

The Crisis of Sensory Citizenship in Dense Urban Living

Kelvin E.Y. Low, Noorman Abdullah

National University of Singapore

Introduction

In June 2021, Indian-Singaporean Livanesh Ramu was going about his bi-weekly Hindu prayer routine just outside of his flat, which involved ringing a bell for five minutes, when he was ‘rudely interrupted by a neighbour loudly clanging a gong and moving animatedly in what appeared to be the common corridor area’.¹ According to news reports, Ramu has lived in this flat for more than two decades and never has had a confrontation with his neighbours about his bell-ringing prayer routine. Yet, that day, as captured in a video that Ramu had posted on Facebook, the woman ‘can be seen aggressively hitting the gong over and over again for around 16 seconds, before giving Livanesh [Ramu] one last pointed glance and heading back into her own unit’. Ramu notes in his Facebook post that his family has never encountered any issues, but ‘with COVID we have a new norm’.² On a daily basis, residents in Singapore may be accosted by a whole host of sensory registers in their home environments that can be overwhelming. Different forms of sensory infractions between neighbours include noisy behaviour (as the above encounter over prayer routines shows) and olfactory transgressions, among others. These sensory registers become further pronounced given the longer periods of time people spend at home owing to COVID-19 restrictions on work-related mobility (Lee and Jeong 2021; Quah and Chun 1992). If a dense urban ecology of residents sharing more intimate social and sensory spaces in their day-to-day living becomes more intensified, then disputes as a result of perceived sensory infractions are bound to occur.

Sensory landscapes of urban living in densely populated cities such as Singapore have undergone profound shifts given the current COVID-19 crisis. Singapore is a city-state with a density of 7,796 persons per square kilometre (Seow 2018). Ambient noise as recorded in Singapore in the quiet of the night registers over 55 decibels, as

¹ <https://mothership.sg/2021/06/prayer-interrupted-gong/> (Last accessed August 3, 2022).

² Ibid.

compared to the range of 40 to 50 decibels recorded in Europe.³ Already saturated with all forms of sensory transgressions where neighbours can be perceived as being too loud, dirty, noisy, or smelly (Low 2013), the pandemic situation has exacerbated these day-to-day transgressions further. Arising from the current global epidemiological crisis, many countries have gone through periods of lockdown in a bid to curb or slow down transmission of the virus. Singapore itself went through a period of 'circuit breaker' or 'partial lockdown' that lasted from 7 April to 1 June 2020. During this two-month period, residents were not permitted to hold any form of social gathering, and all except those deemed to be working in essential services had to work from home as a mandatory policy. The circuit-breaker period saw a heightening of disputes about sensory issues when working from home (WFH) increased sensory proximity and intensified tensions in neighbourhood living. The number of neighbourly disputes escalated from 3,600 reports in 2019 to 11,400 in 2020.⁴ In terms of noise disturbances specifically, at present about 70,000 complaints are lodged with various government agencies each year.⁵ In essence, a sensorially dense urban ecology has been created as a result of the COVID-19 crisis, given that the usual separation of work and home spaces is no longer tenable.

In this context, social actors need to become accustomed to newer sensory environments that are forged by rules revolving around WFH. Where one's sensibilities are deemed to have been affronted due to a neighbour's unruly sensory conduct, residents who then lodge complaints to the authorities about such sensory transgressions are essentially making claims to their rights (cf. Holwitt 2017; Ruiz and South 2019) to residential peace and quiet and other associated conduct that does not cause any disturbance. In doing so, our necessarily brief reflections here provide ways to rethink citizenship and its sensory and cultural boundaries (Perkins 2015) as demarcated in everyday embodied behaviour and encounters in shifting ecologies of the urban sensorium (Harvey 2017; Perkins 2015).

Apart from the obvious health-related problems that the virus has caused globally, another side of the consequence of this health crisis is that it has increased the time-space compression of urban living. In effect, mandates to work from home have confronted us with a condition of negative bandwidth. Kim (2021) argues that '[t]o go into the negative bandwidth territory is to say that all our time and attention is now fully allocated'.⁶ The demarcations between work, leisure and/or private time become melded into an amorphous whole that is void of any meaningful separation, whether

3 <https://www.noisyneighboursingapore.com/> (Last accessed August 3, 2022).

4 <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/community/mediation-a-key-extension-to-law-awareness-week-to-help-heal-rifts-between> (Last accessed October 2, 2021).

5 www.noisyneighboursingapore.com (Last accessed August 3, 2022).

6 <https://www.insideighered.com/blogs/learning-innovation/5-reasons-why-faculty-and-staff-have-negative-bandwidth> (Last accessed August 3, 2022)

in time and space or in our minds.⁷ Given these new circumstances of the intertwining of work and leisure, urban living is no longer a matter of guarding a domain of privacy but one of the increased sharing of sensory spaces and everyday living. In Singapore, a majority of people live and co-reside in high-rise and densely organized flats known as Housing Development Board (HDB) flats. It is estimated that just over 80% of the resident population dwell in these flats, with some apartment blocks reaching a height of fifty storeys. The size of these flats typically range from 36 to 130 square meters.⁸ There is no occupancy cap to regulate the number of family members living in these government flats. It is therefore not uncommon to have multi-generation families occupying such housing. Given that more of these flats, as well as private condominiums, continue to be erected over time, 'it is set to get noisier, and the chances of encountering a noisy neighbour will inevitably be higher as well'. Living in such dense urban spaces inevitably lead to experiences and encounters of sensory spillage or excess. Such perceived infractions experienced by HDB flat-dwellers can run the gamut from the smell of cooking curry (Montsion and Tan 2016) via loud music and noise to smoking (Tan 2016). The idea and perimeter of HDB flats as one's 'home' actually goes beyond the confines of the flat. Instead, 'home' is a communal space and commodity that includes shared spaces (which include common corridors and void decks on the ground floor), as well as shared sensory spaces where excess is frowned upon given such communality. In legal terms, this expansive definition of home is inflected in the words of the Second Minister for Law, Edwin Tong: 'a common misconception is that a person can do whatever they wish within their home, leading to complaints about excessive noise or second-hand smoke'. Ostensibly, home includes spaces beyond the confines of one's own flat, given the mobility and permeability of senses such as smell and noise (Low and Abdullah 2020).

When smells and noise become sources of disturbances, people become further irritated with their neighbours. Such responses can extend to xenophobic perceptions of foreigners as well, where their sensory behaviour, in being deemed unacceptable, becomes augmented owing to their 'foreignness' (Low 2013; Ye 2021). This response is essentially articulated through disagreements over residents' day-to-day experiences and encounters. What has been encroached upon lies not only in the sensory domain, but in how the different aspects of citizenship and their rights are seemingly transgressed or threatened in embodied and sensorial ways, as the case of Livanesh Ramu demonstrates. Since the encounter occurred, the police have contacted Ramu's family, and netizens have also 'largely condemned the woman in the video and told him to pay no attention to her'.⁹ Arising from this particular incident and other race-related

7 Ibid.

8 <https://www.hdb.gov.sg/residential/buying-a-flat/resale/getting-started/types-of-flats> (Last accessed: October 2, 2021).

9 <https://www.msn.com/en-sg/news/singapore/singapore-neighbor-sounds-off-with-gong-during-man-s-hindu-prayer-routine-video/ar-AAKT2oZ?li=BBR8OIU> (Last accessed: October 4, 2021).

occurrences, the President of Singapore, Halimah Yacob, also took to Facebook to express her consternation. She is quoted as saying:

It is agonising to read about the incidents of hatred and chauvinism perpetrated by Singaporeans against each other. Such displays are so hurtful because we thought that we had done so much to protect our cohesion until we are shaken from our belief... Our greatest fear is how such prejudice will affect our young and influence their minds. We wonder whether these are one-off incidents or reflective of a larger problem.¹⁰

Clearly, the President's post reflects upon the social fabric of cohesion and harmony that may come under duress from sensory fissures such as that seen in Ramu's experience. More pertinently, the fragility of such multicultural harmony needs to be constantly protected and should not be taken for granted. Guarding this prized cohesion as a public good may be seen in communal as well as legislative contexts, as the next section explains.

Mediating Sensory Disputes

The provision of mediation outlets that are pre-judicial or juridical reflect upon the codified safeguarding of one's rights to sensory non-excess. Among these outlets and/or laws are the CDRA (Community Disputes Resolution Act), POHA (Protection from Harassment Act), CMC (Community Mediation Centre) and CDRT (Community Dispute Resolution Tribunal).¹¹ According to the law, for instance, residents may invoke the CDRA if examples of 'unreasonable interference' occur and can be proved. Examples of such interference include those '[c]ausing excessive noise, smell, smoke, light or vibration, littering in the vicinity of the resident's home, obstructing the home, interfering with the person's movable property, conducting surveillance on the resident's home and trespassing'.¹² Quite aside from these ostensible scenarios of sensory excess, however, 'noise disturbances' may also include 'soft ambient noises that affect rest'.¹³ Collectively, these are categorized under the umbrella category of 'social disamenities', which include 'cigarette smoke, noise issues and foul smells'.¹⁴

10 <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/police-investigating-viral-video-woman-banging-gong-while-neighbour-was-performing-prayer> (Last accessed: August 3, 2022).

11 <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/neighbour-disputes-nuisance-what-you-can-do-lawyers-1882786> (Last accessed: August 3, 2022).

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/hdb-more-reports-issues-cigarette-smoke-nouse-circuit-breaker-523111> (Last accessed: August 3, 2022).

If the sensory fabric of dense urban living becomes frayed owing to such proximity and tense encounters, then mediating institutions may be seen to be making attempts to repair such friction, or what they would call (sensory) ‘rifts’, as mentioned in a media report on community mediators and neighbourly disputes.¹⁵ The report further notes that complaints about second-hand smoke had climbed from fewer than 2,000 to 2,500 in mid-2020. Community mediators, including the Community Development Council, are therefore focusing on how such conflicts may be resolved. The theme of the ‘Law Awareness Week@Community Development Council’, launched on 25 September 2021, is ‘Relationship and Healing’. Efforts such as these are geared towards helping ‘residents gain a better understanding of their rights and obligations under the law’.¹⁶

The sensory crisis mentioned above, which occurred during the pandemic, has thus incited renewed attention and thinking on how to conceive of sensory citizenship. This concept reflects upon how aspects of the sensory both mediate and are mediated by the state, including other domains of citizenship, thus intertwining everyday lived experiences with the political and the ideological (Trnka, Dureau and Park 2013). What are the limits of sensory citizenship that pertain to one’s rights to peace and quiet and acceptable sensory conduct? What are the connections between sensory conflicts, citizenship rights and the law? While we wish to bear in mind these important questions, it is also clear that there are no water-tight solutions or straightforward answers to them, being questions requiring further deliberation.

Towards Sensory Citizenship in a Time of Crisis

There are many dense cities in the world that come with a kaleidoscope of sensory encounters – think of Beijing and its sonic order of park life (Richaud 2021), the gustatory, olfactory, visual and sonic ambience of East London (Rhys-Taylor 2017), the noise ordinances and welfare principles of São Paulo (Cardoso 2016), Taipei and its noise-control system (Hsieh 2021) and many others – that may spillover and potentially form a source of (sensory) transgressions requiring governance and control. Such sensuous forms of governance (Hamilton 2020) have to do with protecting the rights of citizens and residents as urban-dwellers. Beyond the idea of citizenship as a political category of rights, privileges and duties, citizenship is ostensibly subjective, embodied and contested (Tan 2016). We pointed out how ideas and practices of citizenship can likewise be located and analysed at the level of everyday, quotidian sensory behaviour and conduct. Thus, akin to foregrounding sense experiences in articulating the sub-

¹⁵ <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/community/mediation-a-key-extension-to-law-awareness-week-to-help-heal-rifts-between> (Last accessed: August 3, 2022).

¹⁶ Ibid.

jectivities of citizenship (Tan 2016), we approach citizenship as a sensory experience in expanding upon an ethnology of the senses (Damsholt 2008) in scholarship more widely. Sensory citizenship, as well as other forms of rights and privileges, is seemingly all the more pertinent given the current context of COVID-19, which has generated uncertainty, fear and a loss of control. In this regard, outlining and prompting a re-think of what citizenship implies has become an exercise useful in conceptualizing what it now means to live in the present-day climate of dense urban living that intersects with epidemiological challenges.

References

- Cardoso, L. 2016: The Politics of Noise Control in São Paulo. *Journal of Latin American Studies* 49:917–945.
- Cheng, T. et al 2020: The Impact of COVID-19 on Subjective Well-being: Evidence from Singapore. IZA Institute of Labor Economics Working Paper series, IZA DP No. 13702.
- Damsholt, T. 2018: The Sound of Citizenship. *Journal of European Ethnology* 38(1):56–65.
- Hamilton, S. 2020: Introduction: Sensuous Governance. *The Senses and Society* 15(1):1–8.
- Harvey, S. S. 2017: Sensuous Citizenship in Contemporary Singapore Cinema: A Case Study of Singapore Gaga (Tan Pinpin, 2005). In: Liew, K.K. and Stephen Teo, eds., *Singapore Cinema: New Perspectives*. Pp. 84–93. New York: Routledge.
- Holwitt, P. 2017: Strange Food, Strange Smells: Vegetarianism and Sensorial Citizenship in Mumbai's Redeveloped Enclaves. *Contemporary South Asia* 25(4):333–346.
- Hsieh, J. 2021: Making Noise in Urban Taiwan: Decibels, the State, and Sono-sociality. *American Ethnologist* 48(1):51–64.
- Lee, P.J. and J.H. Jeong 2021: Attitudes towards Outdoor and Neighbour Noise during the COVID-19 Lockdown: A Case Study in London. *Sustainable Cities and Society* 67:1–8.
- Low, K.E.Y. 2013: Sensing Cities: The Politics of Migrant Senseescapes. *Social Identities: Journal for the Study of Race, Nation and Culture* 19(2):221–237.
- Low, K.E.Y. and N. Abdullah 2020: Senses as Mobile Actants: Sketching Conceptual and Comparative Possibilities. *American Behavioral Scientist* 64(10):1430–1443.
- Montsion, J.M. and S.K. Tan 2016: Smell This: Singapore's Curry Day and Visceral Citizenship. *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 37:209–223.
- Perkins, A. 2015: Muslim Sound, Public Space, and Citizenship Agendas in an American City. *Citizenship Studies* 19(2):169–183.
- Quah, E. and J. Chun 1992: The Law and the Economics of Noise Nuisance: The Singapore Experience. *Journal of Environmental Law* 4(2):203–219.
- Rhys-Taylor, A. 2017: *Food and Multiculture: A Sensory Ethnography of East London*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Richaud, L. 2021: Places of “Heat and Noise”: Sonorous Presence and the Interstitial Time-spaces of Everyday Life in Contemporary Beijing. *The Senses and Society* 16(1):46–66.
- Ruiz, A.G. and N. South 2019: Surrounded by Sound: Noise, Rights and Environments. *Crime, Media, Culture* 15(1):125–141.
- Seow, J. 2018: Dip in Population Density, but Not in Crowded Feeling. *The Straits Times* 16 January.
- Tan, QH 2016: Scent-orship and Scent-iments on the Scent-ual: The Relational Geographies of Smoke/Smell between Smokers and Non-Smokers in Singapore. *The Senses and Society* 11(2):177–198.
- Trnka, S.; Dureau, C. and J. Park 2013: Introduction: Senses and Citizenships. In: Trnka, S.; Dureau, C. and J. Park, eds., *Senses and Citizenships: Embodying Political Life*. Pp. 1–32. New York and London: Routledge.
- Ye, Junjia 2021: Ordering Diversity: Co-Producing the Pandemic and the Migrant in Singapore during COVID-19. *Antipode* 53(6): 1895–1902.
- <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8222935/>, accessed August 3, 2022.

