

Sounding Place: Towards a Practice of Field Recoding

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Abstract

This paper traces a path through current thinking about “place” in human geography, ethnomusicology, and phenomenology. It draws upon Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s insistence that knowledge of the lived world is generated by a living body; Edward Casey’s formulation that place precedes space as “the first of all things”; and Tim Ingold’s definition of landscape as “dwelling-place”. My perspective is that of an artist who uses field recordings as the primary material in a matrix of activities – composition, live electronics and improvisation among them. My larger project is to develop an integrated and sustainable model of sonic practice that supports an embedded and non-hierarchical relationship with our ecological milieu. An anecdote will set the stage.

Keywords:

“The world is not what I think, but what I live through.”

Maurice Merleau-Ponty [2005, xviii]

This paper traces a path through current thinking about “place” in human geography, ethnomusicology, and phenomenology. It draws upon Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s insistence that knowledge of the lived world is generated by a living body; Edward Casey’s formulation that place precedes space as “the first of all things”; and Tim Ingold’s definition of landscape as “dwelling-place”. My perspective is that of an artist who uses field recordings as the primary material in a matrix of activities – composition, live electronics, and improvisation among them. My larger project is to develop an integrated and sustainable model of sonic practice that supports an embedded and non-hierarchical relationship with our ecological milieu. An anecdote will set the stage.

It’s four-thirty in the morning and I’m standing on the banks of the Corbally Canal in Limerick, Ireland. I have brought a steaming mug of jasmine tea as proof against the chill. A special play of muscle and tendon is needed to carefully balance this vessel of hot fluid in one hand, a tripod in the other, while distributing the weight of a pack across my back. The specific movements required for these tasks recall previous field recording outings – memories stored in the body more so than in the mind. I place a digital audio recorder in the bushes. Soon a scatter of birds start up their song from the other side of the canal. From the far distance is heard the occasional sound of rubber tyres on tarmac, early commuters on their way to work. A silent cat passes close by. Will the recorder note its passage by way of a gap or change in the bird-song? Will its footpads be audible in the grass? Would it have travelled a different route had I not been here, scented with jasmine? The back of my hand is on fire from where stinging nettles brushed the skin. I forgot to bring gloves. Again.

For centuries the prevailing bias has been to read the world through visual metaphors; this bias is inherent in language and philosophy. But as the preceding narrative illustrates, we are each an archipelago of perception, memory, and cognition, operating across diverse interrelated sensory pathways. Many contemporary writers are now aware that an approach dominated by optics is insufficient for the task of developing a thorough and responsive phenomenology. Jim Drobnick has written of the “sonic turn” in the arts, practices of sound-making and listening that affirm “sound’s heterogeneous significance” and which reach towards understandings the eye alone cannot reveal [2004a, 10]. Volumes such as *Autumn Leaves* attest to the range of artistic practice through which sound is currently being

interrogated [Carlyle 2007]. More specifically, the eighteen interviews collected as *In the Field* highlight the diversity of contemporary field recording practice [Lane and Carlyle 2013].

Nonetheless, it is important to avoid establishing a facile opposition between the aural and the optical. This dialectic ignores cross-modal sensory connections, such as that illustrated by the ventriloquist illusion. Further, it risks over-simplifying hearing itself, specifically how hearing utilises not only the ear, but is embedded in the haptic through vibration and touch. As Tim Ingold insists, our perception cannot be “sliced up along the lines of the sensory pathways”, but rather must be considered as a whole [2007, 10].

This is the background for my current project, which aims to create a consistent ideological basis for sonic engagements with place. I start by examining two contrary ways of relating space and place: the empirical and the Archytan. Normative conceptions generally hold with the empirical position that space¹ is either an actual entity (Newton), or at least a relationship between or formed by entities (Leibniz, Locke, Hume). Kant may have believed that space was “in here” rather than “out there”, but he still held that space was a priori and “inheres in us before all perception or experience as a pure form of our sensibility and makes possible all intuition from sensibility, and therefore all appearances” [Janiak 2009, n.p.]. Practitioners in the discipline of acoustic ecology tend to the same view; space is an empty medium waiting to be filled with sonic events we can map and graph. In this, they follow Descartes, Galileo, and the mainstream of classical Western science in viewing space as isometric, homogeneous, and universal [Casey 1996, 20]. It follows that sounds can be catalogued as autonomous objects with independent qualities.

A very different relationship between place and space has been termed by Edward Casey the Archytan Axiom [1996, 16]. He traces the belief that “place is the first of all things” from Aristotle to Heidegger to Bachelard. For followers of Archytas, place comes before space; the individual and the local precede the general. Or, as Casey writes, “spaces are themselves emplaced from the very first moment, and at every subsequent moment as well” [18]. In the discipline of human geography, this consideration has led to what Greenhough has termed a “vitalist geography”, or what Anderson and Harrison have more generally described as “non-representational” geography [Greenhough 2010, Anderson and Harrison 2010b]. These authors champion an approach based on “the symbolic qualities of landscape, those which produce and sustain social meaning” rather than “physical artifacts (log cabins, fences, and field boundaries)” [Cosgrave and Jackson quoted in Anderson and Harrison 2010b, 5]. Fur-

1. And not just space, but time. In this paper I will not explicitly consider the temporal dimension for the sake of brevity, despite it being key to sonic understandings.

thermore, this symbolic order is not fixed and ordered a priori, but is arbitrary and contested, a product of cultural forces [Anderson and Harrison 2010b, 5].

This approach is demonstrated clearly in the work of ethnomusicologist Steven Feld with the Kaluli people of Papua New Guinea. In this culture, improvising “duets with birds, cicadas, or other forest sounds are not uncommon everyday events. Sometimes people will find themselves a waterfall just for the pleasure of singing with a shimmering accompaniment” [Feld 1984, 395]. The Kaluli make their way through the rainforest with their heads down, navigating by sound more than sight. Names for things – and especially places – come from the sounds of these things. Important rituals and everyday activities both have aural accompaniments, not as ornamentation but as substance. For the Kaluli “sonic sensibility is basic to experiential truth” [Feld 1994, np]. This new form of knowledge Feld termed *acoustemology*, a portmanteau for “acoustic epistemology” [Feld 1996, 91]. Despite the emphasis on sound in his analysis, Feld is careful to note that the Kaluli sensorium is indeed cross-modal. Their language even has a word meaning both “absorption by ear and nose” [99].

For some readers, these ethnographic observations have justified declaring tribal peoples as being “closer to nature”. For others it’s reason to lament lost knowledge² or the degradation of the “Hi-Fi” soundscape into the “Lo-Fi” [Schafer 1994, 43]. This is not the place to debate such topics³. Rather, it can be stated that Feld’s observations are, at the very least, a concrete demonstration of Merleau-Ponty’s thesis that knowledge of the world is generated by a living body. And though the Kaluli may represent rather obvious support for this thesis, the same experiential philosophy can be seen to hold true in our own urban and para-urban societies.

Tim Ingold follows the Archytian Axiom by considering “the world as it is known to those who dwell therein, who inhabit its places and journey along the paths connecting them” [2000, 193]. *Landscape*⁴ is a dwelling-place⁵, created through the accretion of tasks performed within the constraints that the landscape itself imposes. In *The Perception of the Environment* Ingold argues that this recursive process “is why the conventional dichotomy between natural and artificial (or ‘man-made’) components of the landscape is so problem-

2. For it is true that the Kaluli no longer live in the manner described, contact with outside societies, particularly Christian missionaries, being to blame.

3. Though one might wonder how, ideology aside, a massed cicada stridulation or a loud waterfall is preferential sonically to, say, a passing aircraft.

4. Ingold’s use of the term “landscape” should be distinguished from both “land” and “place”, though a fulsome discussion must wait for another opportunity.

5. This thought can be traced to Heidegger’s famous lecture “Building Dwelling Thinking”. It is important to note that this word has a generalised existential meaning in German. “The way in which you are and I am, the manner in which we humans are on the earth, is *Buan*, dwelling” [Heidegger 1951, 145].

atic” [199]. This is an argument against those practices of acoustic ecology that divide sound sources into biophony, anthrophony, and geophony [Krause 1998, 82 and Pijanowski et al. 2011b, 1214]. Such categories pretend that we, *Homo sapiens sapiens*, are somehow separate from nature, and, furthermore, that we are inherently deficient in comparison to other species.⁶

Ingold’s thesis is largely based on the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty. Being is always being-in-place, inflected and constrained by the specific milieu. (I use that particular word in order to avoid terms, such as “environment” and “ecosystem”, that come heavily laden with existing ideological connotations.) Furthermore, Ingold insists that “the forms of the landscape are generated in movement” [2000, 198]. Place is not a static object that lies still for examination, but is instead always in the process of being constructed. It is appropriate, then, to read “place” as a verb rather than a noun. My proposition is that we should consider that each engagement with the world sounds a place. This sounding is limited spatially, temporally, and perceptually, and is all the richer for being so constrained. The visual term for the limit to perception is the horizon. Indeed Edmund Husserl, whose phenomenology underlies much thinking in electroacoustic music,⁷ wrote that “every experience has its own horizon”. Edward Casey explicated that we “continually find ourselves in the midst of perceptual horizons, both the ‘internal’ horizons of particular things (ie, their immediate circumambiance) and the ‘external’ horizons that encompass a given scene as a whole” [1996, 17].

I specifically choose “sounding” as an acoustic metaphor, with the understanding that it applies not only to hearing, but across our integrated sensorium. The sounding reflects back to our senses qualities of the milieu, allowing us to gather knowledge of topology, dimensionality, and materiality. At the same time, the particular intentions and attentions we expend, as both individuals and societies, encodes meaning in the milieu. Place may be understood as both this activity (here “place” is a verb) and the tentative, ever-changing product of this reflexive and discursive process (“place” as a noun). Further, this encoding can never in fact be an original process, free of influence, since there is always already a milieu in place. Every sounding is, in fact, a recoding.

Several contemporary field recordists “sound place” in the manner I have described. Davide Tidoni stimulates sites by popping balloons; the results engage with social responses

6. The power of this ideology cannot be over-stated. In interview Bernie Krause claimed: “The sounds of the natural world are the sounds of the divine – the sounds of the human world are anything but” [Sriskandarajah 2012].

7. This is epitomised in the acousmatic tradition of Pierre Schaeffer and Michel Chion, on which I have written elsewhere [Parmar 2012]. I should make clear that Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology, which ultimately rejects historical and technological context, is quite distinct from the existential and embodied approach of Merleau-Ponty as described in *Phenomenology of Perception*.

as much as acoustic results [Carlyle 2013, 80]. Dallas Simpson presents “intuitive improvisations using found objects” as binaural recordings, articulating his own ontological engagement with place [Simpson 2014]. Slavek Kwi (who also works as Artificial Memory Trace) playfully reconfigures field recordings through overt manipulation, establishing a strange symbiosis between himself and his subjects [Fischer 2013]. Mark Peter Wright plays recordings back out into their place of origin, before erasing them forever [Wright 2013]. Each of these practitioners deserves more complete study in light of the thesis developed in this paper. (This work is in progress.)

My own sound works are rooted in my local environment, utilising recordings I make as part of my daily life. I take as a given Casey’s declaration that “[t]o live is to live locally, and to know is first of all to know the places one is in” [1996, 18]. An example of my practice is the composition “Caged Birds (Augmentation)”, originally created for the John Cage centenary celebration in New York City.⁸ (This piece is presented at this symposium in a new four channel diffusion.) The title is a play on John Cage, but is also a reminder that a recording is a sound no longer at liberty. The composition takes as its source material the dawn chorus described at the outset of this talk. Though it might initially be mistaken for an “untouched” field recording, it becomes apparent that the avian performers have been taught a new tune. The birdsong shifts in frequency, amplitude, and timing, much as actual birds have adapted their song to changing urban environments [Pijanowski et al. 2011a, 208]. In part, then, the piece is a metaphor for a particular ecological concern, though the fact that its aesthetic affects are derived from electronically-generated transformations belies nostalgia. The intent is to highlight, rather than resolve, any paradox inherent in this mediated engagement with what might only naively be called “nature”.

This paper has attempted a synthesis of phenomenological observations from several different disciplines, in order to examine field recording. The haptic nature of sound makes it particularly suited to the expression of cross-modal phenomenology. This belief has led to the development of certain key acoustic metaphors. The core thesis is that perception exists in and through our being-in-place. Every act, inflected and constrained by a specific milieu, sounds a place, bringing it into being for a certain duration, within a certain circumambiance. This sounding reveals that place is not static, not simply “location”, but is instead a product of ongoing reflexive and discursive processes, both personal and societal, that encode meaning in the milieu. Thus, field recording practitioners cannot appeal to any pre-existing “objec-

8. *100x John: A Global Salute to John Cage in Sound and Image* was presented by Ear to the Earth from 20-23 December 2012 at White Box, New York City.

tive” reality that they might document as unattached observers. Rather, they should accept responsibility for their active role in creating the places they record.

Praxis that engages with these principles is termed field recoding.

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