

The multiplicity of pathways in urban life

Interview with Ruth Finnegan¹

By

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In 2016, I had the opportunity of visiting the city of Milton Keynes in England,² to conduct an interview with anthropologist Ruth Finnegan. Professor Emeritus of the Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences at Open University, her distinguished background encompasses ethnographic research in Africa (Sierra Leone, Zimbabwe – at the time, Southern Rhodesia – and Nigeria), Oceania (Fiji) and also several sites within the British context. Finnegan's works are devoted to music, historical and oral literature, language, literacy, poetry, performance, dreams, and trances – not to mention her more recent fictional literary productions.

Ruth Finnegan's investigations into her city of residence, found in the acclaimed *The Hidden Musicians: Music-Making in an English Town* ([1989] 2007) and in *Tales of the City: A Study of Narrative and Urban Life* ([1998] 2004), peaked my interest with their connections to her broader production. The first production fundamentally traces a vigorous panorama of practices and interactions among local amateur musicians, in which members of a variety of grouping navigate personal paths. This work explores a reconstitution of plural worlds, which was acknowledged by Roger Sanjek ([1996] 2002: 557) as an expressive interpretation of Ulf Hannerz's (1980) views on urban life.³ The second one, published almost a decade later, reconstitutes the life trajectories of Milton Keynes's residents, whose accounts are taken as tales, or rather coherent narratives or stories constituted of sequential parts. Intriguingly, urban theory is also taken as a set of narratives, inherently endowed with that same internal logic.

Before the actual interview, generously held at Finnegan's residence in Bletchley⁴, it is worth presenting some brief remarks about Milton Keynes, a *planned* city of the late 1960s and evidently much less internationally renowned than Brasília. The most distinguished mark of the latter was its construction

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- 1 English version of the presentation done by Pedro Lopes, under supervision of Lilyth Ester J. Grove.
- 2 The visit was the outcome of an academic undertaking, founded by Fapesp (case No. 2016 / 05923-8). Two years earlier, I had been in London and had already tried to meet with the anthropologist but was unable to because of last-minute unforeseen events. That was the first time I was able to visit the city, and I published a record of this first experience as a *work in progress* (Frúgoli Jr., 2015).
- 3 For the author's approach to her ethnographies on musical practices in England, as opposed to experiences in Africa and Oceania, see Finnegan (2002).
- 4 One of the old towns that became part of Milton Keynes in 1967.

from the “zero” (in spatial terms, which also intended to represent a sort of modernist historical “recommencement”)⁵. Meanwhile, although MK was a projected city, it incorporated the group of towns and pre-existing villages, turning into districts connected by a system of highways.

The day before the interview and shortly after our encounter, I took a brief trip to the various districts of Milton Keynes. These districts represent different eras and incorporate various landscapes; with the underlying theme of a garden city woven together by a system of planned roads. In the little time I had, I pursued a deeper understanding of these spaces, as well as clues or traces that would connect me to Ruth Finnegan’s work.

Thanks to the existing bus structure, operating with a relatively affordable day-pass system, it was possible to explore the region and observe the users of the buses themselves – which included many women, elderly people, and several wheelchair users. I began my journey in downtown Milton Keynes, including its huge shopping mall and rediscovered what I had observed two years before (Frúgoli Jr., 2015: 583-588). This time however, I found a greater ethnic diversity in the market right outside the mall, as it is predominantly aimed towards immigrants. On the way to the central railway station – connecting all bus lines – in a landscape of ostensive corporate buildings, I found a pedestrian footpath, utilized by some homeless people.

I continued on to the commercial centre of Stony Stratford, a small classical village, whose origins date back to 1066 (Fisk, 1981: n.p.), complete with Roman ruins, old inns, churches, and markets (Finnegan, [1989] 2007: 23). Nearby, Wolverton – another ancient medieval town, originally settled by approximately 250 inhabitants in 1086 (Fisk, 1981: n.p.) – currently shows some industrial traces, linked to the dynamism brought in by the train station inaugurated in 1845. From there I tried to get to Fishermead, created in 1974 with more affordable terraced houses⁶; however, I could not find a sign with an accurate location. I ended up getting to Netherfield, another popular area, initially intended for those who worked on the construction of Milton Keynes (Fisk, 1981: n.p.)⁷, visible in the smaller size of the residencies, the abandonment of several empty houses’ facades, and the garbage piled in the streets; contrasted with amply landscaped surroundings. The local shopping centre is also quite diverse, where I was able to find many immigrants and black people.

On the following day I walked around Bletchley,⁸ passing by its shopping centre, without noticing certain landmarks that would later appear in the conversation with Ruth Finnegan.⁹ In the afternoon, I had a unique experience of attending a small concert and recital in Pitstone, South of Milton Keynes. That was an opportunity, I think, to get a glimpse of the musical and poetic context studied by Ruth Finnegan, which is not revealed at first glance, as the title of her reference book, *The Hidden Musicians* tells us.

5 About this, see Le Corbusier ([1929] 1996).

6 Focused in depth on *Tales of the City* (Finnegan, [1998] 2004: 124-164).

7 Such as Fishermead, an area stigmatized by locals, according to Lamburn (2011: 24).

8 Bletchley, Stony Stratford and Wolverton are the oldest towns (now districts) of Milton Keynes.

9 See further details in the interview.



Pictures 1-8

Local scenes: by order, Sunday race (with wooden vehicles) at Newport Pagnell and concert at Pitstone Parish; shopping streets in Stony Stratford and Wolverton; Milton Keynes mall and downtown Bletchley; church's garden (N. Pagnell) and state-subsidized houses in Netherfield. Photos by Heitor Frúgoli Jr., June 2016.



Let us now turn to the interview to explore topics mainly related to Urban Anthropology in Ruth Finnegan's vast work, whose diversified production, although already recognized in the Brazilian academic field,¹⁰ could be better studied by us.¹¹

During your interview to Alan Macfarlane,¹² you talk about a “very difficult study” when you mention *The Hidden Musicians* ([1989] 2007). Could you clarify exactly the main challenges in this study?

RUTH FINNEGAN – Let me start with some quick notes on the *Hidden Musicians* book (MMK; it's my pet name for it – Musicians in Milton Keynes). Difficult because so different from my earlier fieldwork and, totally, from the kind of setting I and other anthropologists had been trained for.

Milton Keynes was literate and with a literate history (all those miles of written records...); urban; large; not in most senses a “community”; or settled; or, mostly, “traditional”; nor did anthropologists study music much, unless they'd three years training or such (just singing – badly – in a choir like me was not enough).

I also have just noticed another thing – the great range of gatekeepers to be negotiated or wheedled; in my earlier fieldwork far fewer. Each was – well almost all – friendly inclined; but still, it took time, and nerve.

All that meant the approach, context and methods were all new to me. “Quantitative”!! Perish the thought, this was anthropology! But though qualitative participant observation was still central – no regrets there – I was studying an urban topic. When I started I thought of it as primarily urban anthropology, not music – I had been very inspired by Ulf Hannerz's¹³ lecture a few years before – so that is how it began, even though it is now for music, and rightly, that the book is celebrated (there has just been a large international conference “The Hidden Musicians Revisited”,¹⁴ what an honor).

So true, it was new, untrodden except by social historians – actually I found them the best model – well, did I have to wait till people were dead before I was allowed to study them?! No. It was the huge amount of data, and necessary data, that I found so difficult. For my first fieldwork – rural, remote, mainly non-literate, qualitative, on an “unknown” tribe¹⁵ – I had amassed a few notebooks, typed and handwritten, and some taped stories.

For Milton Keynes – well it was a town with links going out into a complex country (or countries). It was scores (and I mean that) of large hardback A4 files (my husband said the study floor raised a couple of inches when I gave them away): photocopies, interview transcripts, records, newspaper cuttings, committee records, conversations – well, all the things listed in MMK's Appendix, each almost a library in itself. And quantification. And a research assistant to manage – I had never even dreamt of such a thing.

10 The author was in Brazil at least twice: in 2006, attending the II Encontro de Estudos da Palavra Cantada (UFFR), which resulted in a publication with her participation (Finnegan, 2008); in 2015, giving the opening lecture for the I Jornada de Estudos sobre Etnografias da Linguagem (UFF de Niterói), which will be published in the *Revista del Museo de Antropología* (Córdoba, Argentina).

11 My thanks to Robert Sansome, Tiago Frúgoli and Marina Frúgoli.

12 For more details, see Macfarlane (2008).

13 Hannerz (1980) wrote a landmark book on Urban Anthropology.

14 International Conference held in January 2016 at the Open University (Milton Keynes), with papers related to the influence of “The hidden musicians” in several areas of knowledge, especially studies on musical genres (for more details, see <http://www.listeningexperience.org/2016/01/04/3842/>, accessed on 28/06/2018).

15 Her first ethnography was at Sierra Leone in the 1960's, with the Limba, under the supervision of Evans-Pritchard (see Finnegan, 1967 and Macfarlane, 2008).

And all those different musical worlds to write about and understand (in my first bit of fieldwork, apart from male versus female, I found only one world – now would be more discriminating I think, but even so it was simpler, less differentiated (well, just fewer people)).

I was provoked into doing the MMK work by the arrogant people who called my beautiful musical city a “cultural desert” or “concrete jungle”. Also by the anthropologist’s conviction that there is always an ethnography to be collected, specially of something looked down on by the snobs. Oh, and I was also stimulated by my earlier study in Fiji (now just published as *The Travels and Travails of Music* (2016a) which you might like to look at for comparison): a simpler setting, so good training for me, but also with several musical “worlds” (three), thus the precursor of MMK.

Your two books about Milton Keynes are very different. If *The Hidden Musicians* covers a very detailed ethnography about musical practices, *Tales of the City* ([1998] 2004) focuses on a series of strong narratives about the city (and the musicians almost disappear, although the issue of urban planning is deeply investigated). If the first one is based on a thick ethnography, the second is connected to, let’s say, a post-modern perspective. Do you agree with these assertions? In this sense, why are they so different?

RF— Yes, I do agree, exactly, I suppose the reasons are:

- 1) *Tales of the City* was never meant to be about Milton Keynes as such, just that Milton Keynes was where I lived and so the most convenient – and also interesting – case study and I prefer the concreteness of a specific case in space and time to the abstract.
- 2) The book is really about narrative (in various senses) rather than, as *The Hidden Musicians*, about music, or even (though it is partly this) about (the concepts surrounding) Urban Anthropology. I had already studied narrative and story-telling in Africa (also built on in my novel *Black Inked Pearl* (2015) which you may also like to look at) and “Tales” is the continuation of that rather than of the music book (MMK).
- 3) MMK was indeed “thick ethnography” based on long participant observation (plus other sources and methods), and *Tales* was more hands-off, a lot (not all) of the contact was by an assistant working under my direction so for that reason I never liked the book much, though improving as I find others like it or based on it.

But this was OK because it was the narrative form rather than the content or contact that I was interested in. Does that answer your questions?

Indeed. When I visited Milton Keynes (in 2014, just for one day),¹⁶ we went through many places far apart, whose locomotion, it seemed, was very dependent on the car, on routes that alternated between local residential streets and highways lined with landscapes in which prevailed a fairly close setting, let's say, a city-garden. As you already told me that you have been researching the lives of taxi-drivers in Milton Keynes, could you talk anything about the motivations of this investigation, and the role that they develop (particularly in Milton Keynes, or generally speaking) in the urban life?

16 See Frúgoli Jr. (2015) for details.

RF— I'd rather answer that question when I am a little further on in my taxi driver research (ask me in, say, six months) but a preliminary answer is that I started on it because I have now given up driving and started always sitting in the front seat in the taxis. I now take several times a week, and chat with the drivers. I discovered how interesting their lives are (almost all, in Milton Keynes, immigrants from the "New Commonwealth" (India, Pakistan, Africa, Caribbean), also some from Eastern Europe) and, surprisingly that there is no serious book about them. They also know so much as in the liminal space of a journey with a stranger people open up, many secrets, which the drivers keep in confidence. Thanks for asking.

Now I'd like to ask about the city itself, if I may. Brasilia, the Brazilian modernist city, was built in an empty space, and after its founding (in 1960), against the wishes of planners, peripheral cities were informally created, mainly occupied by laborers. Milton Keynes is a planned city that, at its foundation, included some then existing villages (like Wolverton, Stony Stratford or Bradwell, if I'm not mistaken). Do you think this helps to explain certain urban heterogeneity, present for example in Hidden Musicians?

RF— The third pre-existing urban settlement was Bletchley (not Bradwell – a village), then the largest in the area, 40,000 population approximately, and the centre of local government, home of many musical organizations, e.g. the Bletchley Amateur Operatic Society that later, like others, changed its name to The Milton Keynes Amateur Operatic Society.

Yes, it's one explanation for the heterogeneity, but in addition, the Milton Keynes Development Corporation (MKCO) encouraged heterogeneity within its overall grid or roundabout plan and tried (and mostly managed) to keep a "village" feel round earlier settlements, with churches, old pubs, green squares, sometimes some thatched cottages, local place names. It's one reason people like living here, I guess, for they still quite often describe themselves not as living in Milton Keynes, but in their local area, e.g. Bradwell, Bletchley etc.

Is it really possible to talk about problematic urban areas (no-go areas) in Milton Keynes? And if so, this would be for example Fishermead (studied in Tales of the City), or Netherfield (as suggested by Victoria Lamburn (2011))?

RF— They're not exactly no-go areas nowadays, just looked down on by better-off people in Milton Keynes, cheaper houses, said to be more crime there, denser housing. At the start they were new, shining and much sought after, and people were proud to live there.

I did a quick search (in the data available in the library of Open University on the Internet) on social sciences studies related to urban sphere of Milton Keynes. Two of them caught my attention for their focus on different social uses of the local shopping mall (The Centre: MK).¹⁷ I had this feeling when I first visited Milton Keynes, although I only knew Willen and some spaces of central area, in addition to the mall itself. This would be, let's say, the main regular meeting place (not only for consumption activities, in this sense) in the region? Or would it be a superficial view?

17 See Degen; DeSilvey; Rose (2008) and Degen; Rose; Basdas (2010).

RF— I think the question should be “meeting place for whom”? For some it would be cafes in the shopping centre, for others a favorite pub, street, school playground, book club, local community hall... no single answer.

Your book The Travels and Travails of Music, already mentioned, was published this year. In the preface you say that without your experience in Fiji, Hidden Musicians would have never happened (2016a: 9). Could you comment on this?

RF— In Fiji the people speak a lot of different languages, and then I found three different music traditions – three authentic music worlds – as I explain in the book: the European tradition (more recent, but quite important), the South Pacific tradition – with wonderful chanting songs, all mixed with dance and percussion, blended with religious influences – and finally, the Indian tradition, since half of the population came in the past from different parts of India, for working in sugar plantations.

I had visited Fiji for the first time in 1978, before my research about Milton Keynes, and then I returned in 2005, when I researched the BBC Empire services, in order to understand its overseas influences in 1937, through the investigation of archives available in Fiji.

Is it possible to say that Oral Literature in Africa (1970) would be your most influential book in terms of, let's say, creating a new field of anthropological investigation?

RF— Maybe in terms of number of people reading it... About a hundred thousand people have read *Oral Literature in Africa* on the web. On the other hand, *Hidden Musicians* was equally influential (although not read by so many people, perhaps), also considering the recent conference about this book. In a way, *Oral Literature in Africa* was a turning round, and maybe it was more, let's say, revolutionary at that time. Anyway, possibly *Why Do We Quote* (2011) could be considered my best book, in which I brought together all my interests,

expertise and skills in only one book.

“Hidden Musicians revisited conference” (Jan. 2016), which you just mentioned, seems to have been a very interesting event. Could you comment anything, if possible, about the present studies that focus on relations between city and music scenes, or between music and place?

RF— There were about 60 papers on the conference (and I could not read all of them), with participants from all over the world, with different backgrounds and ages, many of them with an ethnographic approach, exploring new questions related to music, that I had not thought about. I had to speak last in the conference (I’d really prefer having been the first one – get it over and then just enjoy myself! To tell the truth, I still feel a tad nervous, at first, speaking to a large gathering...): on that occasion I compared my approach to music in *Hidden Musicians* to the approach to language (in a kind of pragmatist approach). In the book I stressed the study of music as a practice (the importance of what people do, rather than theorizing about it), but in the last chapter,¹⁸ apparently contradicting myself, I give way a bit and speculate about music being transcendent. Let’s say that as humans we speak, but we are also emotionally moved by music.

Answering to your question about place, the British Academy developed a project on this subject, and produced a volume with short essays, supposed to be very quick and light, but policy related, and they asked me to do one. And what I’ve done is, beginning with Milton Keynes, where I live, to argue that we must pay attention to sounds, songs, smells, emotions, overtones, memories, things that are part of ourselves but also part of or experience of place (2017). And music is surely something very related to places. In a certain way, I explored it in my novel, *Black Inked Pearl*, from a different perspective.

By the way, could you talk more about your recent experiences in literature? What was the motivation behind the creation of the pen name Catherine Farrar¹⁹?

RF— Catherine Farrar was the maiden name of my grandmother. She had five children, like my mother did, and my mother was the youngest. But the second youngest was Catherine, and she died before she was seven years old (of scarlet fever, it must have been so dreadful, nowadays it would never happen). I know this is very mysterious, but I was convinced that I had dreams that were originally Catherine’s dreams. It was from that that I began to write fiction, based on dreams. I knew that she was too young, not to have them, but to write them down. So I think that it was because of her that I started to write down my (her) longer dreams, to become stories and novels.

I love the name Catherine (or Catarina, as you would say in Portuguese),

18 The author refers to chapter 22, “Music, Society, Humanity” (Finnegan, [1989] 2007: 327-341).

19 Name adopted by Finnegan in her fiction books years ago, as in *The wild thorn rose* (Farrar, 2012).

it's magical, specially Kate, and that's how Kate came into my novel. By the way, the *Black Inked Pearl* is partly taken from one of Shakespeare's sonnets, partly from the mediaeval Persian poet, Rumi, who wrote that if you look at a pearl, look into it. So it's a story of a quest for the pearl of true love.

Can I just ask you: your background, does it come from music or from Social Sciences?

My background doesn't come from music, but from Urban Anthropology, urban studies...

RF— So we have much in common...

I hope so...

RF— I'm just a lover of music, but my background doesn't come from it, well not academically.

I would like to return to the urban aspects, if I may. Actually, yesterday, I took a bus and visited places like Stony Stratford, Wolverton and also Netherfield. I got to see very different urban landscapes.

RF— They were nicely built, in different styles... So you found it interesting?

Yes. If you go to Netherfield, for example, it's possible to observe a diversity in ethnic terms, something that I didn't see in the other places, except for the market outside downtown shopping mall, where there were many immigrants...

RF— o it has been useful coming here, because I think you can get the real feel of the place... It is also interesting to try to get the old villages' atmosphere, like in Middleton, the original Milton Keynes' village. There's a lovely old pub there.

The name Milton Keynes comes from Middleton, doesn't it?

RF— Yes. There is a lot of history behind Milton Keynes, like the old Roman Watling Street and then the Saxon routes along the same way connecting Fenny Stratford to Stony Stratford, crossing places along the river, and sometimes they flooded, of course.

When returning to the center of Bletchley,²⁰ on the way to Buckingham Road, you will find the Three Tress (restaurant). In this part of Church Green Road, there's an old school. This house was built by a very famous local builder, Tranfield, just after the I World War, using prewar standards. Very close, there is a well-preserved cottage, originally an Elizabethan house.

20 The city (now a district) where Ruth Finnegan lives, whose origin dates back to the 13th century, attached to Milton Keynes in 1967.

I also read about Bletchley Park, where England secretly produced codebreakers during the World War II, isn't it?

RF— Yes, sure, quite near the rail station...

Could Milton Keynes be considered an important garden city?

RF— I think so, but they mostly don't use that word... But as I say in the *Tales of the City*, when I learned from that, it's very much in a tradition, and some of the old planners had been involved in one of the garden cities. It's so ironic that we would be known by snobbish or conservative Londoners as a concrete city, for those famous concrete cows...²¹ The real one is in the city center, and there are replicas in some parts of the city... A friend of mine, who's now in New Zealand, made some small concrete cows and sell them all over the places...

21 Finnegan is referring to concrete cow sculptures made by the artist Liz Leyh, which were donated to the city in 1978, then exposed at a public park. That aroused a lot of mockery by critics of the Milton Keynes project as a planned city. Those narratives are analyzed in *Tales of the City*.

The mockery about Milton Keynes is mainly based on this concrete cows episode?

RF— It's based on the idea of a cultural desert... At the beginning, so many people working in the Open University²² refused to move from London, Oxford, Cambridge, or even Brighton; they commuted from there, because they say there was no culture here... But nowadays there are more and more people wishing to live here. Sometimes people don't move because they have family commitments.

22 University founded in 1969.

Also, the Open University is a bit different, because you have not to stay for three or four days in the university, you have to be a lot of time at home preparing the stuff to the students meetings, not to mention the growing use of the Web.²³ It's another kind of thing about Urban Anthropology—a place that isn't a place. It's a concept, but people aren't physically there, necessarily.

23 The Open University, maintained by the British government, is partly based on distance learning.

And now, as I told you, I've been writing an ethnographic book about taxi drivers.²⁴ Lots of them are immigrants. In most cities of Britain (and in New Zealand too), the taxi drivers are immigrants, mainly from India and Africa, and a few from Eastern Europe. In Cambridge, they're all quite mainly from Eastern Europe, and in Birmingham, they're most from Pakistan. They are all men (there's a few women), they own their cars, they can decide how many hours they work. They can take time off to be with their wives or children, and many of them are so well educated, they are humble but quite proud, they honor their names... By the way, Heitor, your name come from a warrior from Troy. Does it have some kind of influence on your personality?

24 In progress, tentatively titled *The Secret Lives of Taxi Drivers*.

I'm not so sure... maybe I fight for things that I really believe in.

RF— He was a peaceful warrior...

He was killed by Achilles during the war...

RF— Have you read the *Iliad*?

Not completely.

RF— In the last chapter of the book, when Hector was killed by Achilles, Hector’s father, prime king of Troy, comes to Achilles to ask for Hector’s body for a proper burial. Hector had killed his loving partner Patroclus, that Achilles adored, and Hector thought he had attached Achilles, because Achilles had lent his armor to Patroclus, and Achilles was truly heartbroken... The similes in Homer take you into the universal in a way that the poem does altogether. They keep coming into my novel too... Some are actually literal translations, but some are things that Homer might have said. My novel *Black Inked Pearl* came, as I told you, from dreams, and the story also includes poems (very oral, sonic), which at the end I decided, following the proposal of an editor, to publish separately (*Kate’s Black Ink Poems*, 2016b), not yet transformed into prose, sometimes slightly changed.

**Picture 9**

Ruth Finnegan at her home.
Photo by Heitor Frúgoli Jr.,
June 2016.

Do you see yourself more as a writer than an anthropologist today? I'm not sure if this is a good question.

RF— I definitely see myself as a writer, especially since I have retired from teaching. Now I can do what I want, it’s nice, but I also see myself as a researcher... I think I have got two sides, as an anthropologist, and as a novelist as well. I’ve written over twenty books. As an anthropologist, I’m quite pleased with my contributions. I don’t know which is more important. Let’s say that my experience of Anthropology can contribute to the novels in giving me a kind of perspective in terms of approaching the conundrum of what is dream, what is reality or trying to understand other people today, or in the past.

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