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'Lost Aural Landscapes'
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Lost Aural Landscapes: Norman Nicholson's 'Hard of Hearing

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Norman Nicholson's lesser-known autobiographical lyric 'Hard of Hearing' explores how the speaker's deafness shapes their experience of the surrounding Cumbrian landscape. As Nicholson describes how the world aurally darkens, he describes voices by their appearance and vowels by their diminishing colours. Within a rural landscape characterised by silence, the speaker seeks to redefine his selfhood and to adapt so that he can navigate this newly silent landscape. For those of us with perfect hearing, Nicholson's poem provides us with an opportunity to try to comprehend what it would be like to live in a world without sound.

A recent project defines ambient literature as a 'combination of place-based writing and location-responsive technologies and suggested that these technologies produce new kinds of literary experiences. I would argue that the place-based experience we define as 'ambience' is a quality that literary texts inherently have, regardless of technology. Feeling 'ambience', in whatever way one might, is not necessarily something that is solely technologically produced or driven. As such, I would define 'ambience' based on the emotional experience of a place or location in a piece of literature, using innovative connections to the space through a range of the senses. Nicholson's speaker loses his hearing in the poem; and he thus must find new ways to connect with an already-familiar space. In the works of writers such as Norman Nicholson, literature is created in response to a specific place, and is attentive to the senses when experiencing that place, in creative ways. 'Hard of Hearing' arguably sheds light on assumptions people may make about the form ambient literature takes, its relationship with the senses, and its accessibility to readers with disabilities. The poem explores how a sense of self and a sense of place is constructed in the absence of sound, thus challenging the centrality of sound to ambience.

Contributing scholarship to Nicholson studies, this paper presents a thematic discussion of the poem which calls for a reassessment of the role of sound in ambience, implicitly demonstrating the importance of avoiding ableist conceptions of literature and encouraging the curation of soundless ambient literatures. The poem – 'Hard of Hearing' – explores three thematic threads: sound and the relation to selfhood; the creation of space using sound, and the resultant sense of belonging; and the relationship between sound and community.

Nicholson (1914-1987) was born, raised through childhood, and died in the same terraced house in Millom, South Cumbria. His attachment to this place is evident in his poems which transport readers to the industrial edge-lands of South Cumbria in the twentieth century (then known as Cumberland). The mighty Black Combe which overlooked the town of Millom provided Nicholson with much of his inspiration, as did the historically significant Millom Ironworks, which shut in 1968, causing a dramatic economic decline in the area. Although his career overlapped with those of W.H. Auden and T.S. Eliot, with whom he was friends, his work is little known beyond the devotees of the Norman Nicholson Society in Cumbria. Nonetheless his poems and literary archive creates an intertextual atmosphere that gives insight into his interactions with notable poets of the day. He took particular note of Auden's work and, enclosed in the front cover of one of his personal books—now held at the University of Manchester Library—a clipping of Auden's 'Woods' can be found. In addition, these two writers both accepted poetry commissions from St Matthew's Church, Northamptonshire, and common themes can be found across their oeuvres.

'Hard of Hearing' is a short lyric that was published in his 1981 collection, *Sea to the West*. While it is not as popular as the titular poem 'Sea to the West' or others that are more well-known such as 'Wall' or 'Scafell Pike', 'Hard of Hearing' stands out amidst Nicholson's oeuvre of nature writing because it foregrounds the abstract and personal experience of his own hearing loss – Nicholson himself was near-deaf. Viewed within the context of Nicholson's life work this poem can be seen as a notable attempt to push against traditional methods for creating ambience in nature writing. This was perhaps spurred by his personal experience of the need to soak up the ambience of his surroundings in untraditional ways due to his newfound absence of sound. Arguably, this would have been a particular challenge for Nicholson because his prose work *The Lakers* (1955) argued that evaluating a landscape based on a 'view' that the eye can see is unhelpful because a view is a 'man-made dimension' that 'imposes a rigid and unnatural rule of proportion' on the landscape before us.[1] He continues, reducing one's experience of a landscape 'view' to what the eye can see leads us to 'reject so much of what our other senses tell us'.[2] Nicholson's references to 'man-made dimensions' and 'an imaginary picture-frame' suggest his critique is firmly inspired by his disdain for the picturesque which he felt '[reduced] the universe to the size of a man's eyeball'.[3]

[1] Norman Nicholson, *The Lakers: The Adventures of the First Tourists* (Cumbria: Cicerone Press, 1995), p. 6.
[2] Norman Nicholson, *The Lakers*, p.6.
[3] Norman Nicholson, *The Lakers*, p. 41.

Illustrating Nicholson's belief that 'our other senses' are vital to our experience of landscape, synaesthesia plays a key role in depicting the diversity of landscape experienced through the senses in 'Hard of Hearing' as well the perception of place and one's selfhood in relation to the surroundings.[4] As an 'aural darkness' falls in the poem, the reader experiences the speaker's disorientation and disengagement with a landscape he once recognised; yet, the loss of hearing forces the speaker to focus on what he can see, and what definition he can give to the missing sounds.[5] The poem is open form, and rhyme is scant. The first stanza contains the full rhymes 'dimmer/simmers' (ll. 2-3)and 'sound/ground' (ll. 1-4), but there is no establishment of a solid rhyme scheme, and rhyme doesn't feature at all later in the poem. The internal rhyme included in the first stanza – 'Words/blurred' (l. 5), 'lipped/tongued' (l. 7), and 'smudged/sponged' (l. 8) – create sound and rhythm for both reader and speaker, before the few rhyming moments disintegrate, playing into the theme of disappearing sound.

Scientifically speaking, the loss of hearing over time (age-related hearing loss) is known as Presbycusis and is commonplace. Gradually, a human being will lose the clarity of sound needed to recognise words when spoken. Gradual hearing loss results in the loss of consonant letter sounds such as 'p', 'b', 't', and 'd' – 'In speaking and singing, the individual handicapped with Presbycusis will frequently be unable to recognise various consonant sounds. Certain consonants fall into a higher frequency range than the overall range of normal speech'.[6] As a result, sounds appear softer to the ear, and Presbycusis is also known to affect the '...comprehension, perception, and recall of spoken language'.[7] Nicholson's 'Hard of Hearing' deals explicitly with Presbycusis, and the poet's mention of the 'smudged and sponged' to replace words that were formerly 'lipped and tongued' reflects this gradual process of hearing loss; the sharpened edges of consonant sounds are rounded and softened considerably with age, losing clarity as would a painting when smudged on canvas. Nicholson's speaker also tracks the failures and struggles of the process of hearing loss,

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[4] David Cooper, 'Envisioning 'the cubist fells': Ways of Seeing in the Poetry of Norman Nicholson', in *Poetry and Geography: Space and Place in Post-war Poetry*, by Neal Alexander and David Cooper (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press; 2013).

[5] Norman Nicholson, 'Hard of Hearing' in *Collected Poems*, ed. by Neil Curry (London: Faber and Faber Ltd.; 2008), p. 365, ll. 15-18. *Further line references to this poem are given after quotations in the text.*

[6] Robert A. Cutietta, 'Hearing Loss Due to Aging', *American Music Teacher*, 31.2 (1981), 30-32, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/43541349.pdf?ab_segments=0%2FSYC-5910%2Fcontrol&refreqid=fastly-default%3A3a8db70ad1876e94c9c2f8f1033d2fad> [accessed 21 July 2021] (para. 4 of 14).

[7] Amanda L. Schlegel and Jeremy S. Lane, 'An Exploratory Study of Adult Amateur Musicians' Identification of Instrumental Timbre', *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education*, 196 (2013), 65-79 (p. 66), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/10.5406/bulcouresmusedu.196.0065.pdf?ab_segments=0%2FSYC-5910%2Fcontrol&refreqid=fastly-default%3A3a8db70ad1876e94c9c2f8f1033d2fad> [accessed 22 July 2021].

thereby denoting the difficulty in transition toward aural darkness. It is as Nicholson writes in *The Lakers*; the over-reliance on the visual landscape does not allow the opportunity to recognise the beauty of spaces characterised by touch, smell, taste, or sound. In 'Hard of Hearing', the speaker loses his ability to hear, and so must learn to rely on sight – a heightening of his other senses; perhaps, similarly, the absence of sound pushes Nicholson to adjust his methods for depicting landscapes—depictions which can no longer rely on sound as they had previously.

Addressing the dislodgement of his sonic-image of the landscape—itself a synaesthetic concept—Nicholson turns to synaesthesia. Sound and sight are mixed, creating a complex interweaving of the experience of the senses for Nicholson's speaker. This can be seen in phrases such as 'A hush simmers | Up from the ground' (ll. 3-4) and 'The landscape of sound | Grows slowly dimmer' (ll. 1-2), as if it is a fading light, and suddenly 'Words are blurred; vowels | Lose almost all their colour' (ll. 5-6). The juxtaposition of 'grows' with 'dimmer' draws attention to the speaker's recognition of his previous reliance on the sonic landscape, even as it fades. Thus, each of these phrases demonstrates how the speaker is experiencing an aural impairment as a visual impairment, thus blending the senses further in the poem, indicating that deafness is significant beyond the loss of hearing only. The simmering hush indicates the suppression of the speaker's normal landscape of sound, and the replacement of it with a less familiar landscape because his place, and mode of being within it, has been irrevocably altered.

This unfamiliar and less recognisable landscape is demonstrated by Nicholson's loosening of the sonic image of the landscape, the softening of edges, and the subsequent coming of what Nicholson terms as 'aural darkness' (complete loss of hearing) in the poem. The new landscape is characterised by indistinct sounds and, later, 'blurred' words. Losing his hearing means losing his connection to his surroundings. The 'lipped and tongued sharp edges' (l. 7) of the words which 'Are smudged and sponged away' (l. 8), for instance, bear resemblance to the crags and peaks of Cumbria. The sibilance of 'smudged and sponged' contrasts the phrase 'lipped and tongued' thus illustrating the softening of sounds and the consequence of that which is that 'all voices', and all words, start to 'look alike' in an 'aural darkness' (ll. 9-10).

This poem suggests the disappearance of sound not only tested Nicholson's artistic beliefs and aesthetic practices, but also his sense of selfhood as a mode of being in the world. As a result of losing his hearing, the speaker feels he is losing his sense of selfhood. The loss of hearing, for the speaker, initially means disorientation and disengagement. Imagery of sound and sight, and light and dark, are incorporated to emphasise this: 'Ears staring /

Under the twilight' (ll. 11-12). The 'twilight' setting places the speaker at the hour in-between light and inevitable darkness which will obscure all things, some beyond recognition. This disorientation, however, can also be seen in the speaker's inability to recognise 'blurred words' (l. 5) and their attempts to 'grope and blunder' (l. 13) through the landscape. The image of uncontrolled limbs and movement contributes to the sense of desperation but also of meaninglessness. In the poem, however, all is not lost. Although he stumbles, Nicholson's speaker still '[walks] stumbling' (l. 16), and still clings to the light with his 'eyes / strained to the south- / west linger of day (ll. 16-18). There is suffering and perseverance in the phrase 'walk stumbling', and loss and hope in illustrated by his determination to move towards a new version of personal selfhood, seen at the close of the poem with Nicholson's reference to the need to 'illumine my own silence' (l. 37).

Nicholson's approach towards selfhood here clearly recognises how it is forged in relation to its surroundings with which it interacts and against which it can push. Sound is central to Nicholson's speaker's attempt to understand himself by forging a connection with the world around him. This consequently recalls ideas explored in the field of soundscape ecology. Holmes Rolston, for instance, noted that natural and human-made soundscapes were linked to human wellbeing and enabled them to develop a sense of place.[8] In the lines depicting disorientation in Nicholson's poem, the landscape is not a 'place' which holds meaning but a space that is void of meaning beyond suffering. The senses, along with the memory and meanings that are attached to sounds and sights, create the personal significance of a given place. A place has personal meaning to an individual and their self-hood when, as Angus Winchester suggests, it is 'inscribed' with memory and meaning' and endowed with 'abstract qualities which are then experienced as being reflected back to the observer'.[9]

In the poem, Nicholson's speaker experiences the loss of a familiar landscape, and the 'place' he once knew becomes visually blurred and dark, arguably relegated to a mere 'space' – 'Through the slithering dusk / Walk stumbling, eyes / Strained to the south- | west linger of day' (ll. 15-18). The speaker's struggle towards the light throughout the poem, and his broadening of understanding of a world without sound, steadily transforms the darkness into an opportunity for redefinition of the space in the closing lines. Throughout the poem, the speaker tests his 'boundaries of self' against the backdrop of the visual and auditory landscape, by 'groping' in the darkness, striving to 'illumine' (l. 37) his unfamiliar

[8] Holmes Rolston, III, *Environmental Ethics: Duties to and Values in the Natural World* (Pennsylvania: Temple University Press, 1988).
[9] Angus J. L. Winchester, *The Language of Landscape: A Journey into Lake District History* (Cumbria: Handstand Press, 2019), p. 2.

surroundings, and giving meaning to a place where 'All voices look alike' (l. 10). Scott Slovic notes: 'It is only by testing the boundaries of the self against an outside medium (such as nature) that many nature writers manage to realise who they are and what's what in the world'.[10] Nicholson explores the boundaries of selfhood in 'Hard of Hearing'. As the speaker experiences the loss of a sound-based landscape, he reconciles the newfound near-silence with the visual images of the landscape around him. As such, the speaker learns to define the space as his own in the absence of any defining auditory features.

Although the speaker learns to define the space as his own, the absence of sound challenges his sense of community and experience of belonging. As Nicholson's poem slowly demonstrates the growth of his understanding of how sound has supplemented his ability to see and recognise his community which is formed by the landscape and the people within it, there are echoes of Auden's 'September 1, 1939'. Moving away from the all-encompassing darkness, the speaker begins to recognise the familiar objects of his visual landscape, and the darkness confines itself to his ears only, arguably opening his other senses to experience the new version of the world he knew before hearing loss. Nicholson writes of how 'Unspeaking faces | Gape blankly about me' (ll. 21-22), mirroring Auden's anonymous 'Faces along the bar', which 'Cling to their average day'.[11] Nicholson's images of 'gloomed tree-trunks' (l. 19) mirror the stark warning of Auden's: 'Lest we should see where we are, | Lost in a haunted wood, | Children afraid of the night | Who have never been happy or good'.[12] Loss, desolation, and a sense of anonymity are common threads of both poems: Auden's subjects are wallowing at the advent of World War II and the consequent change in the global landscape it inevitably brought with it; and Nicholson's speaker is learning to process the landscape of silence, as opposed to a landscape full of sound. Although the speaker recognises how sound allowed him to feel a sense of community previously, this is not a comforting revelation for him and does not ward off loneliness.

A growing sense of anonymity, and the accompanying loss of selfhood, is a key characteristic of sufferers of Presbycusis because, for most, sound is a way to connect to the world, and the loss of sound severs and important sense of situating oneself in the surrounding landscape. Martin Atherton notes of deaf people: 'Such people have to some extent been placed on the fringes of mainstream society, if not completely removed from common perceptions of community and society'; this taps into Nicholson's own experience as a man living with profound deafness, in a geographical space already defined by being on

[10] Scott Slovic, 'Nature Writing and Environmental Psychology: The Interiority of Outdoor Experience', in *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism*, ed. by Laurence Coupe (Oxford; Routledge, 2000), pp. 352-3.
[11] W. H. Auden, 'September 1, 1939', p. 96, ll. 45-46.
[12] W. H. Auden, 'September 1, 1939', p. 96, ll. 52-55.

the edge of something more significant (Lakeland).[13] Furthermore, the blankness with which the 'unspeaking faces' (l. 21) look at Nicholson's speaker indicate that the loss of sound accompanies his loss of understanding of, and connection to, the immediate landscape (which links to the earlier mention of 'All voices look alike' in line 10). His hearing loss forces him inwards, away from external objects such as other people. Familiar objects are ill defined, described as 'gloomed' (l. 19) and 'shadowy' (l. 20), as if masked by the darkness of hearing loss, even though they are visual objects in the speaker's landscape.

The tree-trunks and 'shadowy doorways' (ll. 19-20) represent physical obstacles for the speaker to overcome on his journey out of the darkness; Nicholson's decision to blanket the obstacles in darkness emphasises the struggle of the speaker even further – not only must he overcome the obstacles, but he must do so in the darkness. And, whilst a doorway may in some form represent a new beginning, an adventure beyond the present into the future, it also represents a sense of unknowing, with which comes trepidation and the possibility of danger. Nicholson's 'shadowy doorway' (l. 20) is uninviting and creates a landscape ahead of the speaker that is both unknown and unsafe, uninviting and cloaked in darkness. The speaker goes on to note that 'Night ties | Bandages round my ears' (ll. 23-24), a deliberate development of the aforementioned state of 'twilight' (l. 12) in the poem. Darkness has now descended fully, and the speaker has lost his hearing completely. The 'bandages' (l. 24) suggest that he is wounded and adds emphasis to the struggle he is facing as he begins to redefine his surroundings without sound. It counters the image of bandages as an image of salvation and healing, creating a dense and complex imagery to Nicholson's poem. Furthermore, the physical act of wrapping bandages around someone's ears blocks out sound, and almost encases the mind in on itself, as if the speaker is turning to interiority and is shunning the external world. In the final lines of the third stanza, the speaker is encased in his own mind, unable to connect with 'light' (l. 30) – representing hope and familiarity – from the external world.

Hearing loss has turned the speaker inwards ('Where not one crack | Of light breaks in' (ll. 29-30)), and he feels separated from the geniality of society – 'from the town's genial hubbub' (l. 31). In contrast to the isolation of the images of the trees and darkened doorways the speaker inhabited earlier in the poem, he is now separated from the image of community represented by the 'town's genial hubbub' (l. 31). The poet's choice of the word 'genial' (l. 31) is no mistake; the friendliness and community spirit invoked by the word are exactly what the speaker lacks. His hearing loss means that he no longer feels like he is a part of wider

[13] Martin Atherton, *Deafness, Community and Culture in Britain: Leisure and Cohesion, 1945-1995* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), p.3.

society, and thus can no longer access the 'hubbub' of community life. Martin Atherton notes that '[T]here is certainly no indication that certain aspects of communal deaf leisure (and by extension deaf culture) were the same as those enjoyed by non-deaf people…', which plays into the idea that Nicholson's speaker has been forcibly removed from society by his hearing loss.[14] This, in patients suffering with Presbycusis, can lead to an increased loss of the sense of self. There is also recent medical research to suggest that there is a significant link between severe hearing loss and dementia, the latter of which is characterised by symptoms that exacerbate the ability to fully integrate and participate in society: 'Hearing loss is independently associated with developing dementia and is associated with around a third of all cases. Dementia rates are progressively higher in people with increasingly severe hearing loss'.[15]

Nicholson chooses to include an English idiom – 'Sends me to black | Coventry' (ll. 27-28) – in the third stanza, playing into the wider context of isolation in the poem, as if to make the recipient feel invisible in society. The speaker feels victimised and ignored because of his hearing loss. The 'night' (personified) has sent him 'to Coventry' (l. 28), so to speak, which indicates that he feels shut off from the world due to the loss of one of his senses. Given that Nicholson remained in Millom his entire life (aside from a few years at a sanatorium in the South of England for his health), use of the idiom also plays into the idea that such familiar surroundings to the poet as Millom was, has now been transformed into an unfamiliar space – Coventry. As the poem ends, the speaker highlights his isolation further, firmly imposing an absence of others in his new world of silence. From the desperation that characterised the early stanzas, Nicholson composes the ending as one of reconciliation between speaker and his new local landscape. No longer is the speaker desperate to hear that which he once recognised in the landscape, but instead accepts the reality that he must rely on himself to give definition back to his visual surroundings – a movement towards a new era of selfhood.

The poet does this by offering images of light in the final stanza, in stark contrast to the earlier darkness used to depict the speaker's initial loss of hearing: 'For not from out there | Will come my brightening | … Myself if my only | Lamplighter now' (ll. 32-36). The speaker's lost aural landscape gains redefinition and he has retreated, as he earlier notes, 'in my own skull' (l. 28). The final stanza speaks to the message of the poem's entirety; Nicholson is suggesting that landscapes are personal ('I must illumine my own silence' (l.

[14] Martin Atherton, *Deafness, community and culture in Britain*, p. 8
[15] Ted Leverton, 'Hearing Loss is Important in Dementia', *BMJ: British Medical Journal*, 351 (2015), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/26522321.pdf?ab_segments=0%252FSYC-5910%252Fcontrol&refreqid=excelsior%3Ae16aee0c254ee445e38ba54c21e1d4ee> [accessed 22 July 2021] (para. 4 of 7).

37)). Even though landscapes are, in part, shared entities, enjoyed by locals, tourists, and adventurers alike, they are also personal spaces and self-defining spaces for those who interact with them. Yet as the speaker recognises objects of the visual landscape, in the growing absence of the aural landscape, he redefines the space by ascribing 'speech to the blank faces' (l. 38), noting that 'I must illumine my own silence' (l. 37). The injection of light into the end of the poem offers a sense of moralistic closure; Nicholson uses the realisation of his speaker to encourage his reader to seek their own definition of a landscape, without waiting for definition by others ('Myself is my only | Lamplighter now' (ll. 35-36)).

The interiority of the final stanza offers a sense of closure and safety or solace for both speaker and reader; the opening panic and desperation is quelled, and replaced by resignation, but also determination, to redefine a previously familiar space on new terms ('If the town won't talk, | Must put words in its mouth' (ll. 39-40)). The tone of the final stanza lacks the desperation and despair of the earlier lines in the poem; the speaker uses the word 'must' twice, indicating a sort of defiance towards his loss. The modality is definite; the speaker will, for certain, 'illumine' (l. 37) the silence of his life, and regain a sense of selfhood; there is no doubt as the poem ends that determination characterises the speaker at the close rather than the loss – grief, almost – that characterised the opening. Nicholson's own illumination certainly came through writing and use of his imagination; despite being increasingly deafened to the sounds of the world, his poetry was created with the notion of putting words out into the world to be heard and reflected upon.

Nicholson's 'Hard of Hearing' is not a poem that draws on the poet's conventional backdrop of his beloved South Cumbria, but still exhibits his love for, and understanding of, the landscape. The poem is a challenge to the centrality of sound in ambient literature – in the absence of sound, the loneliness and sense of detachment one might experience through hearing loss must be recovered through the creation of place by other means. From a liminal space, Nicholson attempts to portray his struggle with Presbycusis, on the basis that integration with society is difficult with profound hearing loss (something Nicholson himself experienced). Whilst the speaker's withdrawal from society is troubling, solace is found in the natural world in 'Hard of Hearing'. The poem is a tour de force of the importance of the senses in connecting oneself with nature; the relationship between man and nature is described as such a visceral interaction, based on personal meaning rather than economic value or need. Landscape, as the poem and poet depict, is a lifeline; it is a defining feature of the immediate world and offers selfhood for those who inhabit and embrace it. Nicholson's speaker in 'Hard of Hearing' relies on his immediate landscape in his recovery and reconciliation of his previous life filled with sound, and his new life of silence. At first, the

loss of the audible landscape is akin to tragedy, and the speaker struggles to recognise that which was once so familiar; yet, as the poem develops and closes, the speaker transforms his outlook, and the landscape is once more recognisable – this time, on the speaker's own terms.

The poem is a process of imaginative examination and exploration of synaesthesia; Nicholson transforms a world he had approached predominantly by sound, to a world he must navigate by sight instead. The 'self', the reader and speaker anticipate, is defined more acutely following the speaker's realisation that he must 'illumine' (l. 37) his own world of silence. And, as such, the poem is one of hope and strength; amidst the isolation of a silent world, Nicholson's speaker has found a sense of selfhood in nature, and with it he has experienced the landscape through his other senses, and with an imagination heightened in the absence of sound. The familiar landscape that the speaker must navigate on new terms is a space he can think and grow, and the speaker thus makes the experience of hearing loss, that many will not understand personally, an accessible and tangible one. Nicholson gives a voice to the isolation and withdrawal experienced by those with hearing loss, but also offers a glimmer of hope with his participation in a world understood via his other senses. He reminds the reader of the vital relationship between sound and self in daily life, and, in the absence of sound, the speaker still finds his selfhood and a place in the world; these challenge traditional concepts of belonging – whether through conversation with others, music, language, and wider sociocultural sounds – and instead redefines what it means to make a place one's own.