to understand cities within and beyond the context of a global pandemic. A key lesson from this project is that some of the most insightful reflections about podcasting and COVID-19 cities were produced through the collaborative writing process rather than through the production of the podcast. This might not surprise qualitative researchers because the production of the podcast was highly curated by Dallas and Miles and they made all the editing decisions in the audio editing suite. By comparison, the writing of this commentary was described by some of those involved as being more collaborative, analytical and revealing.

Therefore, each step in the methodology revealed different types of insights. In the tightly controlled production of the podcast stage of the project—as with much qualitative research—the sampling strategy underpinning podcast production was purposive. That is, the primary aim was to elicit the experiences of a particular group or community, and in this case City Road targeted urban studies scholars. Again, as with qualitative research in general, the podcast does not lay claim to generalisability. Rather, it provided explorative and situational insights at a specific moment in time from each contributor. It was fortuitousness for City Road that Eugene McCann framed his contribution with four dialectical assemblages, inspired by Berman, but it was ultimately Dallas and Miles, rather than the broader collective represented in the podcast, that used this conceptual framework to illuminate and bring into sharper focus the different concerns and questions raised by the various contributors.

The discussions about the podcast project that form the substance of this collaborative writing piece were much more revealing than the podcast production process. These discussions quickly turned to positionality, privilege, power, people, place and voice.   Although the contributors to the podcast were broadly diverse in terms of gender, age, academic position and geographical location, with contributors from nine countries across the Global North and South, the views and experiences reflected in the podcast were largely, although not exclusively, coming from various positions of privilege. While every participant was affected personally and professionally by the COVID-19 pandemic, and these stories are important, there were big silences too. Various minority groups' voices and experiences were absent from the podcast; the sacked service-sector workers sleeping rough on the streets of London or Rohingya refugees in a Bangladesh camp. We only hear a glimpse of these types of stories in the podcast, when we hear about informal settlements in India, or the effects of COVID-19 in Iran, or the plight of Aboriginal families in regional Australia.

Who and what was, and was not, heard thus became central questions in our post-podcast discussions. So much of what we learnt about COVID-19 in cities was mediated by news, current affairs, and social media (and by policies and laws). The financial and other logics underwriting these media routinely privilege powerful voices and institutions, as marginalised voices struggle to be heard. It was hard to hear the full force of the virus' social, political, economic impacts of COVID-19

in cities. As a digital methodology, then, the question of who gets to speak through podcasting and who is listening deserves more attention.

Future research could target the tension we have noted here in this emerging digital methodology; i.e., the power and privilege that is afforded to academics to speak and the silences in our debates about cities. Indeed, this type of critical reflexivity opens up a longer process of engaging with urban soundscapes along political, social, economic and other lines, and beyond the moments of recording and listening. Being critically reflexive requires slowing down to listen and observe, to ponder and reflect, and to integrate and synthesise. It might also require us to put the microphone down. As a digital qualitative methodology, podcast production with accompanying critical reflection opens up a space for wider critical discussion and researcher reflection once a podcast is released into the world.

References

Allegra Lab (2020) The Corona diaries. Accessed on 01/04/2020. Available at: https://allegralaboratory.net/the-corona-diaries/

Badiou, A. (2020) On the epidemic situation. London: Verso. Accessed on 23/03/2020. Available at: https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4608-on-the-epidemic-situation

Berman, Marshall 1982/1988 [ed.] All that is solid melts into air: The experience of modernity. New York, Penguin Books.

Butler, J. (2020) Capitalism has its limits. London: Verso. Accessed on 30/03/2020. Available at: https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4603-capitalism-has-its-limits

Connolly, C., Keil, R., & Harris, A. (2020) Extended urbanisation and the spatialities of infectious disease: Demographic change, infrastructure and governance. Urban Studies (iFirst).

Cities and Memory Collective (2020) Cities and memory. Accessed on 01/04/2020. Available at: https://citiesandmemory.com/

Davies, W. (2020) The last global crisis didn't change the world. But this one could. London: The Guardian. Accessed on 24/03/2020. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/mar/24/coronavirus-crisis-change-world-financial-global-capitalism

Dreher, T. (2010) Speaking up or being heard? Community media interventions and the politics of listening. Media, culture & society, 32 (1), 85–110.

Farha, l. (2020) COVID-19 Guidance Note Protecting Residents of Informal Settlements. Accessed on 1/04/2020. Available at: http://www.unhousingrapp.org/user/pages/07.press-room/Guidance%20Note%20-%20Informal%20Settlements%20April%20FINAL[3].pdf

Gallagher, M. & Prior, J. (2014) Sonic geographies: exploring phonographic methods. Progress in human geography, 38 (2), 267–284.

Graziani, T. & Mary S. (2020) Data for Justice. ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies. 19 (1), 397-412.

Harter, L. (2019) Storytelling in Acoustic Spaces: Podcasting as Embodied and Engaged Scholarship, Health Communication. 34 (1), 125-129.

Harvey, D. (2020) Anti-capitalist politics in the time of COVID-19. Accessed on 22/03/2020. Available at: http://davidharvey.org/2020/03/anti-capitalist-politics-in-the-time-of-covid-19/

Houston, D. (2019) Planning in the shadow of extinction: Carnaby's Black cockatoos and urban development in Perth, Australia. Contemporary Social Science: Journal of the Academy of Social Sciences.

Llinares, D., Fox, N,. Berry, R. (2018) (Eds.) Podcasting: New Aural Cultures and Digital Media. London: Palgrave

McNeill, W. (1976) Plagues and Peoples. New York: Random House

Nancy, J-L. (2020) Communvirus. London: Verso. Accessed on 27/03/2020. Available at: https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4626-communovirus

Quarshie, A. (2020) Solidarity in time of crisis. London: Verso. Accessed on 26/03/2020. Available at: https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4619-solidarity-in-times-of-crisis

Rayner, M. (2016) The radio documentary and oral history: challenges and opportunities. Australian historical studies, 47 (1), 108–117.

Ren, X. (2020) The Quarantine of a Megacity: China's Struggle Over the Coronavirus Epidemic. International Journal of Urban and Regional Research. Accessed on 04/02/2020. Available at: https://www.ijurr.org/the-urban-now/the-quarantine-of-a-megacity/

Ricco, J (2020) The COVID-19 pandemic returns us to our impotentiality and hence to our capacity to resist. Unbecoming community. Accessed on 03/04/2020. Available at: https://unbecomingcommunity.wordpress.com/2020/04/03/the-covid-19-pandemic-returns-us-to-our-impotentiality-and-hence-our-capacity-to-resist/

Rogers, D. (2020) @DallasRogers101. Accessed on 26/03/2020. Available at: https://twitter.com/DallasRogers101/status/1242898652193910784

Rogers and Herbert (2019) Podcasts and Urban Studies: Notes from the Field; Sounds from the Studio. Urban Policy and Research (iFirst).

Smith, S. (1994). Soundscape. Area, 26(3), 232-240

The Anti-Eviction Mapping Project (2020) About: Anti-Eviction Mapping Project. Accessed on 10/04/2020. Available at: https://www.antievictionmap.com/about

Thomas, L. (2020) Hurricane Corona. Accessed on 16/04/2020. Available at: https://www.radicalhistoryreview.org/abusablepast/hurricane-corona/

Tomalin, E. & Crandall Hollick, J (2002) Making a radio documentary series about the river Ganges. Contemporary South Asia 11 (2), 211-226.

Valentino-DeVries, J., Lu, D., & Dance, G. (2020) Location Data Says It All: Staying at Home During Coronavirus Is a Luxury. Accessed on 16/04/2020. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/04/03/us/coronavirus-stay-home-rich-poor.html

[i] Weblinks:

ApplePodcast https://podcasts.apple.com/nz/podcast/47-listening-to-the-city-in-a-global-pandemic/id1231889275?i=1000470415835;

City Road Podcast website https://cityroadpod.org/2020/03/29/listening-to-the-city-in-a-global-pandemic/;

The Conversation https://theconversation.com/what-does-the-coronavirus-pandemic-sound-like-the-voices-of-people-struggling-secluding-and-surviving-around-the-world-135539