

The Third Bank of the River Lea: Listening to Waterbodies in East London

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Abstract

With this full-day workshop (or *walkshop*), our aim is to foster horizontal human-river-technology relationships alongside the Lee Navigation in East London, at the venue of NIME 2026. We will explore together how sonic practices in sounding, listening, and recording shape our sensory experiences and relationships to waterbodies and ecological factors. Firstly, we will promote a collective listening walk alongside the Lee Navigation canal as it moves towards its reunification with the rest of the River Lea, where we end our walk. Secondly, participants will work in small groups to explore critical ecological themes and create, capture, or listen to sonic experiences. They will be invited to produce narrative accounts about how and what they discovered, shared, and/or engaged with. The motivations of the workshop are: 1) to foster ecological sensibilities based on listening and care; 2) connect these sensibilities to a broader discussion about urbanised waterbodies and how sound and sonic technologies shape our relationship to them.

Additional Key Words and Phrases: Human-water relationships, relationality, entanglement, attunement, recording, collective listening, critical ecologies, extractivist listening

1 Motivation

There is no fixed or singular identity in a river, ocean, or waterfall. A body of water can be a means for transportation, a static resource, a sacred entity, all of these in convergence, or something in between. Brazilian author Guimarães Rosa's tale *The Third Bank of The River* [13] is an example of this: It describes the journey of a man who silently decides to spend the rest of his days in a small boat. He never leaves his vessel, nor sails to another place. The third bank exists as a metaphor about what exists between the physical banks and arises from the entangled relationship between humans, animals, and the river itself through its physical presence and history. We utilise notion of the "Third Bank" as an entry point for this workshop's approach to dynamic ecology and technology assemblages.

Our sonic relationships, positionalities, methods, and acts of listening also create diverse and unfixed relationalities with ecological entities [9]. In the case of waterbodies, sonification has been used to convey new forms of water-human composition: John Eacott's *Flood Tide* offers an artistic composition "rendered" by tides [4, p. 118]: the tides are mapped and algorithmically translated into notation and tempo marks performed by musicians. Although the tide presents a "predictable structure", anthropogenic and animal interventions (such as flock movements, boat traffic, garbage, and urban construction) create further "harmonics and resonances" through their patterns [4].

The listener (who is always listened to, in return) comes into being through relations with sound, space, body, technologies, and the more-than-human. What emerges is a form of "ecopedagogy" [7, p. 11], a way to activate and/or broaden the perception of communities, things, and ways of being that, often ignored by our sight, can be activated by exercises of hearing. In working with recording technologies, sonification, and musical expression, we explore in this workshop the incorporation of spiritual, phenomenological, and metaphorical connections into sonic practices and research at the New Interfaces for Musical Expression (NIME) conference, engaging bodies of water and other ecological entities.

Previous works at NIME advocate for technological sustainability [8] and a political agenda for our work [10], function as social mediators of ecological awareness [14], and address forms of environmental kinship [2]. Jaime Rojas' *Soundmap of the Iguazu River* [15, 16], for instance, uses open-source libraries like Gibber and Lealeft to map the Iguazu as it runs

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Fig. 1. Views of the Lee Navigation's towpath, our proposed walking route, outside of the LUL campus, and the human and more-than-human assemblages along the water (photos by Luiz Ribeiro Fonseca).

through Paraguay, Brazil, and Argentina. The project's website offers a map and several audio files [15]. By clicking on different points on the map, users can sonically navigate the river.

Taking Rosa's, Eacott's and Rojas' works as initial provocations, this workshop - or *walkshop* [6, 12] - will invite participants to engage with waterbody relationalities through experiences of sound and listening. Participants are invited to bring devices (e.g., recorders, instruments), tools, and any other high- or low-fidelity approaches that they would like to explore in their reflection of waterbodies. Shaped by our lived experiences and personal histories with waterbodies, we will work together, and in smaller groups, to engage locally with the Lee Navigation (Section 4.2), the canal that surrounds Here East and Loughborough University London (LUL), the venue of NIME'26. We will query the plural perspectives that make up the River Lea and its diversion along the Lee Navigation, as a greater entity beyond the physical waterway, and how these can be listened to and engaged with through sound. Participants will interact and explore relationships with the river in many ways: they can sing to it, "interview" it, record it, play for it, or compose together with it, asking whether and how sound technology can foster respectability and non-hierarchical relations with these ecosystems.

However, sound-driven engagement and technological approaches to listening are not free of problems. This workshop will also challenge the extractivist properties of field recording [17]. We will together explore whether non-extractive listening-recording practices are possible and how. We consider some of the more typical modalities of interacting with nature sounds, for instance through soundscapes, field recording and engagement with waterbodies through hydrophonic recordings. Making way for other relationalities, we also consider how we can listen and interact with a space besides recording just below the surface – through working with inaudible sound and listening through opacities in the visuals, history, and community around a river – and how we shape our spaces through acts of listening [5, 9]. We will consider:

| | Activity | Duration (min) |
|---------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------|
| Pre-Workshop | Registration Form Completion | - |
| | Opening | 10 |
| | Organiser Introductions | 10 |
| Part I (3 hrs) | Participant Introductions | 30 |
| | Break & Transition | 10 |
| | Sound walk & Listening Exercises | 90 |
| | Group Discussion | 30 |
| | Lunch | 90 |
| Part II (3 hrs) | Small Group Theme Explorations | 110 |
| | Break & Transition | 10 |
| | Discussion & Closing | 60 |

Table 1. Proposed schedule for the workshop. Activities taking place outside are marked in green.

What should we record, why, and when? What do we do with this data? How does the data we collect shape our relationships with the environment and our understanding of it, acknowledging that multiple perspectives are possible [1]?

These questions highlight the main motivation of the workshop, where we will entangle audio interfaces with “technologies of sensing” – from our ears, through our bodies, recording devices, and other materials that can carry the trace of the canal. Through listening to each other and the river itself, we will explore together how narratives about the environment and our relationship with it emerge through our dialogue and exploratory activities. Our main aim is that everyone, regardless of prior ecological work or experience with ecological sound, can engage in discussion about how technology shapes worldview and relationships, learn with each other, and create something about and with the river, its inhabitants, and its imaginaries.

2 Workshop Description

The full-day workshop will be broken down into two parts of three hours each. An overview can be found in Table 1.

2.1 First Half (3 hours)

The first half will involve a general opening with the introduction of organisers and participants, a short context of the River Lea and the Lee Navigation, and a sound walk through its banks.

2.1.1 Opening (15 minutes). We begin with a general introduction to the workshop’s aims and methodologies, as well as the background of the River Lea and the Lee Navigation, which we will work with during our walk (Section 4.2).

2.1.2 Organiser introductions (15 minutes). We will briefly introduce our positions as listeners, artists, designers, data scientists, and ecologists, discussing our research interests and the listening approaches we will engage during the day.

2.1.3 Participant presentations (20 minutes). Participants are invited to introduce themselves and the materials, instruments, or recording devices they brought with them to the workshop. This is an opportunity for everyone to get to know each other, share the views and stories about waterbodies they provided when signing up, and to add new layers through others’ perspectives.

2.1.4 Break & transition (10 minutes). We will have a short break will allow participants space to process all the information and prepare for the sound walk, also allowing a little buffer time for anything before we leave the campus. This will also be a chance to continue informal conversations sparked by common research interests, should they wish to.

2.1.5 Sound walk (90 minutes). We then embark on a listening-recording walk alongside the river. We aim to cover an area of 1km (0.9 miles) from LUL to the London Stadium and Old Ford Lock (Figure 3), where the Lee Navigation returns to the River Lea. The walk itself takes approximately 20 minutes each way, leaving room for stopping and different paces.

We will engage in a variety of listening exercises guided by the workshop organisers, as well as participants’ inputs as they emerge. Example provocations include:

- How do we take time to slow down and engage with different modalities, going beyond the technological to cultural, environmental, and relational factors?

- How can these technologies of sensing open new forms of attunement, i.e., listening to the otherwise inaudible?
- Why record? What sounds *should* we record? Are there any we should *not*? What do we do with this data?
- What is the difference in listening *to* and listening *with*? What shapes each experience?
- What do the material properties of the canal’s waters – e.g. opacity, temperature, pollution, sediment, and current – mean for listening?

2.1.6 *Discussion (30 minutes)*. At the end of the sound walk, we will take time to discuss impressions, recordings, or listening practices that were fostered by the experience and emerging relations about the river, its inhabitants, and the workshop participants. The format will be a dialogic one: everyone can speak, but it is not mandatory.

2.2 Second Half (3 hours)

In the second part of the workshop, following a break for lunch, participants will form small groups for in-depth engagement with experiences along the canal. After, we will discuss each groups’ creations, as well as possible outcomes and ways of collectively sharing the work.

2.2.1 *Small group thematic explorations (110 minutes)*. Based on discussions before, during, and after the earlier sound walk, participants will self-group according to themes of interest brought into or emergent in the workshop. In small groups of around 3-4 people (the number of groups will vary depending on the attendance), they will be invited to create materials, document experiences, or engage otherwise on that reflect what river listening might be. There will be no mandatory format nor specific tool: participants will be invited to utilise whatever data they choose to collect, focusing on emergent experience and the devices they bring to the workshop. The results can take the shape of a composition, a recording, a drawing or poem, or any other format. Additional materials will be provided to support speculation, reflection, and creative representations (Section 4.1), in addition to what participants choose to bring themselves.

For those that may not have a clear idea of what to focus on, we will also provide suggested prompts of “water listening”. Thematic suggestions include examining the (1) relationship between humans and the river, (2) non-humans and the river, (3) pollution and stewardship, (4) development and gentrification, and (5) the physical containment of urban waterbodies. We will direct participants’ focus to ideas of collective listening and dialogic engagement with their topic of choice. Finally, we will ask them to produce an expression of their collective listening to bring back to the final discussion. This can take the form of a recording, a composition, a drawing, an interview with a boat dweller, a collection or assemblage of found objects, or something else.

2.2.2 *Break & transition (10 minutes)*. A short break will again facilitate transition back into the campus space, where we will conclude the workshop.

2.2.3 *Closing discussion (60 minutes)*. Finally, we will connect the materials created by the groups, fostering a reflexive discussion. Each of the small groups (estimating 4-5 groups of 4 participants) will be given 5-7 minutes to share their collective listening practice and whatever they have generated, gathered, recorded, or reflected on. After this, we will revisit our initial questions, introduced during the soundwalk, and collaboratively discuss potential future practices to engage with ecologies in sonic practice.



Fig. 2. Map of the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park Waterways (available from the Canal River Trust website [3]).

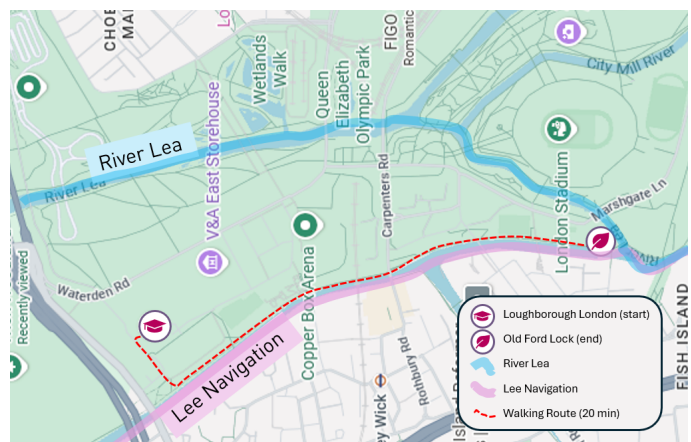


Fig. 3. Our proposed walking route from LUL to the Old Ford Lock, near the Lee Navigation and Lea River (re)convergence.

2.3 Post-Workshop Activities

Following the NIME conference, we will compile documentation in various formats (written, recorded, photographed, etc.) with participants and on a dedicated website, as a digital portfolio for further engagement. Depending on interest and the kinds of materials generated through this reflective listening workshop, we can also consider the release of audio or a collective audio piece on streaming platforms.

3 Organisers

Ania Mokrzycka is an interdisciplinary artist and a doctoral researcher at Loughborough University London. Her practice-based research investigates how practices of submersion with(in) the ocean can generate other modes of listening-sensing and relation, transforming processes of artistic making. Situating listening outside the rigid dichotomy of aurality and visuality, her work engages transdisciplinary methodologies and draws on theoretical frameworks that foreground the radical indeterminacy of space-time-matter.

Luiz Ribeiro Fonseca is a doctoral researcher at the Institute for Creative Futures - Loughborough University London and a Techne DTP scholarship holder. He investigates sonic practices in Brazilian ecological activism, questioning how sound making can intertwine climate collapse with colonialist, capitalist, and techno-scientific ideals.

Vitória Croda is a PhD student at the Institute for Creative Futures of Loughborough University. She researches strategies of resistance to data colonialism in Latin America, more specifically on how to build alternative futures taking grassroots social movements as inspiration.

Karina Townsend is a creative technologist and intrepid sonic adventurer. Her practice explores hearing loss and concepts of isolation and connection via DIY super-sensory devices.

Inês Nolasco (she/her) is a Postdoctoral Researcher at Earth Species Project, working in computational bioacoustics and animal communication. Her research focuses on developing machine learning methods to improve conservation efforts and biodiversity monitoring and understand how animals communicate. In doing so, she aims to foster greater empathy and acceptance towards other life forms.

Courtney N. Reed (she/her) is a Lecturer (Assistant Professor) working between the Institutes for Digital Technologies and Creative Futures at Loughborough London. Her work explores how bodies and subjective embodied experiences are honoured, conceptualised, and collaborated with in music performance. She is interested in meaning-making processes when working with ambiguity, metaphor, and non-dualism in digital musical instrument design.

4 Technical & Space Requirements

The event will be held in-person only with the necessity of on-site engagement. We aim for between 15-20 participants, not including organisers. To facilitate the opening presentation and closing discussions, we will ideally have access to a classroom with a projector and group table setup on the LUL campus. Necessary attention will be given to accessibility inside and outside of the university; the section of towpath chosen is wheelchair accessible from LUL to Old Ford Lock and participants will be asked to bring anything necessary for comfortable walking and spending time outside. In the case that it is raining (as it often does in London), participants will also be asked to bring waterproof jackets and organisers will supply reusable ponchos and umbrellas as needed, incorporating the weather into the listening experience.

4.1 Materials

Participants will be asked to bring any materials they are interested to work with according to their own histories and relationships to waterbodies, indicated in the sign-up and Call for Participation (Section 5). Participants will also be asked to utilise recording devices they already have, if applicable, or even their phones should they wish to document sounds. The organisational team can provide some handheld Zoom recorders, depending on interest from the group. We will also supply craft materials such as paper, card, markers, pencils, watercolour paints, modelling clay to support reflective practice in group explorations.

4.2 Dialogue with the Lee and Lea

The Lee Navigation (or simply Lee) is 28-mile (45-kilometre) long canalised body of water. It starts in the city of Luton, about 35 miles (55km) north of Central London, at Leagrave in the Chiltern Hills, crosses the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park (where the LUL campus is located) and meets the Thames in Bow Creek (Figure 2). Since the 15th century, the canal is part of England's (and especially London's) history of construction and destruction of waterways for several activities: navigation, exportation, food supply, and inhabitation. Unlike completely human-made canals, the Lee is a "patchwork": some parts of it are "natural", and some sections are "man-made" [11]. According to the Canal River Trust, the "spelling 'Lea' is used when referring to the natural river, whilst 'Lee' covers the canalised navigation and man-made features" [3].

5 Call for Participation

We will invite participants from NIME community and other students, artists, researchers, and musicians to register for the workshop through a Microsoft Form (hosted on LUL servers, see below). Here, they will be asked to provide their name, contact, and a brief reflection on the question: “What is your relationship with rivers, oceans, and other waterbodies (Please write a couple of sentences)?” Finally, participants will be asked to indicate any tool they might want to bring and engage with (recording devices, pen and notepad, listening devices, phones, tablets, etc.) during the workshop.

The form is not eliminatory or meant for use to select participants, rather it will help us to come up with “seed ideas” and engage with participants’ own concepts and inquiries during the workshop. The form will be displayed on the workshop’s website, the NIME Forum and programme on the NIME 2026 site, and shared further on social media (Instagram, LinkedIn, Facebook, etc.) and in the organiser’s own networks .

5.1 Call

We invite the NIME community, ecologists, researchers, designers, musicians, artists, creative practitioners, and the general community to our full-day workshop “The Third Bank of the River Lea: Listening to Waterbodies in East London”, to take place at this year’s New Interfaces for Musical Expression (NIME) conference. During the workshop, we will discuss and engage together with the multiple identities, phases, and histories of waterbodies. To explore the practicalities of human-machine-water relationships, we will promote a listening sound walk alongside the Lee Navigation canals in East London, near the Loughborough University London host campus. We will query the plural perspectives that make up the River Lea and its diversion along the Lee Navigation, as a greater entity beyond the physical waterway, and how these can be listened to and engaged with through sound. Participants will explore relationships and interact with the river in many ways, asking whether and how sound technology can foster respectability and non-hierarchical relations with these ecosystems.

To register your participation, please complete this form: [\[click here\]](#)

Accessibility: *We are committed to making this workshop accessible to all. If you have any accessibility requirements we can support, please let us know in the form.*

5.2 Website

We will host the Call for Participation and provide the information about the workshop on the workshop site at <https://thechaoslab.github.io/thirdbank/>. Initially, this will also include schedule and information about the organisers. After the workshop, we will share the work generated in the workshop and information about the contributing participants, should they wish to be named.

6 Ethical Standards

We acknowledge that our interaction with waterbodies and other ecological factors are expressions of and enacted through our relationships with the world [9]. At the same time, Indigenous scholarship shows that there is no friction-free wilderness, rather associations of care and codependency [17]. The workshop will adhere to standards and guidelines outlined in NIME’s Principles & Code of Practice on Ethical Research. We take special care for environmental and diversity considerations as outlined above to acknowledge pluralities and care in our engagement with natural phenomena and non-humans. After acceptance of this proposal, we will conduct a formal ethical review and participants will be consulted prior to the workshop to ensure that they are able to make informed choices to contribute their data or not as we engage in this work. Where data is collected about participants, their reflection and collective listening, and the artefacts generated in this workshop, we will adhere to given consent and data will be stored safely in dedicated servers at Loughborough University London. Anything shared will be made accessible, for instance on the workshop’s website, through Creative Commons CC-BY licenses, except where inappropriate for personal data protection; for instance, to keep the privacy of sensitive artistic processes and personal narratives.

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