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Swimming Sounds

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Abstract

City sounds are scarce these days in Johnstown, PA. The population of this once-thriving rust belt town has shrunk to fewer than 20K people and is now focused on outdoor recreation and the arts. The YMCA pool is one place where, even in COVID times, the community gathers in the name of wellness.

I left The City a long time ago, moving from New York to Phoenix, a desert city with vastly different sounds. I left there too, for a diminished steel town. Today, the loudest noise makers in my neck of the woods are the birds. Cacophonous. There is no city here, it is all town. But I do remember city sounds and sometimes I find their echoes in the most unlikely places...

Swimming sounds like the city more than any place I find myself in these deep COVID days. The lifeguards all play DJ. One who works after school spins everything from Garth Brooks to Daft Punk, sometimes ET rocks the gospel on a Thursday morning, and another guy curates classic rock from the 60s so tightly – the set ends up sounding like nothing but Cream and Yes. If there's no music playing at the pool, there's probably a swim team practicing.

There are traffic sounds at the YMCA swimming pool. The crawl gives a low vibrating whoosh when people who've been swimming for decades cut the water. You can hear the gallons moving as they calmly slice off one length of pool after another, interrupted like clockwork by flipping splashes. I add my own special kick splash to the soundscape. It is the result of a confusing and freakish stroke that sends me lumbering down the lane. I also contribute a sputter and cough, every once in a while, when I lose my breath.

The city sound of chatter comes through at the pool. Old ladies walking laps share stories of disappointing children. Listen carefully and you'll hear the aged former mill workers planning for dinner, grocery bargains, and doctor's appointments. The quotidian concerns of octogenarians create a hum that floats slowly across the top of the water. There're the hecklers, too. I'm one of them. "Who's this playing?" I yell across the pool to the young lifeguard. "How about some Joy Division?" He obliged, amazingly. Love will tear us apart, again.

The YMCA pool has its stoop sitters, too, men hanging out at the end of the lane. These guys take up a lot of space, acting like mayors, greeting and commenting loudly. One regular pool sitter hangs out in the middle of his lane, seated and bobbing up and down as he spins around to survey the swimmers. He shakes his foot to whatever music is playing, singing along and splashing the surface of the water like a child.

Like the sounds of a city, the YMCA pool noise depends on a schedule. The water aerobiciers take up a lot of sonic space; they arrive weekdays at 10am. Practicing high school swim teams are super loud and seasonal. The teens spend astounding energy into the water as they tear up laps by the clock. Coach sits on the side of the pool barking times above the wet white noise of their efforts. Community swim practice has an entirely different kind of sound. The water becomes a buoyant, blue playground with 60 children. Under the roof of the YMCA, a kid can learn new water skills. Sunday at 10 am, when all the walkers are in church, is the most quiet time. It feels like 3.15 am in the financial district, when you can hear the infrastructure breathing. The sound of the pump and filter, water trickling is like the steam rising from the sidewalk. My breath.

Swimming is the most gregarious thing I do.

Note: This piece was developed as part of a year-long zoom Writing Salon, initiated by Michelle Dent, involving eight former colleagues from the Department of Performance Studies at New York University.

About the author

Jo Novelli-Blasko is an artist living in her hometown of Johnstown Pennsylvania. She established The Habitorium in 2013, as a platform for her writing, watercolor painting and research about habits (TheHabitorium.com). Jo studied Art History at Arizona State University, and Performance Studies at New York University. She currently serves as the Director of Fundraising and Audience Development for the Johnstown Symphony Orchestra. Website: jonovelliblasko.com. Email: jonovelli@gmail.com.