

**Soundscape, Memory, and Meaning:
Thoughts on Alan Nakagawa's *Peace Resonance***

Today I want to talk about a soundscape work that superimposes the soundscapes of two disparate, but related, times and spaces to make an anti-war statement about collective memory, social imagination, and possible futures. I am referring to sound artist Alan Nakagawa's work, *Peace Resonance*. Three years in the making, this presentation is timely as the work was premiered just yesterday in Los Angeles. *Peace Resonance* is the second installment of a three-part project that involves field recordings of soundscapes made in socio-historically-significant constructed spaces. As we will see, this one links the Atomic Dome in Hiroshima, Japan to the Wendover Hangar in Tooele County, Utah. Nakagawa's family immigrated to the US from Hiroshima in 1957 and, in a sense, this work represents an autobiographical manifestation of his connections to that world. Hiroshima's implication in World War II has served as the real and imagined backdrop of his own family's history; one that grounds his identity as a first-generation Japanese American in Los Angeles. For Nakagawa, casting the presence of Hiroshima into the Wendover Hangar represents a homecoming of that previously-devastated space—now again vibrant but still resonant with the memory of violence—into the space that harbored the instrument of that violence. In addition to this overt symbolic juxtaposition, I am interested in his choice of silent soundscapes as a medium for this work. I want to look at what the invitation to listen to what Nakagawa has called “alleged silence” might occasion for a listener. What happens in silence? What might be accomplished by listening? The juxtaposition of these soundscapes is an exercise in worldbuilding that puts them in conversation differently, bringing together disparate material resonances of spaces and their attendant memories otherwise separated by time and spatial distance. To theorize this idea briefly, I will borrow from Jean-Luc Nancy and

Lisbeth Lipari to consider not only how listening builds worlds, but perhaps also works to locate the self in that world. As such, the sonic world created by the work offers a heuristic space in which to listen; to experience a refigured field of being in which we might understand our own constructed identities as related to others differently. But before I get to that, a little more information about the artist and the production of *Peace Resonance* itself is necessary.

I first met Alan Nakagawa in 2016 while conducting fieldwork interviews for my dissertation project about Los Angeles' DIY experimental music scene. Born and raised in Los Angeles, he was brought up in the centrally-located neighborhood of Koreatown, where he still resides. During the course of our first interview, he had mentioned the project that became *Peace Resonance*—one which I immediately thought was brilliant both conceptually and aesthetically. Apparently, the idea for laminations of soundscapes was a result of his work with the Southern California Soundscape Ensemble. A small but committed group of musicians, multi-media artists, and recordists, the Southern California Soundscape Ensemble has been meeting regularly for years in Los Angeles to share their raw field recordings. These are often auditioned simultaneously, creating soundscapes to be heard as synthetic wholes—soundscapes of imagined worlds. In a written description of *Peace Resonance*, Nakagawa reflects: "I was the first US born family member and grew up with the 'ghost' of their WWII history. As my art career grew so did my commitment to develop an artwork about our historical and personal connection to Hiroshima and the Atomic Bomb, but it took decades for me to find a path into the subject matter." It was, then, the aforementioned sonic experiences with the Southern California Soundscape Ensemble that revealed a path by which to reflect on those spaces in his own history and how their significances might inflect one another if set in a kind of materially resonant superposition of soundscapes.

After having conceived *Peace Resonance*, Nakagawa set about the process of gaining funding and permissions to make the necessary recordings a reality. Through the financial and administrative support of the City of Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs, Art Matters, the Center for Land Use Interpretation, the City of Hiroshima, the Smithsonian Museum of American History, the Japanese American Cultural and Community Center, and the Consulate General of Japan, he was able to make it happen, bit by bit. First, of course, he had to travel to Hiroshima.

The structure that became the Hiroshima Peace Memorial was designed by Czech architect Jan Letzel and completed in 1915. While its role changed several times in the years before World War II, by 1933 it gained a title as the Hiroshima Prefectural Industrial Promotion Hall and came to house arts and educational exhibitions. On August 6, 1945, the Little Boy atomic bomb dropped by the Enola Gay B-29 bomber detonated about 600 meters above the dome. Unlike the immediately surrounding structures which were instantly destroyed, the blast's force from overhead allowed parts of the hall with its characteristic skeletal dome to survive. The ruins of the building, now recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, have been preserved as an anti-war memorial—a material witness and cautionary example to extraordinary violence and destruction. Seeking to aurally capture the presence of the space as it now stands, Nakagawa traveled to Hiroshima in October of 2016 and was allowed to make a 17-minute, three-point recording of the Peace Memorial's interior soundscape (I don't know why, but he always records for 17 minutes). A little more than a year later in November of 2017, he was allowed to play that recording from Hiroshima via a three-speaker PA inside the large Quonset hut on Wendover Airfield in Utah that was the former home of the Enola Gay. Incidentally, after years of neglect, the hangar has become a tourist attraction and is undergoing restoration. Rather than an anti-war

peace memorial like that in Japan, advertising materials reflect an American nationalist, celebratory attitude of the atomic bomb and the destruction it occasioned. As the recording from Hiroshima played in the space, the soundscape thereby created was documented in another 17-minute, three-point audio recording. He had succeeded in, at least aurally, collapsing a distance of cultures previously at war whose mutual otherness was reflected in their ideological values and the violent actions they occasioned.

Having completed the project, he's described it as is "a conceptual voyage of the Enola Gay arriving back to the hangar seventy-six years later but carrying with it the redeveloped urban-scape of contemporary Hiroshima...It's a spiritual round trip...an auto-biography of sorts, a portrait of the complexities of being Japanese-American in a post WWII culture of hybrid identities; a dynamic code switching." In another symbolic homecoming, Nakagawa presented the work just yesterday in his hometown of Los Angeles at a DIY gallery called Human Resources. He's has been very patient and generous with regard to my interest in his work and, at my request, shared some of *Peace Resonance* for us to listen to. So, let's hear a minute of the piece.

I have great respect for Nakagawa's having conceived of and executed this work. And as I said in my opening, I think it can do more than only juxtapose these soundscapes in a "spiritual round trip." Nakagawa has said that it is an anti-war work and that the affective power of its presentation must be more than just its symbolic juxtaposition conceptually graspable in his artist's statement. Rather, it is in the doing, the listening and inhabiting the work by which one experiences the imagined space. It is, then, perhaps the listening and experiences occasioned thereby that somehow implicate it in the ethical sphere and reflexive self-understanding more so

than just the concepts. With that in mind, I'm going to pivot from my conversation of the work to talk about listening as it might be related to worldbuilding, both personal and social.

In his treatise, *Listening*, Jean-Luc Nancy ([2002] 2007) explores a relationship he intuitively feels between listening and being. Assuming an onto-phenomenologically-informed epistemology that assumes a subject's understanding of the world to be always under construction, ever transitive, he suggests that listening is resonant of the process of how humans make meaning. Truths are continually re-assessed and reconsidered as contexts change, as is a subject's understanding of and relationship to the world that said truths inform. So, then, he asks, shouldn't truth be something that is not really, "itself"? "[N]o longer the naked figure emerging from the cistern but the resonance of that cistern—or, if it were possible to express it thus, the echo of the naked figure in the open depths?" (4).

I like this statement, as it opens to a greater inquiry that relates sound, listening, and being, and their mutually-inflecting flux. For Nancy, there is an implicit relationship between the process of listening and meaning-making that points to construction and identity of self - a reflexivity of a self entangled in feeling-oneself-feel. This is further illustrative of a subject's process of world building and the flux of the construction and understanding of their world in which they have their being. Nancy further notes how sound and listening problematize the notion of self as a hermetic, bounded entity. By its omni-dimensionality in its resonance, listening trans-mediate spaces and boundaries and reveals our own heterogeneity and self-plurality. In a characteristically, para-logically poetic turn, he puts it this way:

Sound has no hidden face; it is all in front, in back, and outside inside, *inside-out* in relation to the most general logic of presence as appearing, as phenomenally or as manifestation, and thus as the visible face of a presence subsisting in self... To listen is to enter that spatiality by which, *at the same time*, I am penetrated, for it opens up in me as well as around me, and from me as well as toward me: it opens

me inside me as well as outside, and it is through such a double, quadruple, or sextuple opening that a “self” can take place. (Ibid., 13-4)

Like a bat’s echolocation or a submarine’s sonar, the self’s identity and location in inter-symbolic and cognitive space, he suggests, is revealed by the perceived distancing of sonic repeat in a space that reveals its contours and a location therein. Understood this way, the mutable and boundary-less self-presencing occasioned by listening offers credulity to the claim, or hope, that intentional listening might refigure or dissolve perceived differences that work to “other” others in a world ever more characterized by pluralism. Furthermore, silence—“alleged” silences—are recovered from any potential emptiness and meaninglessness into an arrangement of meaningful resonance, for even silence must be *heard*. Silence, as such, should not be understood as a meaningless privation of sound, “but as an arrangement of resonance: a little—or even exactly...—as when in a perfect condition of silence you hear your own body resonate, your own breath, your heart and all its resounding cave” (Ibid., 21). So, then, even a listened-to silence might affirm and hold open the being of the subject to further self-realization.

It is in this way, too, that we might find the acts of listening and speaking to be implicit in plurality and ideas of “otherness.” When we listen, we find that others’ worlds differ from ours and that there is no perfect communication of ideas from one to the other. This is the most persistent problem of interpretation, that pure and perfect translation is as impossible as actually *being* another person. As such, our different understandings of the world work to define not only our ways of living in the present, but also our imagined futures. Listening is, then, an ethical activity implicated in navigating social plurality.

With an approach similar to Nancy’s in addressing this character of listening, Lisbeth Lipari (2014) develops a concept of meaning-making in a plural world with her idea of

“interlistening,” which describes how listening resonates with echoes of everything we have ever “heard, thought, seen, touched, said, and read throughout our lives” (9). This idea again asserts that it is not only action, but also experiences of undergoing that construct a listening subject’s meaningful world. Whereas speech has often been synonymous with *logos* and order, a *logos* that speaks without listening does not lead to understanding, and as such, is no *logos* at all. Lipari goes further to show how listening is thus necessarily reflexive and situates the listener in a social field, just in the same way that one cannot touch without also being touched. Even when alone and thinking, listening is there - but so is speaking. The two are not a duality, but two complementary characteristics of a unity. In demonstration, she asks:

When I’m thinking silently to myself, am I speaking or listening? If I’m speaking (or listening), then who’s listening (or speaking)? And along those lines, do I listen not only to words with my mind, but also to the music of the voice in my ears, and the posture and the gesture of the body with my eyes, the vibrational rhythm of others’ pulsations, movements, and intonations in my body? (Ibid.)

Lipari’s characterization of listening’s circular, dependent relationship to speaking locates the self on the field of undergoing and action that is charged with memory as well as imagined futurity.

Bringing this back to Nakagawa’s *Peace Resonance*, I suggest that the work is playing with more than the symbolic in its juxtaposition of soundscapes. It is true that setting these sonic worlds in conversation brings together the disparate material resonances of spaces and their attendant memories otherwise separated by time and spatial distance. And though he hasn’t addressed it with me, for Nakagawa in particular the presentation of the work in a space in Los Angeles must represent yet another autobiographical layer. The material and symbolic character of the DIY gallery in which he is first presenting the work adds a third soundscape to the two

presented in the recording that can be read as analogous to Nakagawa's multivalent identity as a Japanese-American who is also an Angelino.

The opportunity for a sort of echo-location as I've described offered by *Peace Resonance* is an exercise in worldbuilding, but perhaps also in the location of self in that world. The imaginary space created by the work offers a new, heuristic one in which to listen; to experience a refigured field of being in which real and symbolic distances between ways of being are collapsed and alterity itself revealed differently. *Peace Resonance* invites the listener into an imagined soundscape where, as they reach out into its silence in an effort of self-location, might reflexively reveal its meaningful topography and the listener's relationship to it anew. For us, this process exemplifies how we, in our own navigation of our plural worlds, must continuously reconsider our relationships to the other. This is a leveraging of the interpretive character of listening that forces the listener into a conversation with others' experiences and, ultimately, our task of living together. It further demonstrates that, at a primary level, perhaps *what* we listen to is not as important as the intentionally-open act of listening. Nancy said that truth's identity is not "itself," but its becoming—not the figure emerging from the cistern but that cistern's resonance. In that spirit, *Peace Resonance* demonstrates the significance of reflection as we listen to historically-charged spaces of undergoing, and points to how that might inflect our contemporary spaces of action and the futures they create.

References

- Lipari, Lisbeth. 2014. *Listening, Thinking, Being: Toward an Ethics of Attunement*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Nancy, Jean-Luc. [2002] 2007. *Listening*. Translated by Charlotte Mandell. New York: Fordham University Press.