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From Confinement to Sound Encapsulation: The Social References of Sound in Morro do Palácio, Niterói (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil)

Ismaël Stevenson-Déchelette

(Translated from French by Jorge de La Barre)

Abstract

Lessons on soundscapes, music, and noises from the Morro do Palácio favela in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

The COVID-19 health crisis is transforming our relationship to privacy and intimacy. In France, the policy of containing the spread of the virus was formulated by the implementation of social containment measures via social distancing, in order to limit interactions in public space – first, limiting access to spaces dedicated to festive atmospheres, then banning them altogether.

Very quickly, the first effects of this new way of occupying space were felt, and our sound perceptions were transformed ("Le confinement a modifié..."), bringing calm to a noisy and intense urbanity, while in the private and intimate spheres, the sound relationship with the neighborhood was intensified. During the first confinement, musical meetings and aperitifs ("Confinement à Lyon...") were taking place on balconies and terraces, the making of sound our only relation to the other inhabitants of the city. The presence of children, pets and loud music also changed our sound references ("Après 40 jours de confinement..."). The closing of bars, concert halls, restaurants and theaters; the curfew "to avoid the aperitif effect," ("Couvre-feu à 18 h...") have finally made sound an enemy, in this sanitary "war." (Lemarié and Pietralunga).

The Context at Morro do Palácio (Palace's Hill)

The current context makes me think of the practices of sound encapsulation of the inhabitants of Morro do Palácio, described in my doctoral thesis (Stevenson-Déchelette). Almost a year to the day before the French government announced the lockdown, I was defending my thesis in Social Anthropology at the UFF (Universidade Federal Fluminense), on the theme of the social arrangement of sound at Morro do Palácio. From a fieldwork carried out from 2015 to 2019 as a morado a local category that translates as inhabitant and contains a moral substance acquired through local daily life (Oliveira) - I described the sound encapsulation as a management of intimacy and privacy, in the face of extreme noises. This thesis was made possible thanks to the privileged relationship that existed between the Morro do Palácio and the NUPIJ - Center for Research in Legal Institutions (UFF), coordinated by Professor Ronaldo Lobão – since 2010, which allowed me to establish a reciprocal relationship with several people within the morro, and to live there in relative safety.

Morro do Palácio is a *favela* in Niterói (Rio de Janeiro), located in the heart of the city's noble districts (Fig. 1). This favela is nestled between the MAC (Contemporary Art Museum); the Faculty of Law of UFF; and the *Ingá, Boa Viagem,* and *São Domingos* neighborhoods. Yet located in the heart of the city, the sound practices differ within what the inhabitants call the *morro* – which they distinguish from the *pista* (track, synonymous with *asfalto* or asphalt, designating the "formal" city and its modes of administration), and reveal mechanisms of sound administration that, once described, inform about the practices and moralities of the people living there. Sound is one of the keys to understanding the local organization.

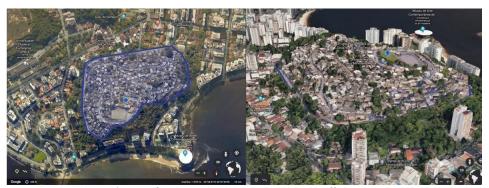


Fig. 1. Morro do Palácio, a *favela* wedged between several affluent neighborhoods. Source: Google Earth.

The trajectory of the *morro*'s land occupation is very particular. The *morro* has undergone several phases of migration, occupations, deoccupations and re-occupations (Albernaz). Located in a fairly central and commercial area, in recent years, the *morro* has had virtually no open space to provide for habitation.

Morro do Palácio counted in 2010 with a population of more than 1,850 inhabitants for about 50,000 m². Its main access road is from an urbanistic project produced in the 1960s that aimed to build a condominium complex. The urbanization project came to a sudden halt, leaving the streets and alleys in place, and a snail-like division of space (Stevenson-Déchelette) (Fig. 2). I emphasize this point because it is an essential element in understanding the local management of sound. The houses were built spontaneously by the inhabitants and without declaration to the municipality; without hygiene, acoustic or safety standards – in short, in self-construction. It is said that "the houses are one inside the other." This data is important for the rest of the analysis,

as it allows us to situate the degree of intensity of the neighborhood's noise perceptions.



Fig. 2. Morro do Palácio Condominium Project, 1960. Source: Photograph obtained from the archives of the Niterói City Hall.

My Experience in the Favela

For me, the experience of the *favela* was a real sound discovery. Like corn that is heated to make popcorn, sounds "pop-up." At first, it was the discovery, upheaval, and incomprehension of the internal functioning of Morro do Palácio. Until the day when I perceived the sound dimension as central in the analysis of all neighborhood and daily life issues: there is a rhythm, a score and a harmony, that the attentive listening of sound was going to reveal to me, in a spatial-temporal and sound referencing system that guides the daily practices: this is what I call sound georeferencing.

Sound georeferencing consists of elaborating a cartography of sound information within the territory of Morro do Palácio, and thus, constructing elements of reference from the territorial knowledge that the *moradores* have acquired cognitively. This sound georeferencing offers a framework for action that revolves around three axes: time, space, and sound (Stevenson-Déchelette).

It is difficult to describe the landscape of the Morro do Palácio. It is a mound, a *morro*, on which people, with the most incredible stories, have invested the soil of their homes. Today, land rights issues represent a huge challenge for the future of Brazil. The inhabitants of the *morro* have appropriated the space they live in (Frémont), first adapting as best they could to the constraints of the morro. Then, from the 1980s onwards,

land occupation accelerated, and the association of *moradores* took over the distribution of building plots.

Being a Morador, Between Peace and War

In the years between 1980 and 1990, associations of *moradores* spread in the *favelas* and contributed to transforming the word *morador* into a local category with moral substance and carrying rights — as is the case with the French word *citoyen* (citizen). The word *morador* has become important for the identity of the inhabitants, in a double movement.

First, towards the institutions of the State: being a *morador* constitutes a claim to social and land rights of the inhabitants on their places of residence in the *favelas* (Mello et al; Vasconcellos). Secondly, towards the drug factions that control the territories: being a *morador* invests the person with a legitimacy of right to move around and immunizes him or her from reprisals. It will be said in the *morro*, that one must *ter moral* (have moral — a common category in Brazil and in the *favelas*, to designate whom is invested with responsibility, uprightness, trust), a respect that is acquired through roots and recognition from other inhabitants.

If the territory of the Morro do Palácio *favela* fits into a more or less coherent whole in relation to the structure of the city that surrounds it, it is a complex space made up of a plurality of people who may seem to be totally opposed in essence — as crystallized in the coexistence between the Evangelical and Pentecostal churches, whose places of worship in the public place are very close to the *bocas*, the points of sale of drugs (I defended in my thesis, the idea that there is a complementary relationship between the various actors of the Morro do Palácio, in the way Dumont describes the complementary relationship between the pure and the impure).

Two states of existence coexist in the *morro:* peace and war. Daily life is situated in a liminality, in tension, between these two states. Sound georeferencing allows us to identify the first one by "noise," and the second by "silence."

In the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro, local management depends largely on the factions that administer their drug retail territory. Also, it is common to associate a *favela* with a specific faction. The periods of peace are

characterized by stability within the faction that manages the *morro*, allowing for a very intense social life, many parties, and always sound going on somewhere in the *favela*. In these periods, the various sounds in the *morro* reassure the inhabitants, because they represent a moment of calm and stability. One can go home at any time, without fearing anything, except for a few exceptions (which confirm the rule).

Times of war are defined by armed confrontations, whether by police officers or rival factions. In these times, silence is king; the inhabitants are confined once curfew has been announced. The *morro* is said to be "strange," "deserted," and "silent." It is even advisable to whistle in the alleys of the *favela*, in order to be spotted as a *morador*, and not as a potential rival, likely to be shot. Time is then suspended, until stabilization.

In this social context, I look at the management of sound in times of peace, and the ways in which the *moradores* of Morro do Palácio manage the discomfort of sound, in a context that at first glance seems cacophonous.

From Soundscape to Sound Georeferencing

Introduced in the 1970s by Raymond Murray Schafer, the term "soundscape" is understood as a combination of sounds that form the totality of sounds in an environment. Schafer's influence is invaluable to the social sciences because, from that point on, a part of social life opened up to us and we began to listen to the world.

Woloszyn will use the term "ideoscenes," as what allows "to assimilate sound forms present in the environment to a phenomenal reality including the cultural and identity dimension of these manifestations." Also, the term "sonotope," coined by Per Hedfors, designates territorialized acoustic environments such as quiet zones, acoustic refuges, etc. For the author, the term is constructed from a lexical digression inspired by the work of Erving Goffman. By developing the right to space, Goffman problematizes the spatial sharing of the existence, and dwells on the polysemous notion of "reserve," which according to Woloszyn, is "likely to define the territorialization of the social fact, under the combined lighting of the biotope (the physicochemical environment), and the sociotope (its sociocultural equivalent)."

Three levels of reading: the description of the landscape, i.e. the recognition of its constituent elements; its organization, i.e. the schematization of the relations which exist between the elements resulting from the descriptive stage; and its interpretation, which takes into account the posture and the projection of the listener to give a direction to the perceived landscape. It is the combination of these three levels that forms the sonotope. (Woloszyn)

What I observed at Morro do Palácio, was that the notions of sound and space were intertwined. The morphology of the *morro* makes it so that, if one cannot distinguish the horizon of the landscape in its physical dimension, one may be able to capture it through one's sonic sensitivity.

It is common for a *morro* inhabitant to be able to reference sounds within the *morro* territory, elaborating a kind of triangulation between sound volume, source, and musical genre. Added to this equation are the schedules of the various *moradores*, and an extremely active communication between them. I call this particular local tool a sonic georeferencing, because it consists of intuitively producing a map with multiple sonic references — such as music, but also gunfire. In the classification of the various sounds, to define the different sound perceptions, the locals refer to two different categories: "sound," and "noise."

"Som" ("sound") is a positive sound perception that we generally associate with music: the one we like; the one that makes us dance; the one we identify with. "Sound" involves a manifestation built around a festive dimension, in which the bodies immerse themselves and share a common rhythm; it is a collective event and the construction of an "us." "Sound" is what links us, often to party, but also to share moments of conviviality; thus, we will often see young people sitting around an amplified broadcasting system, or a family going to the beach with a portable speaker.

"Noise" ("Barulho") refers to a rather negative sound production, ranging from music that we dislike, or that is sometimes "unbearable" (Breviglieri), to the sounds of motorcycles, electric saws, hammers, and of course, gunfire and explosions.

As I mentioned, there is, in this particular sonotope, a complex plurality of relationships to morality: a panel of typical profiles, to which the *moradores* refer to, to define the other, even if they define themselves as

part of the same family – "Here, it's only the family," as if to reinforce the community aspect of the *favela*.

The various musical genres allow us to identify each social group. For example, we can easily identify who is associated with drug trafficking, by the kind of music and lyrics called *Proibidão* (very forbidden). To the sounds and *batidas* (beats) of *funk carioca* that saturate on the bass frequencies, the lyrics make an apology of the distinctive signs of the faction, drugs, explicit sex, and firearms; we can hear *mandamentos* (commandments) that are a series of lines of conduct and prohibitions such as: not stealing in the *favela*; not associating with the enemy; not coveting another one's wife – at the risk of very serious repercussion, up to the point of death. To be sure, *funk carioca* is a musical genre in its own right, born from several influences, mainly in the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro. Today, the productions of *funk carioca* convey a festive atmosphere, but the message spread by the *letras* (lyrics) go from crime, to the eroticization of the bodies, to extreme puritanism, and also, social criticism.

There is also a distinction between the *Paraíba* (a State in the Northeast of Brazil that designates, by extension, the migrants coming from the entire Northeast), who love the music of "their land" (ranging from *forró*, *axé*, *technobrega*, *calipso*, *forró universitário*, or *sofrença*: all music genres from the Northeastern regions), and the rest of the *moradores* – each one coming from the two main migratory movements that the *morro* has known.

The first and main migration was internal to the State of Rio de Janeiro, and saw a large part of the region's agricultural labor force invest in the city and its *morros*. This population was mainly black, descended from the many slave owners and other large landowners in the region. The second wave of migration came mainly from the *Nordeste* (Northeastern), especially the State of *Paraíba*, when the country was in full economic and industrial expansion (Albernaz).

It is from these two great internal migrations that the Morro do Palácio was populated. What interests us here, is the musical boundaries that persist between the members of these two "migrations" as a social marker, although the life histories reveal that generally speaking, the migratory flows within the *favelas* are much more complex. I describe these two migrations in order to explain the reference to the origin of the distinction that is made by the inhabitants of the *morro*. However, the

many marriages and children from these groups show that there is a "mix" between the people.

The various musical genres also provide information on the age, sexuality, or social status of their listeners. There is thus, within the *favela*, a cognitive referencing of the sound production; a spatial knowledge of the sounds associated with their contexts which allow to avoid, or to find the populations associated with the diverse sound ambiances.

The people who inhabit the territory organize themselves based on a sonic georeferencing that gives the lived territory a mosaic organization of various well-defined moral zones – in part through the description of socialization spaces (bars and churches), that attest to an existing social plurality, as well as the location of moments of tension in real time (Stevenson-Déchelette) (Fig. 3).

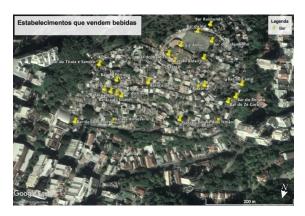




Fig. 3. Bars and churches at Morro do Palácio, 2018. Source: Author's production from Google Earth.

On a daily basis, the plurality of sound production is a source of many conflicts, whether between neighbors, or within the birthday parties themselves (Stevenson-Déchelette). In the *morro*, one easily associates a music genre with a moral identity. The music has, so to speak, a moral substance that the actors invest. In the case of the *favelas*, this is extremely important, as death lurks around every corner of the alley.

A Necessary Georeferencing for the Smooth Running of Daily Life in Morro do Palácio

Sound georeferencing is an indispensable tool for the social coordination of the inhabitants, for several reasons. As described above, there is a group, and moral dimension that is communicated through music (a score). But it is also important to identify moments of real tension and danger (silences and harmony), as the location where it is happening, and to have the right reflexes to act accordingly (improvisation).

In times of peace, one of the most important "rights" – what Geertz calls legal sensitivity – of the *morro* is, of course, "the right to have fun" – and having fun means making noise. The latter allows us to identify, to *geolocate*, where a festive atmosphere takes place. However, even if we live in the same *beco* (alley) as neighbors, there is a wide variety of collective parties, from the smallest to the largest number of participants, and with different genres and groups.

Beyond the festive atmospheres, daily tasks are carried out with music that is often very loud. This allows us to know, for example, if a person is at home, if he or she is busy, or if he or she is willing to host. It is also common to camouflage intimate relationships with music. A DJ friend of mine said to me: "Noise is our form of communication: that's how we can communicate with each other, through noise and sound."

Every day, you can hear children running and playing, soccer balls being kicked and bouncing in the alleys; people shouting and singing, encounters on a street corner exclaiming in laughter and flowery local expressions.

But, in a much more tragic dimension, the attention to sound is a constant state of alert, that allows at any moment to discern variations in the soundscape, and thus, to identify the passage to a state of war. Either by the sudden silence that is established, or by the detonations of

weapons, grenades and other explosions; in Morro do Palácio, these sounds are associated with the invasions that the inhabitants undergo.

The sound georeferencing defined above is a link that exists between the inhabitants of a *favela* and their sonotope, in which they get continuous information about what is happening. It is common to observe two or more *moradores* discussing the various sounds and noises that surround them, as a way of updating their reference frame at all times. Sound referencing is constantly updated, so that we know where the sounds or noises come from, what are the risks, and what kind of interactions will be mobilized. Thus, it is an indispensable tool for social coordination, since the tensions that exist between the sonic variation of the parties and the silent moments define the daily life of a *favela*. Listening carefully to each sound modulation is also a matter of life and death.

The possibility of actualizing one's sound referential in the understanding of the territory is an interesting track for the description of sonotopes, because the relation to sound is not only a relation of perceptions as we have shown; it is also an organic referential of the emergent life that is constantly actualized.

Each of these phases has a recognized sound identity; the first was noisy and festive, while the second was totally silent and calm – punctuated by a few shots tearing the silence of the night. This influences daily life in its smallest details: the routes one takes on foot, the strategies to avoid being in the middle of a conflict, the traffic schedules, among others.

There is no "normality" in the *morro;* it is a liminal form that oscillates between the noisy and the silent. This probably explains why there is so much noise/sound when there is a party. In quiet times, the daily life of the *morro* is extremely noisy, there is music at all hours: in the homes of the inhabitants, in the bars, in the church, in the street – everywhere.

From Cacophony to Sound Encapsulation

In this context, the sound production in times of peace is consequent and daily; it is sometimes impossible to foresee what can happen in the following hours.

Several times, I found myself surrounded by sound speakers that spat out music wherever they could, showering the static and silent walls with noise. The cacophony is a form of resistance to the established order, to the formation of organized social life.

When I arrived, I didn't understand why everyone had powerful sound equipment, and then, incorporating this knowledge into the sound landscape, I understood that there was a common practice among the *moradores*. I named it "sound encapsulation."

In this sound environment, the multiplication of information added to the musical entwinement makes the ambient cacophony unreadable for a neophyte while, for a *morador*, it is a real score of the daily life in which he will have to move through, and exist.

As mentioned before, there is a local "law" that defines the framework from which conflicts around sound will emerge – it is the *direito de curtir* (right to enjoy). In times of peace, the festive and therefore sonorous manifestations intensify, to the point that it is impossible to identify the multitude of sources of sounds; one will say that they are in "duel" against each other. However, what happens is that each person creates a sound capsule that allows him or her to camouflage the external sounds, so that his or her own environment is not cacophonous.

This soundproofing is a practice that has developed to allow the residents to "tolerate" their neighbors and their noise production. I say "tolerate" because it is the local category used by the *moradores*, to justify their "right to enjoy" and the noise it causes. By creating different forms of noise encapsulation, they subscribe to the fact that their neighbors can enjoy themselves — and vice-versa. There is thus a solidarity, for everyone to enjoy their leisure time in Morro do Palácio, accepting that one's neighbor can "enjoy" with *sound*, and this is what we call *tolerância* (tolerance).

I have listed several forms of sound encapsulation, of which I will present here the two main ones. The first form is the most widespread: it consists of producing a sound volume higher than that of the outside. When the noise produced by your neighbor is too important to be ignored, you just have to turn up the power of your speakers so that the sound produced internally camouflages the annoying noise. A second practice is to create sound insulation with a series of electronic devices, inside the home. First of all, the doors and windows will be well closed, fabrics will be put up, so that the sound does not pass through the door; then the air conditioning will be put on, so that a vibration is produced within the room to

attenuate the external noise. Then, the radio or television will be turned on, to give the illusion of a constant background noise, creating a drone that limits the variations in intensity – knowing that the drone is an effect characterizing the presence in a sound ensemble of a constant stratum, of stable height and without variations of intensity. (Auguyard; Torgue).

I have tested both of these techniques *in vivo*; they work flawlessly, so much so that I call them "local technologies," because they are a complex response to the sonic context of Morro do Palácio, to reduce sound-related conflicts.

To Conclude

In this text, I wanted to link the ethnographic experience of living in the Morro do Palácio with the current experience of social confinement that we endure due to the COVID-19 health crisis. It is clear that the contrasts – in society, culture, and contexts – are extremely strong between the situation of confinement in France, and the practice of sound encapsulation in the Morro do Palácio; they even seem antagonistic.

In both situations, however, the actors administer, manage, and codify sound on a daily basis, within their intimacy and privacy thus making sound *the* privileged link with the other, the alter-ego, the neighbor – an important referential of our social life.

By way of comparison, the feedback I had on the practices of social distancing in Morro do Palácio were not applied, and life was situated in a continuum of peace, where the arrangements made in the face of the pandemic were transformed (at least when there were no invasions), into leisure, parties, and music — which is not surprising to me. Social confinement exists for the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro, which are as if suspended outside the city — as they always have been--as is linked to sound production, which cannot be camouflaged, and prevents the neighbors of the well-to-do districts from sleeping peacefully. To disturb is also to exist.

The practices associated with the soundscapes of big cities are transformed by the COVID health crisis, which puts us in a liminal situation of a pandemic. We do not know how a "return to normal" can occur. How will we re-tame the sounds that surround us? Will new soundscapes emerge?

We do not know, but one thing is certain, as long as there is life, there will be sound and noise.

Note: I wrote this text in France two years after the defense of my doctoral thesis in Anthropology (Stevenson-Déchelette).

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