



'Feeling the range': Emotional geographies of sound in prisons



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ABSTRACT

Sound, as a modality of emotion, is central to the everyday constitution of space. For an increasing population in Canada, however, incarceration forms the basis of everyday life. This paper explores the connections between sound and emotion as they play out in the under-researched context of prisons. I use a participant's term, "feeling the range," to identify the atmospheric, haptic, and emotive potential of sound as a vital tool of spatial knowledge. These conceptualisations inform three findings that highlight the enabling and constraining complexities of aurality. First, sound and listening are epistemological practices that offer important tools for spatial orientation in otherwise restrictive environments; yet some materialities of sound, like reverberation, also cause great *disorientation*. Secondly, the extensive capacities of sound enable connection with other beings and contexts during imprisonment; at the same time, sonic practices also *disconnect*, particularly through sonic techniques that carve out individualised auditory spaces. Finally, sound plays a crucial role in the enactment of power through resistance, and is used to reclaim dignity in undignified settings. This paper demonstrates that soundworlds can be as inclusive as they are exclusive, as convivial as they are hostile, and as therapeutic as they are torturous.

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Guards call it "feeling the range". When you are physically present you can sense the mood of the range through the sounds of conversation or raised voices (or lack of). If you spend enough time with a group of people you can read subtle emotion in their tones. With only the video screen far removed from the range you have no warning clues of sound. Suddenly, the range breaks into violence.

(Participant).

Sound is one of the complex modalities of emotion and power that composes everyday life. For an increasing population, everyday life is experienced through incarceration. Despite the recent flourishing of scholarship on carceral geographies (Moran, 2015; Philo, 2012; Sibley and van Hoven, 2009), the notion of "the everyday" in prisons, and the complex role of sound in the emotional and embodied experiences of incarceration, remain under-recognized. This paper stems from a broader project about carceral soundscapes that seeks to examine the deeply personal, and also collective, encounters with sound in prison environments. Material properties of sound, including resonance, vibration, and fluidity, inspire auditory epistemologies or *acoustemologies* (Feld, 1996) that value sound and listening as important ways of

knowing and being known.

Sound scholars have indeed found new ways of conceptualising space and time in exploring the fluidity and multiplicity of sonic expression. However, it is also important to acknowledge that auditory experience is never entirely innocent (Sterne, 2003), nor is it apolitical (Attali, 1985). Such complexity is summarised by Gallagher (2016:7), who describes sonic affects as "ambivalent forces that can both enliven and alienate, soothe and intrude, repel bodies and attract them, regulate space and reconfigure it." In this paper, I draw out these sonic ambiguities to explore the emotional and affective negotiation of sound, and the sonic expression of emotion, in the production of carceral space. In doing so, I argue that sonic experiences and knowledges of imprisonment collide to produce a sonics of both suffering (Cusick, 2013) and survival in prisons.

I draw primarily from written and verbal first-hand accounts of prisons, using research materials collected between 2012 and 2015 to understand how the (in)tangible properties of sound shape emotional and embodied experiences of incarceration. These accounts include in-depth interviews conducted in person and by telephone with seventeen people who have (had) first-hand experience of prisons around Kingston, Ontario. Although participants included employees, volunteers, and former inmates, research barriers – such as the denial of conducting interviews inside prisons – meant that the stories I share here were primarily

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collected through “gatekeepers” (teachers, chaplains, support workers) who worked or volunteered inside prisons and whose positions required frequent interaction with incarcerated people. As a feminist geographer, my questions were guided by a commitment to opening up spaces in which marginalized experiences could be shared and respected. In an effort to protect participants’ anonymity and job security, and at the request of participants, I try to avoid reference to individual names, gender-identifying pronouns, or specific positions. Additional sources that help to contextualize my arguments about the complex and often contradictory experiences of sound in prisons include prison-related blog entries by incarcerated people, archival materials, and media interviews. All of these materials are based in Canada, or are written about experiences in Canadian prisons; in many cases, however, they share similarities with stories of incarceration in other parts of the world.

1. Feeling the range

In correctional facilities, the “range” typically refers to a common area into which individual cells open, occupied by inmates during the day while locked out of their cells. As the [John Howard Society of Ontario](#), (2013) explains, “[the range] is typically quite noisy. . . . Usually the guards are outside of the range, looking in.” The range is a dynamic social space of varying uses and is a key site through which conviviality and conflict play out. As a former prison employee articulated in this paper’s epigraph, inmates and correctional officers (COs) “feel the range” in numerous ways.

First, connections between sound and “feeling” invokes the affective potential of prisons and their sonic environments. The concept of atmosphere ([Anderson, 2009](#)) resonates with the blurring of tangible and intangible, as well as discursive and non-discursive, qualities of sound in the constitution of carceral space. For many, sonic experience has a spectral quality; as [David Toop](#) (2010) insists, sound is a type of haunting – it is ambiguous, fleeting, and ubiquitous. One participant, a former volunteer, reflected that “the prison had so many echoes. I hated being alone because the sounds made my mind wander. It made me think of how haunted the place must have been.” Hauntings are common in the imagination of prisons, particularly older institutions with layered histories of emotional conflict, and help contextualize the carceral soundscape. Participants’ awareness of sonic affect in prisons also includes attention to rhythm. When asked about “feeling the range,” one employee replied, “. . . Some of them refer to it as the pulse. What is the pulse of the institution doing? What are you hearing? What are you *not* hearing? In all different security levels, it’s important. If everything’s really quiet, and the men aren’t moving around a lot, I’m like, ‘what’s going on?’” Conceptualisations of soundscape as a temporal “pulse” further highlights the non-linguistic and non-discursive aspects of aurality ([Gallagher, 2016](#); [Kanngieser, 2012](#)).

Secondly, “feeling” is a word that reflects tactility and haptic knowledge (see [Johnston, 2012](#); [Pallassmaa, 2005](#)). Indeed, sound is a vibrational force with re-spatializing potential ([Gallagher, 2016](#)); I draw on haptic acoustemologies to show how sound touches incarcerated bodies, and how individuals use sound as a respatialising extension of the body. Finally, “feeling the range” connects to emotion through feelings, moods, and desires as they shape prison life. I weave these varying conceptualisations throughout to demonstrate the connections between sound, emotion, and affect as they play out in the context of prisons.

2. Carceral geographies

Dominique [Moran](#) (2015) uses the concept of ‘carceral

geographies’ to account for a growing interest, and indeed concern, about spatialities of incarceration (see also [Morin and Moran, 2015](#); [Philo, 2012](#); [van Hoven and Sibley, 2008](#)). Prisons are often experienced as contradictory extremes: order and chaos, solitude and overcrowding, silence and cacophony, exemplifying the complex nature of aurality. The mobilising capacity of sound and listening can transport a person to distant places, altering one’s emotional state and connecting disparate lifeworlds. At the same time, Suzanne [Cusick](#) (2013) reminds us that acoustic space holds potential for a ‘sonics of suffering,’ which intersects with [Ben Crewe’s](#) (2011; following [Sykes, 1958](#)) work on pain and the ‘tightness’ of power in carceral settings. Without denying the importance of visual space (see [van Hoven and Sibley, 2008](#)), I use sound and auditory space as another point of entry to develop a fuller account of the emotional and affective properties of carceral environments. In prisons, soundworlds can be as inclusive as they are exclusive, as convivial as they are hostile, and as therapeutic as they are torturous.

Recognising that inmates and staff are trained to engage with sound in ways that reproduce authoritative power, this research is indebted to [Foucault](#) (1977) work on discipline and surveillance, particularly through his theorization of panopticism ([Bentham, 2013 \[1791\]](#)) as omni-disciplinary power (see also [Rice, 2003](#), for an auditory extension of the panoptic principles). Carceral scholarship often involves reinterpretations of Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* (1977), challenging the impermeability of omni-disciplinary power and the production of “docile bodies” without agency. These reinterpretations inform my own questions about how constricted bodies use sound and auditory media to expand their conception of space, to resist authorities, and to explore “spaces that are unseen [/unheard] and not susceptible to regulation by the regime” ([Sibley and van Hoven, 2009: 199](#)). As I explain later, the architecture required to guide the panoptic gaze in prisons contributes to a carceral soundscape that often disrupts surveillance and creates spaces for resistance.

My findings resonate with [Dirsuweit’s](#) work on the spatial and material tactics women used to reclaim personal, domestic space in South African prisons; in the case of my research, sonic techniques are used to (temporarily) push back against authoritative boundaries and carve out meaningful, personal, and perhaps even dignified spaces as part of place-making initiatives ([Baer, 2005](#); [Valentine and Longstaff, 1998](#)). [Sibley and van Hoven](#) (2009) similarly note that there are moments (however fleeting) in which prisoners actively question and redefine the cultural spaces of prisons in material and imagined ways. This article builds from these writers to explore the ways in which sound and music similarly contribute to spatial modification or re-constitution, and to query the role of auditory knowledge in the emotional and embodied experiences of prisons.

3. Contextualising the carceral soundscape

“What does a typical day in prison sound like? There is no typical day in prison.” Despite the extreme routinisation of prisons and homogeneous media representations of prison life, participants insisted that it was difficult to describe a typical day. They informed me that variation stems from different security levels, gender-based institutions, cultural complexity, and even weather.¹ Most, however, like [Melissa Stewart’s](#) testimony in *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons* (1997: 2), explain that Canadian prisons are overwhelmingly noisy, a reality that is particularly challenging for newcomers: “The noise level was incredible, with clanging,

¹ Canadian prisons go under lockdown in foggy conditions.

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