

On dis-location: listening and re-composing with others

By Ximena Alarcón

Since 2012 I compose telematic¹ sonic performances using long-distance bi-directional transmission of sound through the Internet: a mediation that strengthens metaphors of migration and dislocation. I am interested in the situations of connection and disconnection that are created and in the 'in-between' sonic spaces, which defy predictability. In the performances (Fig.1), geographical migrants participate as well as other people with interest in the experience of cultural dis-location. I invite them to work with spoken word and vocal expression and pre-recorded or acoustic sounds, as driving forces for their exchange. With this work my intention is the exploration of sonic spaces that support the search for *sense of place*, healing the contradictory feelings associated with the migratory experience. Here, I am reflecting on this creative process, and the aesthetics produced as the result of the interactions between people, through improvisatory sound practice when listening and performing in the distance, and the mediation of networking technologies.

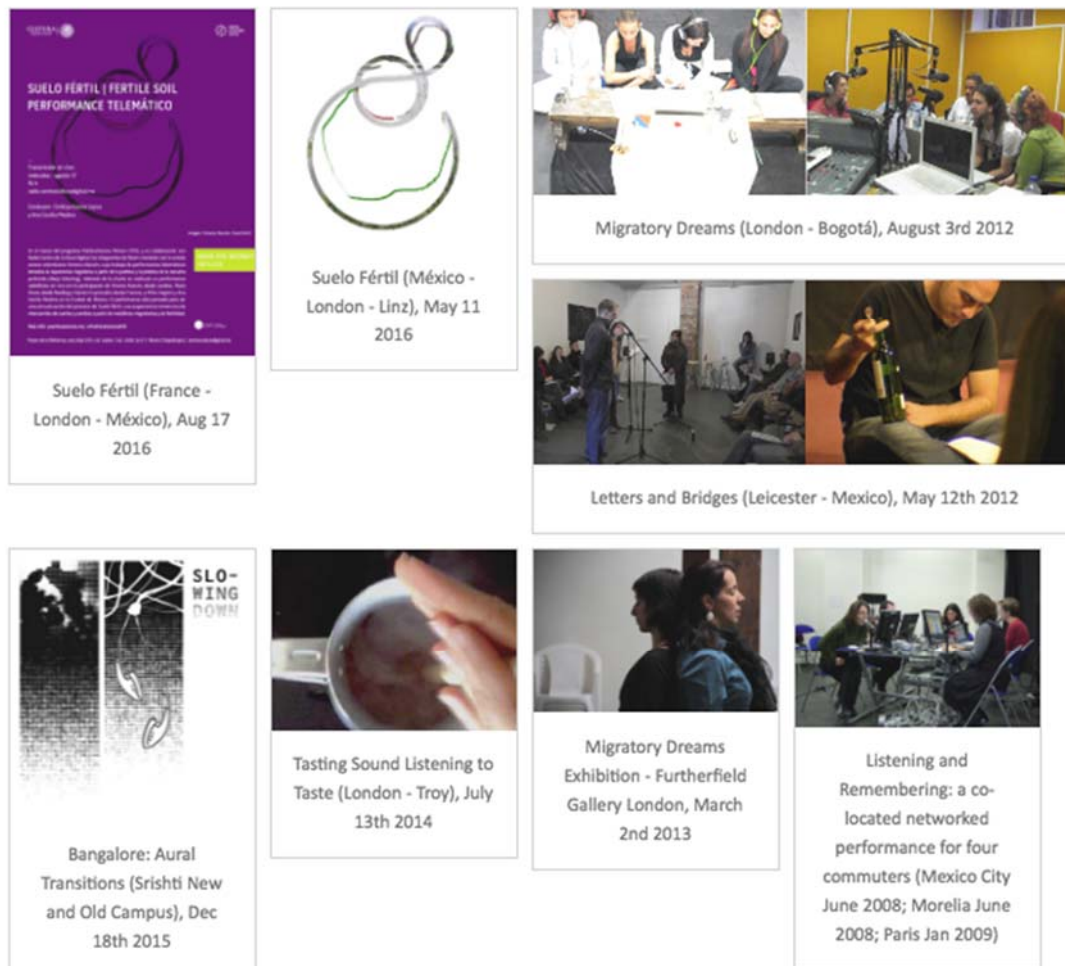


Fig 1. Sample of telematic sonic performances by Ximena Alarcón

¹ Telematic sonic performances involve telecommunications and computers in the transmission of unidirectional or bidirectional streaming of audio.

1. Drafting alone: on relations, migration and sense of place

I am from Colombia and a migrant living in the UK for 16 years now. This experience greatly informs my artwork and research. Recently, I have become interested in relationality and how this contextualizes my individual and collective artistic practice. I write poetry, text scores, and play with words. I improvise alone using PD patches, through which I can hear myself in alternative spaces and times, and play with the words to re-compose myself, opening to new sounds and meanings². This brings a heightened awareness of my own voice, regarding the use of multiple languages and memories, as a form of finding a location. I like to experience the fragmentation of this voice, and to establish conversations with the many fragments that create a feeling of wholeness. I am interested in how technology can aid the creative weaving of these fragments.

In improvising with other artists such as in “4 4 Flow” (2014)³, (Fig 2) and using algorithms for pre-recorded voice fragments’ random choice with Ron Herrema in “Mezcla”(2015)⁴, (Fig3) I have tended to abstract words when these acquire too much weight, creating a sort of made-up language using non-verbal vocal sounds, body gestures and silence. This language feels perhaps more fluid than my speaking in any of the languages I know: my native Spanish, my second language English. Fragmentation opens space for feelings overcoming meanings. My telematic sonic performances are born from these experimentations, as a form and intention of *re-composing* the self with others.



Fig 2. 4 4 Flow free improvisation in Chisenhale Dance Studio.

² Happy Birthday piece played as part of SPUR platform at Tate Britain January 2015
<https://soundcloud.com/speakingof/happy-birthday-fragmented>

³ An excerpt of “4 4 Flow” is at <https://vimeo.com/91291563>

⁴ See <https://soundcloud.com/speakingof/mezcla>



Fig 3. Improvisation “Mezcla”. Ximena Alarcón and Ron Herrema in Lancaster Arts Centre.

In an analysis regarding the conceptual and artistic expressions⁵ of relationality, the scholar Isabel Hoving (2007) speculates on a *migratory aesthetics* as “characterized by its success in interweaving and interconnecting the fragments, disengaged from older structures and discourses, into a pattern woven from the active experience of the new global processes”, or rather “shaped by the tensions between the desire to know world-wide movements of migration and creolisation, and the desire to renounce all knowledge altogether” (p.189) for a new start.

Reflecting on my personal and collective work aesthetics and intentions, I assert connections as fundamental, both as a metaphor and as an actual technical possibility between distant locations (Fig 4). Equally, the interweaving that happens in the performances with others, supporting own individual re-connections.

⁵ In Caribbean writers such as Édouard Glissant and Jamaica Kincaid.

SUELO FERTIL TECHNICAL WORKFLOW ORIGINAL PLAN

MEXICO-LONDON-LINZ TELEMATIC PERFORMANCE

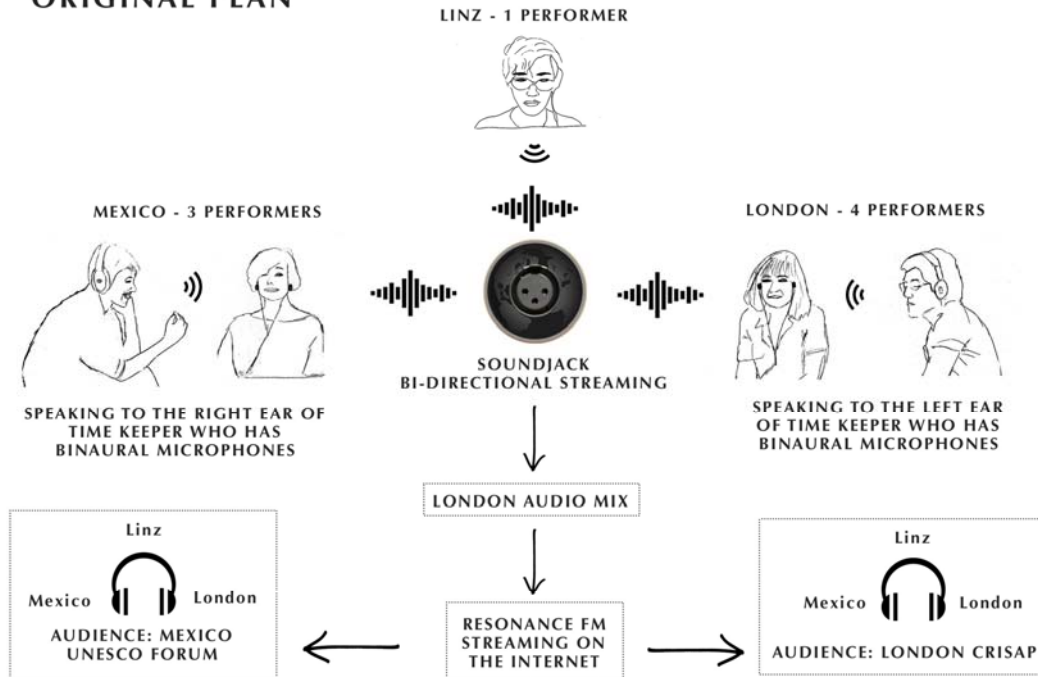


Fig 4. Technical workflow telematic sonic performance “Suelo Fértil”, Mexico-London-Linz. May 11, 2016.

I also draw on Jennifer E. Cross’ (2015) useful interdisciplinary framework of *sense of place* focusing on the social interactions as processes lived by people regarding place attachment. Within her processes⁶, I might say that my *sensory* work interrelates *narratives*, some of which have some historical links, fostering *spiritual* bonds: intangible and hard to explain links that are created by people who don’t know each other but connect within the creative process⁷.

I am interested in: listening and performing as the practices that help the weaving of different fragments and narratives; sound as a generator of space for questioning, searching and asserting *senses of place*; and networked technologies of sound transmission to mediate the connections. I situate my work within networked art, in which, as curator and theorist Garrett Lynch suggests, “[r]elationships are produced as a result of connections which enable performative scenarios”⁸.

Sonically, these relations could be naturally located in the text and graphic scores by Pauline Oliveros (2013), part of her Deep Listening practice (Oliveros, 2005), which invite people to discover relationships between the sounds that surround us, and the sounds felt inwardly: real, imagined and remembered. The addition of technological platforms and virtual spaces stimulates both the reach and the focus of listening, and adds more complexity to the sonic relationship with space and time. This is how eventually I have encountered the term

⁶ The seven processes proposed by Cross are: Sensory, Narrative, Historical, Spiritual, Ideological, Commodifying, and Material dependence.

⁷ See video showing the process of creation of *Suelo Fértil [Fertile Soil]*: telematic sonic performance at <https://vimeo.com/224248104>

⁸ See <http://www.asquare.org/profile/> Accessed 19/04/17

“relational listening” as an inspiring concept, which has been explored by Lawrence English (2015), where the psychological and technological processes are part of the possibilities of listening to others’ listening.

Thus, to re-compose myself in the “in-between” space in the migratory context, I find it important that we listen to the self and listen to and with others, using sound transmission and networking technologies that make space and time relations more complex, and at the same time facilitate the making of connections through ‘interfaces for relational listening’ (Alarcón, 2016).

2. Creating with others

By integrating Pauline Oliveros’ Deep Listening practice, including sonic meditations, dreams and body awareness⁹ in the creative and performative process, I invite participants to engage with their individual stories and feelings, and to exchange these with others’, thereby generating sonic interrelations of experiences of cultural dislocation (Fig 5). In previous projects, this process has lasted from one week to one month. The practice helps to access “in-between” sonic spaces, which are interstitial spaces in the body and mind. This reflection involves sounds of the environment, voice, language, and also music, and the balance that occurs when listening to the self and at once listening to the others – either in co-located¹⁰ and networked environments.



Fig 5. Participants in “Migratory Dreams” performance. Pre-performance workshops.

Using networking software to connect with others, and sometimes working in the same physical space, they practice listening exercises that prompt reflections on their listening

⁹ The Deep Listening practice led by Pauline Oliveros, IONE and Heloise Gold, must include listening, sounding, dreaming, and body awareness, to fulfill the whole practice.

¹⁰ Co-located refers to the environment where performers are in the same physical space, and to distinguish them from the ones who are in distant locations.

journals, which they have been asked to keep during the whole pre-performance process. These reflections are used as key materials that will inform individual narratives (Fig 6). I have invited participants to work with loved ones' letters¹¹, dreams¹², migrant food¹³, fertility and soil metaphors¹⁴, urban space¹⁵ and nomadic voice¹⁶, and listening rituals in Colombia post-conflict¹⁷. These can be seen as themes, departures, triggers, but also as sonic spaces. For instance dreams are packed with narratives, but in themselves they are interstitial spaces where sounds are present, and might be amplified in the performance as if the performers were in a dream state. In that way, I welcome the improvisatory immersion in the experimentation with language and other sonic possibilities that participants' narratives have to offer. Stories become abstract in the "in-between" sonic space and defy literal meaning. Meanings transform when the interrelations of their stories and spontaneous aesthetics emerge, while sounding and listening with others.



Fig 6. Writing of listening journals in pre-performance process "Migratory Dreams" performance.

Participants with no training in sound performance bring their voices into a diversity of forms, which come from various traditions of communication, being on a public stage or in a private conversation. I think of the performances as a stage for questioning and unlearning aesthetic forms, achieved through the sharing and transformation of narratives. People free their voices, sometimes sounding assertive, nervous or hesitant, and these soundings evolve as if their subtle expressions were questioning our relationship with listening and sounding. The transformation in participants' expressions sound to me like an empowerment of tacit intentions such as 'let's do it!', the possibility to say 'what I want to say' in the way in 'which I would like to say it'. They are not monologues, but original individual narratives that are supported by others' listening and soundings, and are open to surprise.

3. Framing a score for a telematic sonic performance

¹¹ "Letters and Bridges" performance between Leicester and Mexico City, May 12, 2012: <http://ximenaalarcon.net/lettersandbridgesperformance.html>

¹² "Migratory Dreams" performance between Bogotá and London, August 3, 2012: <http://ximenaalarcon.net/migratorydreamsperformance.html>

¹³ "Tasting sound, Listening to Taste" performance between London and Troy, July 13th, 2013: <http://ximenaalarcon.net/tastingsoundlisteningtotaste.html>

¹⁴ "Suelo Fértil [Fertile Soil]", Mexico-London-Linz, May 11, 2016: <https://vimeo.com/224248104>

¹⁵ See <http://ximenaalarcon.net/bangaloreauraltransitions.html>.

¹⁶ For "In Transglasphone" see <https://soundcloud.com/femalelaptoporchestra/in-transglasphone-at-cmmr2016>

¹⁷ "Triskele: Escucha en Espiral" between Bogotá and Medellín, and Medellín and Bogotá, July 14th and July 18th 2017 <https://soundcloud.com/speakingof/sets/triskele-escuchar-en-espiral>

Long-distance communication embodies a telephonic gesture, we expect that that someone on the other side might respond, and her/his response might inform the next expression. The philosopher Vilém Flusser (2014) envisioned the telephone network “as a model of a network that keeps branching out, for example, for reversible video networks and computer terminals [...] moving toward a telematic society of self-recognition and the acknowledgement of others” (141). Departing from the telephonic gesture, improvising with others between distant locations strengthens people’s listening attention, increases the level of surprise, enhances the awareness of the self and the others, and opens up a space for the unpredictable to occur.

The telematic sonic performances in my work contain both improvisatory and composed components. After participants have followed a creative process, and as I respond to the participants’ work, I listen in my mind to my intention with the encounters that the performance will generate and create a score to trigger improvisatory actions between participants within a specific duration of time. The score takes shape according to the technologies used, the venue, the location, and the narratives produced by participants (Fig 7, Fig 8, Fig 9).



Fig 7. Score 1 “Suelo Fértil” for the performers in conversation

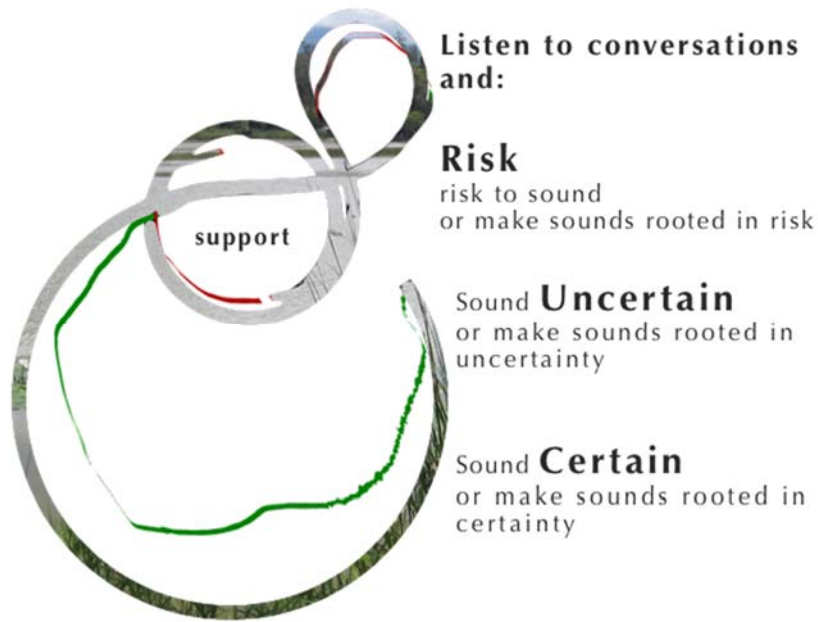


Fig 8. Score # 2 for “Suelo Fértil” for the active audience to support conversations

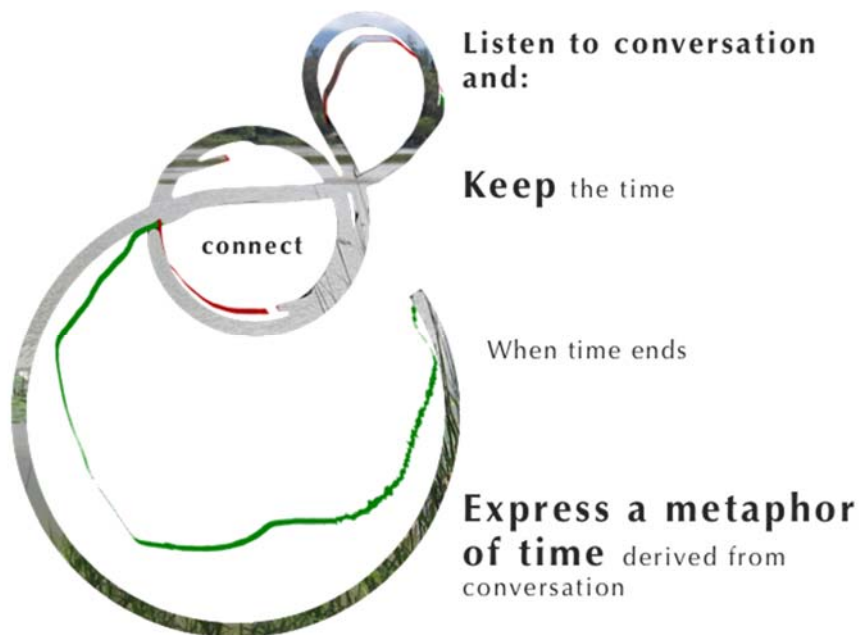


Fig 9. Score # 3 “Suelo Fértil” for the time keeper who is wearing binaural microphones

Listening to the double way communication between performers (bidirectional streaming) using loudspeakers for the amplification creates a live broadcast experience, where performers and audience can respond with the freedom and playfulness of not being seen, while calling and waiting for a response from someone unknown. An example of this playfulness can be heard in the performance *Letters and Bridges*, which took place between Leicester and Mexico City (2012)¹⁸ (Fig 10). An improvisation by Sally and César, two performers, takes them and the audience by surprise.

¹⁸ For *Letters and Bridges* see <https://vimeo.com/79626844>.



Fig. 10. Performance “Letters and Bridges” between Leicester and Mexico City. May 12, 2012

In some performances, listening via headphones creates a shared intimacy. A shared intimacy with others who are far away and also, in some cases, with people who are physically close. An example of this experience can be heard in the performance *Migratory Dreams*, which took place between London and Bogotá (2012) (Fig 11).



Fig.11. Performance “Migratory Dreams” between London and Bogotá. August 03, 2012

When listening and performing in a private space, far from a stage, people perform freely away from the audiences’ gaze; when listening and performing on stage, participants embrace their nervousness to overcome the presence of an audience. Participants have found such public performances as a public stage to catalyse feelings of dislocation through sounding alone and with others.

The question of how to incorporate the audience is still an open one. In “Letters and Bridges” and “Suelo Fértil” I have tried to include audiences in different ways, for instance by calling it an “active audience”, where members of the audience become performers in certain parts of the performance, or as an audience in the classical sense. To be in tune with the performers’ work, in my most recent performance *TRISKELE* (2017) (Fig 12), I invited the audience to do some warm-up body energy exercise, from the Deep Listening practice, to connect with the performance space. In this way, performers might feel more attentively listened to.

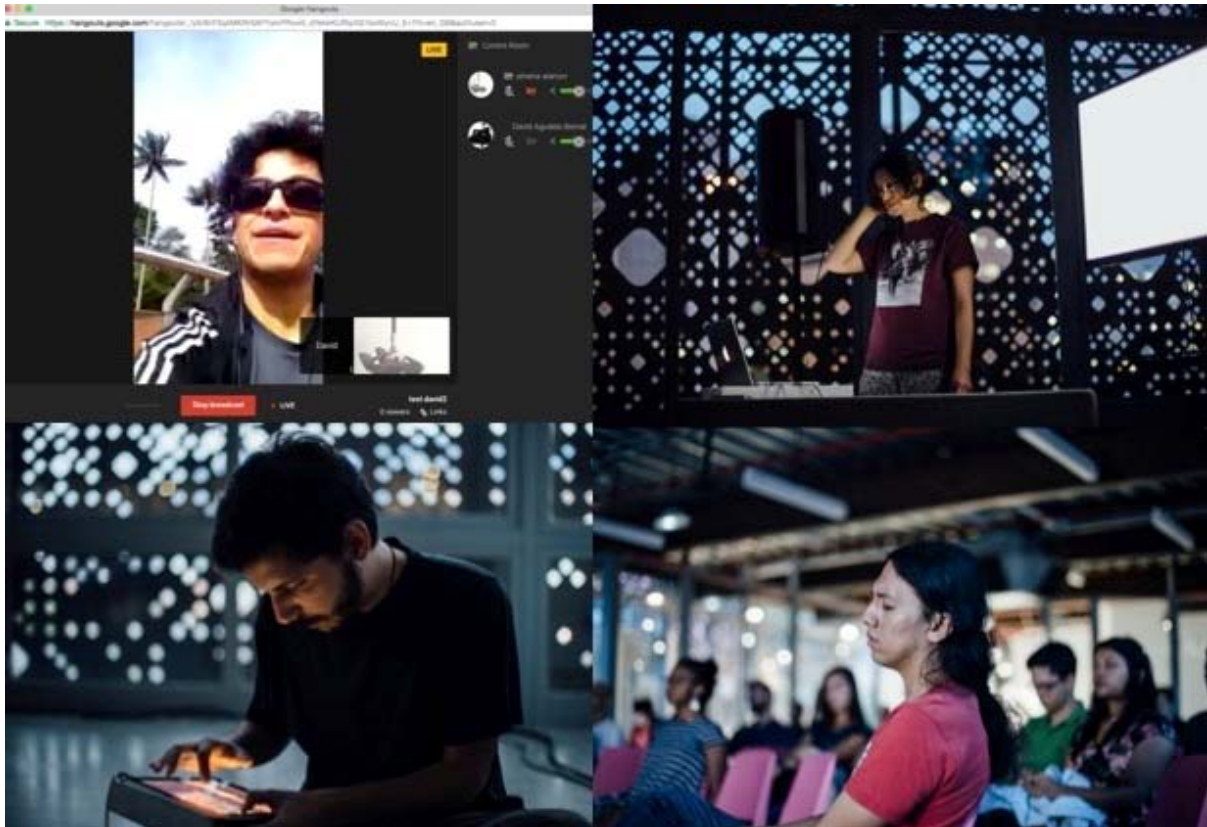


Fig 12. Performance “Triskele: Escuchar en Espiral” between Bogotá and Medellín, July 14th and 18th 2017

Performances such as “Migratory Dreams” and “Suelo Fértil” have incorporated radio broadcasts. Live broadcasting positions the performative experience within a radio transmission. It is a one-way transmission about a bi-directional telematic transmission, bringing with it specific sonic expectations and the time frame inherent in the radio format. Although with this approach it is possible to reach a larger audience, the focus can be turned towards this “one-way” transmission and away from the original “double way” transmission, which belongs to a format of unpredictability because in telematic performances internet connections might be interrupted. Without a live broadcast, there is less fear about disconnection; for instance, in the performance *Letters and Bridges*, we experienced an interrupted internet connection of about five minutes, after which we had to go through the whole process of connecting again, which was an enjoyable part of the performance itself, cheered along by the audience.

4. Streaming Technologies

Each performance reflects on the streaming technologies used, the experiences that they provide, and how these inform our *gestures* for listening and performing “in the distance”. At the same time they are also informed by the audio quality, the venue’s approach to internet connectivity, and the cultural and social possibilities of the performance. Technologies raise questions of control, which are inherent in the performance production, and which also parallel the human migratory experience.

The performances I created have used different software packages, to different effects. Jacktrip¹⁹, for example, uses uncompressed sound resulting in CD audio quality with no

¹⁹ Developed since 2008, by Chris Chafe and Juan Pablo Cáceres at Stanford University. <https://ccrma.stanford.edu/groups/soundwire/software/jacktrip/>

perceived delay - the feeling of distance minimizes. This software demands high-speed Internet connection and a good bandwidth, which is usually found in larger institutions such as universities. Also I have used Tube Plug²⁰ (no longer supported) and Soundjack²¹, both of which work with high quality compression of sound and so offer the possibility of networking through domestic Internet connections. Social VoIP networks such as Google Hangouts on air (stereo) now offer a good sound quality, but still use inbuilt compression that limits collective sonic vocal expressions by experiencing the annihilation of one or more voices, when the sounds are more varied than voice or with an unexpected amplitude. The recently re-developed mobile app LiveShout by Locus Sonus and SARC offers bi-directional streaming from mobile phones, freeing up technical issues of network permissions, and promoting the mobility of participants – resulting in a more direct and continuously changing relationship with the physical territory.²²

Once the connection is established, the question of the ‘invisible’, simple or embedded interface, arises. Going further from technicalities, I am interested in the creation of interfaces for relational listening which dynamically attempt to bring performers in the ‘in-between’ sonic space, departing from performers’ agency and own expressions generated in real-time, as well as with pre-recorded material.

5. Interface: to connect and create sense of place

Derived from these experiences, I am focusing on the body as keeping memory of place. In “A taxonomy for Listening and Performing ‘in-between’ spaces with mobile apps” (Alarcón, 2017), I suggest the exploration and tracking of slow body movements in space, together with the perception of physical space in local and distant locations, to expand awareness of sound in space/time in the ‘in-betweenness’ of the migratory context. Thus, I see my artwork as evolving towards the creation of a system that interrogates the body as an interface for relational listening. With the current project INTIMAL, funded by a Marie Curie Fellowship and developed at the University of Oslo, I am focusing on individual stories as told by Colombian migrant women. INTIMAL will be a “physical-virtual” embodied system, to support migrants’ interaction with body, voice, memories, dreams, and oral history archives, integrating all into a telematic sonic performative artistic practice. In this context the project will explore “relational listening” in depth, incorporating technological innovations such as sonification-of-body-movement²³. This will help to explore individual and collective embodied memories of place, and will serve as catalyst for healing and reconciliation within the context of Colombian post-conflict and peace building. This is a case study that will suggest with its findings the use of the INTIMAL in other contexts of migration and dislocation.

Recalling *migratory aesthetics*, I would say that my work creates artistic platforms to weave fragments from the self, with focused communities and real-time, improvisatory and pre-recorded narratives. The aim is to re-invent a migratory space which acts as a space to perceive and create *senses of place* anywhere, made from the intangible sonic virtuality, established through creative connections, interactions, which are triggered by listening and relationality.

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²⁰ Tube Plug is by Jörg Stelkness.

²¹ Soundjack is by Alexander Carôt. <http://www.soundjack.eu/index.php>

²² In “A taxonomy for Listening and Performing ‘in-between’ migratory spaces using mobile apps” in *Wi: Journal of Mobile Media*. Vol 11 No 1 (2017), I imagine options of performing “in-betweenness” with mobile apps.

²³ See the work by Alexander Refsum Jensenius: <http://www.arj.no/tag/micromovement/>

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