

# The Sounds of Driving – Making Sense of Self, Others and Place

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## Abstract

Consider driving a car without sound, no engine noise, no music or voices, no honking of horns, no whoosh of passing traffic or splash of tyres on wet tarmac. Without sound, much of the meaning and texture of driving becomes lost. In this paper we suggest that a careful attention to sound, not just music, can give insights into how affect moves between and through human and non-human bodies. We argue that the affective and emotional experiences and relations that arise through car driving practices are significant to how people understand themselves, others and place and is part of the reason people continue to drive their cars given we know the environmental impact they have.

**Keywords:**

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Sound for the most part has been conceptualised as a resource which people use to change their experiences of space (Anderson 2004a, 2004b, Bull 2000, 2007). For example Anderson has illustrated how people use music to alter moods or atmospheres, and Bull has documented how drivers use music to create 'auditory bubbles' in order to separate themselves from the outside environment. In this paper we want to consider the viscosity of driving in light of the work of feminist geographers. The visceral refers to the realm of internally felt sensations and the 'physical capacities, relational processes, and fuzzy boundaries of the human body' (Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy 2010, 1274). Here, sound acts on the entire body, penetrating, surrounding and entraining bodies through the processes of embodied listening and cognitive hearing, rather than just through the ear. We suggest mapping the visceral effects of sound can offer insights into how everyday driving practices are linked to understandings of self, others and places.

We argue that music and the sounds of driving not only help to reinforce particular identities (Labelle 2008, Walsh 2010) but help to situate car drivers in material and discursive spaces as they go about their everyday lives. We consider the driving experience as both embodied, and embedded. To begin, we outline the theoretical perspectives we employ and then expand on our methodological approach. Then, drawing on empirical material gathered from a mobility project in Wollongong, Australia we illustrate how sounds help us understand how affective and emotional relations underlie driving practices.

While affect and emotion remain contested terms (Pile 2010) we are interested in the way that the movement of forces, often felt as affective and emotional intensities work to alter our experiences of space and hence our understandings of the world. Thus we stress the importance of embodied experiences for producing meaning in everyday life while addressing the relationality and spatiality of emotions.

A visceral geographical approach emphasises the active engagement and emergent quality of knowing place rather than fixed interpretations. The visceral requires remaining alert to thinking about car spaces as the enactment of a complex of unstable becomings and a

heterogeneous matrix of flows, connections or disconnections, between ideas, things, memories, molecules, and organisms. The car space is conceived as a 'doing' (in the making) which is constituted through performative relations that comprise everyday life. Hence, bodily judgements of driving sounds are always situated, constituted and embedded in material spaces.

Related to driving performances are listening practices. A visceral approach challenges the privileged place of the ear in some accounts of sound (Rodaway 1994). Instead, following Longhurst et al. (2009) the notion of a multisensory corporeality suggests that bodily judgements of the brain, nose, fingers, eye, tongue and ear are conceptualised as flowing over each other rather than as operating independently of each other. We suggest that listening occurs through the body, shifting between affective (non-cognitive) and emotional (cognitive) registers (see also Nancy 2007; Simpson 2009). As Smith (2000) and Saldanah (2002) argued, the affective and emotional power of music has something to do with the embodiment of sound and how rhythm, beat, tempo and melody (the affordances of music) are best suited to connecting bodies by extracting the energies already flowing in and in-between them.

And finally, following Longhurst et al.'s (2009) visceral approach, how we listen is something we have learnt to do, but the experience is tied to our personal histories. Listening practices are therefore both intensely personal and social. Just as bodily judgements of sounds are shaped by the historical weight of ideas about aesthetics and social expectations (speed, tyre pressure, engines, road quality), so the visceralities of sound are differentiated by individual histories. The visceral requires remaining alert to how different bodies have distinct affective capacities. We suggest that the space of the car is performed actively through listening practices – (re)organising experiences of people and place that simultaneously draw on the past and present, here and elsewhere.

Our visceral approach to car driving included mixed methods. Alert to calls by Sheller and Urry (2006) and Buscher and Urry (2009) for research methods that are 'on-the-move,' the next section draws primarily from empirical material gathered from 2010-2011 from semi-structure interviews, 'drive-alongs' (Laurier 2004; 2010), and the use of video (Pink 2009; Spinney 2011) and later sound recorders (Duffy and Waitt 2011) to trace regular car journeys. The audio files analysed here are drawn from a larger sample of over 500 participant recordings, of which 200 contained driving to the sound of the radio or favourite music. Creating and analysing visceral mappings meant listening to the recordings multiple times and making note of those instances where changes to rhythm, tempo, beat, timbre and volume of voice, sound and music allowed a tracing of the movement of affect. Drawing on our own embodied histories of listening, we thought about how particular sounds affectively

acted on our own bodies paying attention to the non-representational elements of sound. In this way we could identify moments variously recognised as resignation, frustration, annoyance, contentment or pleasure. The focus was not on the meanings of sound per se, but rather how the affordances attributed to sound (melody, beat, tempo, rhythm and timbre) help organise a sense of order, control and purpose (see Fraisse 1982). We needed, then, to know from the participant what they felt at particular times. Hence, we joined participants in re-listening to the recordings, asking them to reflect on what they might have been feeling. In this way the researcher gained a sense of how the sounds of driving act a means of experiencing place and identity. An attention to the visceral elements of sound helped us to consider the role of sound in fashioning the identities and places of people who drive cars, and link the emotional to the fabric of social life, the individual body to the collective work of drivers and the personal to the political.

Ours is a novel method for mapping what Ringrose (2011: 599) termed the ‘complex embodied, relational, spatial, affective energies.’ We propose that this method and analysis offers alternative interpretations of empirical data that allow us to move beyond the purely representational and towards considering the significance of the movement and flow of affective states to develop a visceral approach to sound ‘wherein emergent properties reveal themselves – sometimes in surprising ways – through the engagement of multiple senses’ (Ballora 2014, 40).

We provide three case studies to illustrate how we conceive of driving sounds as a medium through which people and places are made, remade and unmade. First, we explore how driving to music works through performance to make particular gendered domestic geographies heard.

Sue works part-time in healthcare, lives with her husband and has two grown up children who live independently. Domestic responsibilities are strictly gendered in this household. Sue is responsible for domestic responsibilities of shopping, cooking and cleaning. Her husband maintains the car and the yard. Having her own car is important to Sue because as the result of a childhood illness she has reduced physical agility.

[being without the car] would be too depressing; I would have to rely on others.

I couldn't do what I want to do (conversation with Jude, 22/01//2011)

Thus Sue draws on the discourses of freedom and independence where car driving allows control over fragmented times and extended spaces. Yet, going beyond abstract rep-

representations of how the steel and glass of the car in the garage may represent freedom, we can explore the embodied pleasures of being behind the wheel through sound.

While driving alone Sue plays her choice of music on CD. She sings the well-known lyrics with feeling, skilfully harmonising, improvising- changing the tone and pitch of her voice to suit each song. Her voice belies the pleasure she derives from singing in the car. Sue speaks out in the privacy of the car, chiding other drivers : *'that's a good place to park, lady, right where I am backing up!'* and talks back to the radio.

The car is where I do all of my listening. I sing all the time, I sing even when I am unhappy... I sing, because I can...because no-one can hear me. God, my voice sounds awful, I guess I shouldn't enjoy it so much. I guess I am more outspoken in the car...though I never really thought about it before (Jude's reflection on audio, 22/1/2011).

However, when Sue drives with her husband her experience of space is altered:

I am very nervous when my husband is a passenger...I was thinking that the other day..... he makes me nervous. He got in the car. Turned my music off. Turned the heater off. 'Why did you go around that truck?' 'Why don't you get in this lane?' 'You'd be better if you went this way'...I am much more confident when he is not in the car.

Conversation with Jude 26/11/2011

For Jude, driving alone and singing to music provides a way to unsettle the power geometries of the domestic home. Within the space of the car, her sense of self is no longer constrained by the lingering gendered relations of the home which prescribe what she can and cannot do. For example, Jude narrated with pleasure her fantasy of driving off to Melbourne, leaving domestic and workplace responsibilities behind:

sometimes I see that sign that says Melbourne 1036 kms and I think, I could do that, I could just keep on going. I've got money in the bank. There is nothing to stop me [laughing] (drive-along 28/10/2010).

The affective intensities that are felt through Sue's body as she drives we argue illustrate how practices create spaces, but also how space works to alter the affective capacities of

bodies. Sounds help to create systematic typologies of taste, beauty and ideals which are productive of human difference. The sounds of driving give insights into the way that affect and emotion move through and between human and non-human bodies in singular ways.

The second case study also illustrates how the sounds of driving serve to create and subvert gendered domestic geographies. In this family, traditional gender roles are reversed, 48 year-old Steve is a stay at home day with responsibility for two young children and domestic duties while his wife works full-time. For Steve, sound is a way to connect or disconnect with conventional gender norms. When driving, listening to children's audio books helps him to reinforce his caring role as he drives his children to art class or the library. The barking of dogs, the drone of lawnmowers and the chirping of birds as he passes through suburban space help to situate him in his stay-at-home role. Yet Steve expresses the frustration of isolation as he undertakes his daily duties:

I think the fact is that I am isolated... being the only male there [children's play-group] I was isolated... and I struggle with that at times (drive-along 15/10/2010).

At times he experiences his non-conventional masculinity as stress. Struggling to control the children, or opening a bill he uses music to alter his affective experience of space by playing loud rock music.

Well it is something about me I guess. Reminds me of the old days when I could just do my own thing. When things were a bit free-er before the kids. I have more responsibility these days. It is like a kind of pressure valve; a release from responsibility (reflection on audio 25/10/2010)

The embodied pleasures of listening to rock music while driving his children illustrate how sound works to organize and make accessible sensations and feelings that we already have. It gives insights into how the movement of affect is mediated through sound and how these sounds express the specificity of place and a sense of social order.

The final example illustrates how not just music, but the sounds of movement can constitute bodies as socially different. Sixty-eight year-old Trevor is an academic who lives with his wife and drives to and from work daily for about ten minutes. Over the past eleven years he has refined his route to minimize interruptions. For example, he typically leaves home early and returns late to avoid traffic congestion and is intimately familiar with the patterns and timing of the traffic lights along the way. Travelling by car allows Trevor to reinforce his

professional identity by drawing on the discourses convenience and productivity. Framed in this way, the car is understood as convenient because it makes possible not only control over the use of time, but also possibilities to 'store' time by minimising interruptions.

Trevor never listens to music when he drives. Instead the revolutions of the engine, the metronomic ticking of indicators and the sound of passing traffic help situate Trevor's body within a particular social and material space. The visceral response to the even sound of regular forward motion and rhythmic speed illustrates how Trevor synchronised his own bodily rhythms with the steady hum of the engine. For example, he often sighs contentedly:

(2:49) Hay ayy, aye aye (lilting, melodic)

The affective pleasures of driving are evident in bodily noises –yawning, sighing, burping and passing wind. The habitual embodied experiences of comfort, felt through the rhythms of driving, co-constitute space as private and unbounded by the constraints and norms of work and home. Sounds give insights into how driving is related to situated understandings of self. For example, we hear Trevor's emotional response when he encounters traffic on his way home:

You *shit* of a bloody thing! (loudly, angrily)

The sound of rapid gear changes and exaggerated rates of acceleration illustrate emotion as performative and embodied. Reciprocal speeds, pauses, movements and flows between body and car work through the co-ordination of hands, ears, eyes, and legs in a textured rhythmic relation. There is an attunement between Trevor and the sounds of movement of air, road, tyre and engine- Trevor drives with the car not just in the car. Obrador (2012) asserts that there is not always a clear distinction between bodies as subject or object. Rather, 'our bodies extend into things and they extend into us' (Patterson 2004, p175). The sounds of driving for Trevor afforded affective moments of pleasure and comfort alongside moments of frustration and annoyance that were tied to understandings of himself.

In conclusion, we have pointed to the possibilities of sensory methods for understanding the affective and emotional dimensions of car driving. The visceral realm is about performance. Driving performance is part of the everyday rhythm of the city which and creates and expresses a particular kind of gendered, racialised, socio-economic space. Driving performances offer insights into the making and remaking of identities and geographies. Driving performances, including playing music, help fashion and mobilise affective and emotional

connections that can reinforce a sense of home or nation, as well as social distinction and difference from others.

We have suggested that taking a visceral approach to sound is a productive way to investigate how bodies, objects, ideas and practices reveal much about social order and situated subjectivities. We used the example of two home-makers to illustrate how music altered the affective experiences of driving. Jude and Steve illustrated how this was a part of negotiating gendered domestic roles and responsibilities and how these were embedded within particular personal and social contexts. Professional Trevor illustrated how the sounds of movement and the movement of sound were caught up in the embodied rhythms of driving.

Drawing on empirical material we illustrated how this approach was used to understand driving as situated in particular gendered, classed and aged discourses. For example, for Sue, a wife and mother, the sounds of driving helped to reinforce an alternative identity that was not situated in the gendered norms of domestic responsibility. For Steve, the sounds of driving allowed affective and emotional connections to other times and places as he negotiated a non-conventional masculinity in relation to his domestic responsibility. For Trevor, the affective experiences of privacy and control reinforced a professional identity that was felt as a pleasurable embodied rhythm. In all three examples, we illustrated by an attention to sound, how affect worked to alter the relations between and across human and non-human bodies. We hope to encourage other scholars to think about the productive possibilities of a visceral approach to sound.

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