

Sounding out survival: Deforestation and sound practices in the Ajusco Green Belt, Mexico

Abstract for general public (1 page, Pol/English)

Climate change and environmental breakdown are typically narrated visually, whether through charts documenting rises in sea level or temperature, or images of melting ice caps or burning forests. They are less commonly understood as aural phenomena. Yet sound is a vital terrain on which people experience environmental breakdown and respond to it. It is a medium which, this project argues, captures and responds to the conflicts driving the climate and environmental crisis.

In the midst of environmental breakdown, the world's forests are increasingly recognized as an indispensable natural resource for planetary survival. In this context, hundreds of land defenders – many indigenous – are being assassinated each year, at the same time that government and civil society efforts to “reforest” and “rewild” take place. What are explored here as ‘sound practices’ constitute a little-recognized, but crucial, aspect of such environmentally restorative activities. Sound constitutes a register of communication often celebrated for its ability to connect the human and post-human. In the Ajusco Green Belt listening and sounding are drawn upon as resources for ensuring the security of movements within and interventions into this terrain. In contexts of forests under threat, sound is also a signifier of danger and a means of spatial ordering. Visitors to and residents of this space hear national parks as a break from urban noise; they seek to distinguish the sounds of birds and insects; they appropriate indigenous rituals within this soundworld, and they learn new vocabularies to make sense of it. Equally, this experience may also be disrupted by the activities of illegal loggers, sometimes connected to drug cartels. Residents of nearby communities soon learn to distinguish between different groups by the sounds they make when felling trees. Strategies of listening are also marshalled by security forces, increasingly drawn upon to guard this fragile urban terrain. Finally, music is drawn upon to imagine and engage emotionally with the natural world, often marshalling the indigenous languages of Mexico in the process.

This project looks to understand how music and sound are employed by people as aids to negotiate unstable terrain. It explores the complex interaction between listening, creating sound, and the natural world. A premise of this research is that sound is a repository of useful information: it allows people to understand and move through many different surroundings. But sound is also affective. People become accustomed to certain soundworlds and learn to react reflexively to them; in circumstances of conflict, sound also encodes trauma. For both of these reasons, it is important to study sites of sonic encounter and change, where different groups come into contact with one another and form coalitions to support environmental outcomes.

Parque Nacional Cumbres del Ajusco, the national park south of Mexico City that forms the site of this proposed study, is one such site. While an area visited by tourists and wildlife enthusiasts, it is accessible through a highly insecure urban zone of Mexico City. Residents of Santo Tomas Ajusco and San Nicolas Totolapan, on its outskirts, become accustomed both to the sounds of urbanity and those of the forest. They also learn to discern sounds of resource exploitation, especially those which are a source of danger.

The objective of *Sounding Out Survival* is to uncover the ways that land defenders and reforesters develop repertoires of techniques of listening and sounding – what are referred to here as “sound practices” – to aid them as they negotiate uncertain terrain. Here the notion of “**sounding out**” is key, denoting a form of experimental and adaptive exploration with sound. *Sounding Out Survival* will use ethnography, broken down into **semi-structured interviews** (c.50) and multi-sited participant observation. This project will also be developed alongside the community, adapting methods from so-called Participatory Action Research (PAR). It will be structured to draw attention to the insecurities faced locally, and the creative means residents use to overcome and mitigate for it.