

Sonic Memories: Stories from My Listening History
By: Brooke Chambers

Writer's note: I use black-colored text and green text in order to visually represent my narration and the audio I've pieced together. I used green to distinguish the audio from interviews, audio clips, and sound archives, while I use black to illustrate my narration of this chapter.

Introduction

Me: Uhm, this is, uhm, I don't even know what day it is. It's a Saturday. That's all I know. It's the weekend!

Then I sings song lyrics from Noah and the Whale's "Mary":

Oh the cold wet wind blew over the heather
You wrote Charlie and Mary for forever
On the back of a rock
That you picked up on the way
And in that perfect moment
I nearly ruined it
By saying I love you
And nearly meaning it
But you know I would never waste those words
Oh when I last saw Mary
She lied and said it was her birthday. (Noah and the Whale)

Narration:

I play this for you in my 99 Toyota, the only place I have a working cassette player. I've been recording myself for a long time. I digitally record now, but before I got an iPhone I recorded myself with a tape recorder. Sometimes I taped audio journals or sonic notes for my friends, and occasionally I recorded myself performing a song I had just learned.

Me: I am thinking it's a sign...

Mother: Brooke go down stairs. We're trying to watch tv.

Narration:

I grew up knowing I had to be quiet, especially after my mom and dad returned home from work. My brothers followed these rules before me, and my sister after. We never

talked about it and if we questioned them my parents delivered the time-old answer, “because children are supposed to be seen, not heard.”

[click, click of my tape player] Drowned out by music or car ride conversations are clicking sounds coming from my malfunctioning cassette player, a beat that persists in the background. Like this ambient noise, memory can be unclear or distant but it becomes hard to forget once it is brought into focus. It wasn't until a phone call with my childhood best friend, Felecia, that I remembered the uncomfortable response to my parent's rules. She said, “Brooke, your family is obsessed with quietness.” Felecia was an exceptionally loud and talkative preteen, so I initially thought her stifled voice was a unique situation when she came over for sleepovers. I listened to her talk about the anxiety she felt in my house while trying to be as silent as possible, and it reminded me of times I also felt uncomfortable.

I adapted to my home environment, and after that, I no longer wondered what influenced my parents to raise us this way. But after I listened to my audio diaries I can't stop myself from thinking about questions I've always wanted to ask them. Why did you always insist we stay quiet? Why do you love listening to music, yet emphasize silence? Why? Why? Why?Do you hear that? *What is that? Do you hear that sound? Where's it coming from? It won't go away [in response to the clicking noise].* I can't put these questions out of my mind.

In her recent work, Alexandra Hidalgo discusses approaches researchers can take when they are faced with emotional findings in family archives. She says, “strategic contemplation and ‘feeling’ the objects, both alone and through dialogue with our family archivists, can help us disentangle our emotions enough to find threads of cohesiveness.” Scattered throughout my tapes are exchanges with my parents about sound. As I listen to these tapes, I remember being angry, but at the time I recorded them I had no idea why. These archived recordings complicate the way I remember growing up, as well as the relationship I have with my parents and their rules. Jonathan Alexander says that the way people think of archives and geologies can be limiting. Alexander recognizes that studying families illustrates history, but suggests they offer much more. In fact, he writes:

In the philosopher's hands, genealogies trace how thoughts are made thinkable. In my own way, though, I am trying to trace how I have become thinkable to myself. And if I literalize the concept of genealogy to think about a family member, someone part of my actual genealogy, I do so not to reveal a history but to historicize it. That is, I want to show its contingencies, its foibles, its simultaneous openings and foreclosings on other ways of understanding itself (n.p).

In this quote, Alexander talks about pushing the boundaries of how we think about family and making new meanings from it. Like Jonathan Alexander describes, when I first listened to these clips of myself at a younger age, I couldn't get past how immature and angry I felt. Although I feel uneasy about these childhood recordings, I use them in this piece to illustrate my previous understanding of my parent's rules about silence. My archive lacks the answers I seek because it only reveals my side of the story, but it also offers opportunity (Anderson). It gives me a chance to try to understand my family's relationship to sound. However, I can't tell this narrative without them. This sonic chapter aims to push back on my own childhood experiences by pairing them with stories from my mother and sister. In addition to conversations with my family, I draw on ideas from Brandon LaBelle to figure out how sound is defined within different spaces, and how we listen and interpret sound through cultural, historical, and embodied conditions (xvii).

In attempt to aurally reflect and reconstruct my life, I present this piece in multiple forms, focusing on audio so that you may hear what I hear and listen to what I listened for. In the same way cassettes and records have two sides, one containing the essence of the album, and the other illustrating the meaningful underbelly of the work, I also divide my chapter into a Side A and a Side B. Side A details my sister's and my experience growing up in a quiet home and having to be mindful about sound we produced. I conducted interviews with my sister and my mom to get their perspectives on the way my parents understand and control the sonic environment of our home. Side B illustrates my mother's side of the story. I was unable to directly ask my mother about this topic, so I used music as an entryway to discuss it. After a few questions it wasn't long until my mother revealed stories from her childhood, which happened to be very similar to my own.

This chapter first tells the story of how I grew up. I use my audio recordings as a starting place to examine sound policing in my home. More importantly, I draw from Anderson's work by including interviews with my sister and mom to illustrate multiple perspectives of my family's history and practice. I connect our stories to illustrate a relationship between culture, sound, and listening. Lastly, I tell this story to better understand my family's listening practices. Though this is just the beginning, it is my family's history and practices that guide my studies at graduate school. Without their help and their influence, I wouldn't be able to uncover the cultural importance of sound and the way it affects our lives.