



## <bridgetown>whisperpost

a sound-based collaborative project | *directed by joscelyn gardner*

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### curator's text | joscelyn gardner

#### <bridgetown>whisperpost: mapping a Caribbean city's pulse.

The heavy clatter of clanking chains and an austere male voice roaring "Come on boy! ... Bring up the next slave!" punctures the everyday hustle and bustle of the contemporary Bridgetown soundscape. While standing on Philadelphia Lane near the site of the Gates where African slaves unloaded from eighteenth-century trans-Atlantic slave ships were sold to the highest bidder, someone has just dialed the telephone number found on nearby whisperpost12 on their cellphone. Over on Shipper's Alley, someone else dials the number on whisperpost17 and is immersed in the drumbeat of a musical interpretation built around the rhythmic repetition of the words "Rocker's Alley" spoken by Rastafarians who used to congregate there. Meanwhile, on Bay Street, as passing cars and minibuses honk their horns, yet another person punches up the whisperpost 7 telephone number and is met by a nineteenth-century Bajan "sweetie lady" who invites the listener to "walk wid me a while" as she carries her tray of goods up the street to catch the tram to Hastings.



This is <bridgetown>whisperpost, an interactive sound installation in the streets of Bridgetown, Barbados. Through easily accessible digital technology, a series of personal narratives and sound explorations based on memory, voyages into collective history, personal responses to time and place, and experimentation with sound as an artistic medium have become a living archive for this contemporary Caribbean city's populace. By navigating the city using a map and a cell phone, members of the public can access location-specific soundscapes via their private mobile phones. Signposts with the distinctive <bridgetown>whisperpost logo mark the setting for 18 creative responses to a series of personally selected city sites. Through dialing the telephone number displayed on each post and listening to a two-minute sound recording, participants can escape into the mindscape of someone who has stood in the same spot before them, adding to their multi-layered experience of this historic city.

**<bridgetown>whisperpost** has been inspired by various location-specific new media projects that have sprung up in cities such as Los Angeles, New York, Toronto, and Vancouver, as well as by map-based sound projects that are currently appearing on the web<sup>1</sup>. It is therefore poised to add another node in a network of similar projects around the world. To date, no such project has been undertaken in the Caribbean where layers of history lie buried in the silt and sands of coastal seaports, the rubble of colonial invasion, and more recently, in the concrete and marble of neo-colonial expansion. Building upon Jeremy Hight's ideas around "narrative archaeology"<sup>2</sup>, in which individual soundscape authors function metaphorically as archaeologists, probing the city's multiple layers of history and fusing their creative and critical interpretations through sound, **<bridgetown>whisperpost** also aims to record oral histories and personal thoughts before they are lost in order to preserve the city's popular mythology. These are stories / impressions that belong to the people of the community, stories that mark a specific time and place, and which speak to the experiences of those who live, breathe, and work in these spaces - the voices of the local inhabitants.

One of the objectives of this project has also been to explore both the factual and fictive layers of the city of Bridgetown in order to speak to a postcolonial understanding of Creole identity. By starting to unearth the layers of personal experience that seep out from beneath the city's surface, the project aims to fold the past and present into a montage of creative soundscapes which loosely narrate a history of place and help establish the collective history of a city's inhabitants. As with Walter Benjamin's Arcades project (a literary montage of published / personal texts about nineteenth century Paris collected between 1928 and 1940), **<bridgetown>whisperpost** compresses history into a semantically dense iconic simultaneity with the past pressed up against the present in such a way that history is conflated. At whisperpost 18, the loud buzzing of an electric razor being used to cut hair in a street salon shapes a vibrant contemporary calypso soundscape on Bolton Lane (Alberta Whittle's Sugar for the Bees). Meanwhile at Denyse Menard-Greenidge's whisperpost 12, the (unburied) ghosts of the over 300 year history of slavery on which the city was built, are unleashed through the ominous creaking of rattling chains. This juxtaposition of fragments of the past and present alongside the day-to-day flurry of city life collapses space and time and helps to unravel place as a site of remembrance for the people who live or work there. At whisperpost 11 on Liverpool Lane, Judy Layne-Banks creates a personal memoir to her grandmother, Doris Eileen Rudder, a craftswoman who for many years sold her handiwork on this street corner. Her subtle reference to vendors hiding from the police in "the cat and mouse game... Getting chase, and selling again..." opens up a space for contemplating how life repeats itself in the city. Over on Roebuck Street, at whisperpost 4, Annalee Davis dramatically recounts a tragedy that occurred in the 1920s outside the store belonging to her great-grandfather, P.C.Fields, where a passerby was set afire by a carelessly tossed flaming demijohn of liquor.

These personal insights offer an alternative view of Bridgetown - not the Bridgetown recorded in the official history books or appearing on foreign prints / paintings dating from the colonial period, nor the Bridgetown found on contemporary advertisements / souvenirs produced for the commercial / tourist market. It is instead the Bridgetown that Barbadians know intimately – a living street culture that celebrates the individual voice and is unafraid to project its private self; a form of expression that often only emerges publicly during national street festivals when calypso singers give voice to local concerns, or in radio "talk-shows" such as Gutterperk where locals express their opinions on socio-political matters. The project recognizes the need to create a public discourse that defines the city through private insight. It seeks to provide a postcolonial reading of Bridgetown that probes beneath its public face as a major Caribbean commercial / tourism gateway to the world, by revealing the city as a vibrant repository of personal memory. It privileges the indigenous audience (an audience familiar with the native dialect and intimate allusions to specific incidents / ideas referred to in the works<sup>3</sup>) and ultimately poses the uncomfortable question; in the race for modernization,

what are we in the process of losing?

It can be argued that in conjunction with the neat packaging of history for an offshore audience / tourist industry, there is the associated danger of selectively preserving heritage in the city to the exclusion of any signs of “dirt and pain”. As Ackbar Abbas states in his essay *Building on Disappearance*<sup>4</sup>, “preservation ... is not memory [...] Culture as preservation... can only be a form of kitsch.” Referring to the preservation of heritage buildings / facades alongside modern architectural structures in Hong Kong, Abbas states, “Culture as preservation leads not to the development of a critical sense of community but works to keep the colonial subject in place, occupied with gazing at images of identity” (Abbas 150). **<bridgetown>whisperpost** actively works to rupture such “images” of history / identity by privileging found sound / personal memory over the officially constructed image in the modern urban space. By placing a collection of private soundscapes in the margins of the city, rather than in offices / commercial spaces / public buildings, and embracing a plurality of voices and multiple points of view from citizens themselves, this project addresses the potential erasure of identity brought about by globalization that threatens to erode the unique character of Barbados’ national capital. Though several of the whisperpost soundscapes present history as auditory spectacle, they also allude to private opinions regarding urban development. At whisperpost 13, Gail Pounder-Speede draws attention to the new boardwalk along the Careenage (“a pathway of flexibility”) which she presents as an icon of Bridgetown’s leap into modernity (perhaps subversively underscored by her use of an affected “foreign” accent in her up-beat poetic interpretation). At whisperpost 8, Rodney Ifill proudly personifies the spirit of Willoughby Fort (built in 1656), and with the melodramatic sound of canon blasting in the background, points out that among other things, “A modern car park, where Carlisle House now rests, replaces me.”

Storytelling has traditionally played an important role in Caribbean life. Caribbean people have typically passed stories orally from one to another over back yard palings, in village rum shops, and in the street. Recordings of live performances from Caribbean storytelling masters like Paul Keens Douglas and Alfred Pragnell, also live in our collective sound memory. But what happens to this oral tradition in our busy contemporary world where television and advertising media have infiltrated both national boundaries and private spaces of oral exchange, and people converse more frequently via wireless technologies than out in the yard? What place does oral tradition have in our fast-paced electronic world? **<bridgetown>whisperpost** seeks to re-insert the disappearing art of storytelling into daily city life using new digital electronic technology. By providing one-on-one access to spoken soundscapes through recorded cell phone messages, it uses this personal communication technology for an experimental location-specific form of storytelling. Paradoxically, the ability to activate stories on the site which inspired their telling and to seemingly “walk into” the story, in turn provides a new interactive dimension to the relationship between the storyteller and the listener. It privileges the listener’s “experience” of the story in the physical place in which it belongs over direct human contact with the storyteller. The participant gains private access to the imaginative world of the storyteller and actively navigates both this world and the present world simultaneously. The cell phone becomes a platform for creative self-expression and makes the work accessible to members of the public at the street level. At whisperpost 14 on Shurland Alley, for example, the listener looks out over Carlisle Bay while hearing a tumultuous account of the World War II torpedo attack on the CNS Cornwallis narrated by an elderly lady who lived in the area during that time. Similarly, on Spry Street, at whisperpost 9, listeners gaze up at the “sacred, mystic walls” of the Masonic Lodge (built in 1740) to solve the storyteller’s mystery, “Who, or what, am I?” The fact that these stories are “packaged” for consumption through the ubiquitous cell phone<sup>5</sup> intensifies the irony of contemporary reliance on technology for what was once a traditional aspect of Caribbean life and has now become a consumable art form.

The act of walking through the streets of the city, of putting one step in front of another



on the dusty sidewalks in whatever direction the walker fancies, is another important part of the **<bridgetown>whisperpost** project. Placed in no particular order<sup>6</sup>, the whisperposts encourage participants to discover them randomly or to set an individual trail based on their city map. Such aimless urban strolling (recalling both Baudelaire and Benjamin), is epitomized by Laila Degia's soundscape at whisperpost 5. Here, accompanied by the ambient noise of the city and muffled background street talk which she has secretly recorded (overheard), she casually mulls over an uneventful day spent as a contemporary flâneur wandering around streets near the Central Bank watching "the people and the town culture..." As Michel de Certeau notes in *Walking in the City*<sup>7</sup>, pedestrians' footsteps "weave places together" - the spatial practice of walking is placed in opposition to the constructed order of the city. Here, the act of walking makes the city ambiguous – any strict order implied by city planning is negated.

Bridgetown was founded in 1628, when 64 English settlers headed by Charles Wolverstone, the first Governor of Barbados, arrived there<sup>8</sup>. As Lilian Sten-Nicholson tells us at whisperpost 16, "This city was built on water... where a river meets the sea... When the first settlers came, they found a muddy swamp full of duppy crabs and muddy water, and with a rickety bridge built across by the Amerindians who had long gone..." In *Historic Bridgetown*, Warren Alleyne notes that the town sprung up quickly on the north side of the River (the Careenage) in an unplanned manner with a complex network of alleys and narrow unpaved streets. **<bridgetown>whisperpost** returns the listener / participant to the organic beginnings of the city, before order was imposed on it. The soundscapes become a space of dreaming, a creative space of escape from daily routine as participants meander around the city looking for the whisperposts. The walker as text unfolds in the streets – a network shaped out of fragments determines his path. In his essay, de Certeau also laments the lack of local legends in cities, the way in which proper names have been replaced by numbers, and the way "stories and legends that haunt the urban space" have been removed by the "logic of the techno-structure" turning it into "a suspended symbolic order". He quotes a city dweller who says "there isn't any place special... Nothing special: nothing that is marked, opened up by a memory or a story, signed by something or someone else." **<bridgetown>whisperpost** opens up a space for such memories - the whisperpost soundscapes fill the silences, provide a detour into the imagination, and add humanity to the public street. They celebrate the ordinary yet "special" city site / street from a personal perspective.

The **<bridgetown>whisperpost** soundscapes also help to collapse distinctions between time and space in the city. At whisperpost 2, on Liverpool Lane, Eric Belgrave counts his footsteps ("a hundred and seventy-one steps, shoe size twelve, from the base of Nelson's statue... to the Gate") in an arrestingly haunting soundscape that likens the footsteps used to measure this city space with the measure of history, or more specifically, the measure of the toll that a colonial history has had on the people of Barbados (an insistent allusion to slavery intensified by the repeating chant "...negroes, negroes, negroes... negro slaves, negro slaves, negro slaves..."). The conflation of time and space reoccurs at whisperpost 6 in National Heroes' Square, where with distortions of sound consistent with an echo chamber from the past, Ingrid Gall recalls a 1715 incident at the House of Assembly and muses about the passing of time. Her ambulatory soundscape ends with the perfunctory sound of a pay phone recording with a droll voice announcing "We're sorry... You're out of time..." as the phone line dies...

In her essay, *Data and Narrative: Location Aware Fiction*, Kate Armstrong points out that in the new physically located audio works within cities, "the city is to be understood as an interface for narrative fragments so that they may be experienced audibly against the real backdrop of the city."<sup>9</sup> The insertion of the **<bridgetown>whisperpost** soundscapes within both the physical reality of Bridgetown's streets as an interactive cell phone project as well as in the virtual space of an interactive website plays with the differing ideas of place, space and time that these two types of interface propose. In the interactive installation within the city, the participant / walker "encounters different versions of the same space simultaneously" – impressions of both the real and imagined

city are merged “in real time into a third synthetic experience.”<sup>10</sup> The city therefore becomes an interface through which the work is experienced physically. With the web version of the project, rather than navigating the city as physical place, the participant engages in a virtual experience that changes the nature of his perception of the same space. He becomes an “electronic flâneur” – not hiding behind the veil of the crowd but able to amble through the network of the virtual mapped city without being seen, accessing the “experience” as data packets of sound and visual information. The way in which the website user accesses this data through hypertext links mimics the ambulatory journey of the city walker. Place becomes problematized by this new global space. In a sense, the physical boundaries of the city are dissolved by the idea of the electronic interface. Space therefore becomes “non-physical and dematerialized”, and the physical idea of space and place become devalued<sup>11</sup>.

The fragmentary nature of these sound pieces ultimately makes the city unreadable by alluding to the myriad viewpoints that lie within it. The official order of planned streets, traffic demarcations, directional signs, and tidy paving stones, is disrupted by this spillage of private thoughts into the streets. Though signified by officially sanctioned signage erected on the pavements and on buildings, **<bridgetown>whisperpost** ironically has the potential to spread like a virus through the city with the probability of anyone posting a number anywhere and having members of the public dial it up to listen to their private thoughts / stories. By engaging with the public on this more personal level, however, the project helps to develop a new intimacy with the city and “history” acquires a multitude of new voices. Official stories mutate into personal tales of trial and tribulation, of tribute and contemplation, helping to give shape to a new “lived” understanding of Caribbean identity. The Bridgetown of the past (a bustling seaport and a prosperous mercantile center with trading houses, taverns, alehouses, and street vendors) is juxtaposed with the Bridgetown of the present (a thriving international commercial center). Horse hoofs on cobbled streets, carriage wheels rattling over uneven pavements, explosions of canon fire, sirens shrieking, vendors shouting, clocks chiming, hymns of praise, and waves gently lapping against the wharf mingle with the voices of ordinary people, thrusting a profusion of buried thoughts up into the sunlight. At each whisperpost, a shard of memory is slipped into the public consciousness via digital technology. But, as Lilian Sten-Nicholson ponders at whisperpost 16 on the water’s edge, “Times change; fortunes change; but some things remain eternal.... If you go down to Bridgetown at night when it’s dark and quiet, you will still find the duppy crabs. The sea is the sea, and the land is the land. And, where the two meet, there is always magic”.

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Joscelyn Gardner is a multi-media visual artist whose practice focuses on her Creole identity from a postcolonial feminist perspective. She was born in Barbados in 1961 to a family that has been resident on the island since the seventeenth century. She holds a B.F.A. (Printmaking) and a B.A. (Film) from Queen’s University, Canada, and an M.F.A. from the University of Western Ontario. Since 2000, Gardner has been working and residing in Canada where she teaches art at the University of Western Ontario and at Fanshawe College, in London, Ontario. She has represented Barbados in many international exhibitions including the Sao Paulo Biennials (1994, 1996), has held solo exhibitions in the Caribbean region, Canada, and the U.S.A., and has exhibited in several group shows in Europe, U.S.A., Canada, the Caribbean, South and Central America, and India.

1. The projects referred to include *[murmur]* by the [murmur] collective, Shawn Micallef, James Roussel, and Gabe Sawhney (Vancouver, Montreal, Toronto); *34 North, 118 West* by Jeff Knowlton, Naomi Spellman, and Jeremy Hight (Los Angeles); *Talking Street* (New York); *City of Memory* (New York); and *PING* by Kate Armstrong (Lithuania). <sup>^</sup>

2. Jeremy Hight, *Narrative Archaeology*. <http://www.34n118w.net/> <sup>^</sup>

3. For example, two of the soundscapes allude to the controversy surrounding the repositioning of Nelson’s Statue in Trafalgar Square (now National Heroes’ Square). At *whisperpost 2*, a voice measuring the space in footsteps says, “...from the base of Nelson’s statue (which is another story) to the Gate...” At *whisperpost 6*, Ingrid Gall comments, “Changes made in the passing of time... direction

in which Nelson looked... recorded in time." <sup>^</sup>

4. Ackbar Abbas, "Building on Disappearance: Hong Kong Architecture and Colonial Space" in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Simon During (Routledge: NY 2000). <sup>^</sup>
5. At the time that the workshop was presented, it was estimated that Barbados (with a population of approximately 250,000) would have over 200,000 cellular telephones in use within 2 years. The cell phone is therefore the ideal technology for providing access to a large number of people because of its simplicity, low cost and widespread use. <sup>^</sup>
6. The *whisperposts* are numbered according to the alphabetical listing of each workshop participant's name. <sup>^</sup>
7. Michel de Certeau, "Walking in the City" in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Simon During (Routledge: NY 2000). <sup>^</sup>
8. Warren Alleyne, *Historic Bridgetown*, Barbados: Barbados Government Information Service, 2003, p.8. <sup>^</sup>
9. Kate Armstrong, *Data and Narrative: Location Aware Fiction*. <http://katearmstrong.com> <sup>^</sup>
10. Ibid. <sup>^</sup>
11. Abbas, p.151 <sup>^</sup>

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