

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

Side A

Clip of Nikki's interview:

Me: *What is that sound?*

Nikki: *The sound of water running through pipes.*

Me: *Yeah, but that's gonna show up in my recording. I knew that's water running, but where's the water running from? Oh! The washing machine. Oh my god!*

Narration:

I asked my little sister, Nikki, about her experience living at home. We laughed a lot, but it's clear that we both see eye-to-eye about my parents' noise intolerance.

Clip from interview with Nikki:

Nikki: *Nikki! You're making too much noise. Go back to your room.*

Brooke: *Ok.*

Nikki: *All I can hear is your footsteps!*

Brooke: *All I can hear is our footsteps.*

Brooke: *How many times can you leave your room, walk around, and get in the fridge, or shut doors; how many times can you do that before you get in trouble?*

Nikki: *Two. Around two. Sometimes I can slide with three.*

Brooke: *Sometimes.*

Nikki: *Sometimes.*

Nikki: *Well I use the headphones just to keep whatever I'm listening to quiet. That's mainly what I do, yeah.*

Brooke: *Do you use them a lot?*

Nikki: *Mhm. A lot. In this house you learn. You learn. You live and learn with knowing you're not supposed to be loud. Uhm, yeah. I use them a lot.*

Narration:

My sister's experience is identical to mine. Once our parents came home from work and were set up to watch their nightly programs, I would have to closely monitor my output of sound. My parent's house is old and the floors creak when you walk around, so if I made too many trips through the living room, I would get in trouble. My dad warned us about making too much noise, and my mom would tell us to try walking softly in order to avoid conflict. I had to listen carefully to my steps as I left my room. After some practice, I knew which floorboards create the most noise and tried to avoid them on my path past

the living room. As I investigate my upbringing, I don't feel resentful but rather want to revisit some of the times I felt censored and silenced.

Cheryl Glenn and Krista Ratcliffe's book, *Silence and Listening as Rhetorical Arts*, challenge the marginalized status of silence and listening. They write, "these arts have been conceptualized and employed in different times and places by many different people—some with power, some without—for purposes as diverse as showing reverence, gathering knowledge, planning action, buying time, and attempting to survive" (2). Instead of positing silence as giving into systems of power, Glenn and Ratcliffe consider ways silence can be used to move progress or survive. Both are useful and express different ways of being. My quiet home was a place I learned to adapt in order to live comfortably. I needed to thoughtfully listen to the noise yielded by my moving body. The situations when my parents told me to be quieter, I thought I had to limit myself, make myself smaller. However, all of this changed when I started to pay attention to the way my body interacted with my home space.

Malea Powell writes about survivance, which she defines as a method of simultaneous survival and resistance (400). Powell argues that some strategies of survivance allow those to "reimagine and, literally, refigure," in order to claim a presence rather than an absence (400). This way of being allows someone to both be quiet, while also establishing their range of sonic expression. When I was young, I believed my parents silenced my sound production and invisibilized my presence; however, I now realize that sound can never really be masked. My family's home is where I first cultivated my acute listening skills. This was a space for growth and bodily awareness, and it allowed me to control sonic output for myself.

Sound studies scholar, Brandon LaBelle, explains the concept of "ethical volumes of silence and noise" as a system that connects bodies with spaces (46). Basically, he argues that sound is given meaning through contexts related to a specific location, which is tied to culture, history, and interactions with the body. My home space was a place where I had to be quiet most of the time. I had to not only speak softly, but change the way I moved. Thus, the relationship to my voice and body is tied together while trying to be less noisy once my parents got home. Similarly, sound and rhetoric scholar, Steph Ceraso, writes "sound requires listeners to consider how sound works with and against other sensory modes to shape their embodied experiences." In this quote, Ceraso ties together hearing with other senses to expand on how our body experiences sound. Because sound was controlled in my home, I had to get to know the layout of my house and the way my body moved throughout it in order to get by.

Katie Fargo Ahern defines soundscape as, “ a landscape made of sound, a sonic ‘field,’ or an arrangement of simultaneous and spatially situated sounds” (n.p). My home soundscape was fiercely monitored by my parents so that there was as little noise as possible. However, I can’t say I felt totally out of control in my own home. In a way, they pushed me to listen to my surroundings and the way I interacted with it. Soundscapes cannot be controlled, yet sometimes there is opportunity for intervention (Fargo Ahern). This can be done by listening to how you might contribute to the sonic landscape. In my home, I listened to the soft creak of the floorboards as I moved across the room. I learned how to slowly open a door handle so that it made almost no sound as it latched open. I learned how to move my body. Learned how to soften. Learned how to listen. In my home, I understood how to redistribute my body’s weight with each step I took. But I was not silent or unseen. I was strategic. I rearranged my weight as I walked. I listened to the steps of my path as I moved from one foot to the other. I was not absent. I was present. I was so present because I was keenly aware of my heavy, sound producing body.