

In that place, the air was very different Report on a Sounding of São Miguel

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How does sound form our experience of place? How do we recall places through sound? How do our activities help create place? These are some of the questions I have been investigating in recent years, by way of phenomenology and human geography, and through my personal practice of field recording, poetics, and composition. I take it as axiomatic that a place is not a passive location awaiting documentation, but an active matrix always in the process of being formed, changed by every attention. We create place as place creates us.



Figure 1. Rain in Terra Nostra Gardens, Furnas.

The word “sound” is often used as a passive term related only to audition. But I use sound as an active principle, by which we can know the world. In my residencies, I *sound place*, not only for the acoustic properties, but for a plenitude of potential resonances across different registers. The normative phenomenological approach to the world in most cultures is

through sight. Vision has had a profound effect on Western language and philosophy, to the point of obscuring other sensory modalities. I wish to foreground sound as *a way into place*. But not because I wish only acoustic results; rather, because soundings reveal characteristics, across all the senses, that sightings might ignore. This approach relies on a principle articulated by Tim Ingold: We do not experience the world as divided by our sensory organs, but rather as an integrated sensorium. The “five senses” of antiquity are a myth, as are any other countable demarcations.

Here follow six encounters with place from my residency.

My skin absorbs salt from the ocean air at Ponta da Ferraria, a promontory at the western tip of São Miguel. The sea has travelled a long way to be here, and seems intent on making its presence felt. The spray is mere excess, the leftover material at the end of a long process of energy transfer. But the feeling of this mist on my skin is important, heightening awareness of the pounding sea, which inexorably struggles to wear down the volcanic rock. What could be a commonplace encounter with the surf is here rendered specific. I notice that in this place the vibrations do not travel horizontally from the waterfront, but instead up through the feet. This earthy rumble is palpable, vibratory, and frightening. The shaking casts into doubt the stability of the very earth. A rare wave cups the air between water and rock in just the right way, splitting the air with a BOOM, a totalising thunder of mythological proportions. The back of my hand is scraped against the sharp, black, volcanic rock. This pain reinforces the sensation, now recognised as fear. This is a dangerous place. It's raw and alchemical, always in the process of becoming something else. Perhaps the real terror is that it reminds us that we too are impermanent.



Figure 2. Surf and black rock, Ponta da Ferraria.

At Lago do Furnas, fumaroles squeak and bubble, utterances of super-heated steam escaping the volcanic realm. One particular patch is inaudible to the naked ear. But putting a microphone close to the soft, heated soil, I am treated to low comic burblings, fit for some cartoon character. Nearby, the hot mud throws itself out of small caldera, intent on bridging the perimeter to the safe viewing path. My sinuses fill with the humid, sulphurous air. This stink discourages close engagement with the materials ejected from the depths. The next day my shoelaces fall apart. The shoes themselves become unwearable; despite attempts at washing, they are forever stamped with the acrid aroma. For the remainder of the residency, everywhere I walk this trace is carried.

For three weeks, I live in Ribeira Grande, a town on the north shore of the island. The community is split by an enormous chasm; even the beach is impassable from one side to the other. Two main roads bridge the river valley. Though it is the namesake of this community, everyone turns their back to Ribeira Grande. Rare exceptions are the teenagers who seek it out precisely because the environs are otherwise ignored. They find private spaces for their intimate encounters, in the shade of disused buildings, alongside paths not taken. In fact, even the teens turn their backs, so that the couplings, if viewed from afar, are anonymous. The beach is also largely ignored. At the American Bar, I notice people take their drinks outside, away from the din of table football and television soaps. They walk across the wide road, to the side of the street that overlooks the ocean from a vantage. But then they sit with their backs to the sea, attention paid instead to those who might enter or emerge from the café.



Figure 3. Source of the Ribeira Grande.

On São Miguel, the fog does not roll in from the sea, it tumbles down from the mountains. Most days, the peaks are hidden in thick mist. Water condenses on the mountain slopes, accumulating to form the Ribeira Grande. The source of this river lies high in the hills, within the crumbling walls of an abandoned bottling factory. A spring irrigates a still pool that floods the building shell. From this source, I taste the carbonated effluent of the misty peaks, tongue tickled by clear, precise bubbles. This sensation makes me aware that this artificial tarn is not static or placid, as it appears to the eye. It is forever alive with micro-movements, as water exchanges content with the surrounding air. I can taste processes that are hidden to the eye. And now, too, I can hear it, a high frequency sizzle, overlaying the thrum of wind that scrubs the mountain cuts and dusts the huddled flora.

It pours rain with an intensity entirely fitting for ancient ferns and tropical groves. At the Terra Nostra Gardens, visitors bathe in thermal pools, coloured a deep orange with primal minerals. Having a contrary impulse, I walk through the botanical park. It's designed for crowds, but is abandoned in this downpour. On my journey, I pause to hear rain under bamboo, rain under eucalyptus, rain on the steaming rivulets that carry run-off from the warm pools. I am soon soaked to the bone, but maintain this activity through force of will. This effort enhances my receptivity. Each rain at every different spot now sounds distinct. I am sure that with time, I could recognise species of vegetation from their sound under precipitation.



Figure 4. Dancing tea, Chá Gorreana plantation.1

The immense thrumming of the drying turbines at the Chá Gorreana plantation powers an integrated resonating instrument, comprised of wooden floorboards, loose frames, wire mesh, and antique machinery. This sound is overwhelming, the drone blotting out other impressions. But then I crush tea leaves between my fingers. The pungent leafy aroma refocuses attention from the general to the particular. I can now notice small leaves dancing in the corner of a wooden slatted tray. Their patterns are delightful; I cannot help laughing out loud. I am also aware that a loose panel fitting is generating a musical rhythm, an ever-changing Euclidean pattern around a fixed motif. The sun creates, from a porthole joining two rooms, a circular frame, an aperture ready-made for a film camera. From the adjacent café, the clink of teacups may just be heard above the more present noises. A hundred such small observations could be catalogued in this domain of the tealeaf.

These examples demonstrate that each encounter with place is facilitated by the intelligence of the body. My experiences are not only due to a thinking mind, but also a thinking arm, thinking skin, and so on. Our tools are also part of this process, extensions of our touch, our sight, our audition. I have learned to see differently after decades looking through a camera lens. And I have learned to hear through my microphones. This is not only because they magnify sounds, changing acoustic scale, but also because they focus attention in particular ways, some amenable to investigation, others less so. But even constraints are useful.

Because sound can evoke an integrated sensorium, I deliberately restrict my installations to sonic material. The physical environs, the topology, and the material cladding of the architectural spaces provide all the necessary cross-stimuli. Once activated by the imaginations of listeners, a plenitude of responses is not only possible, but inevitable. To facilitate this outcome, I tailor the selection of sounds and the diffusion parameters to the specifics of the site.



Figure 5. Installation at Arquipélago, Ribeira Grande.

Arquipélago is a well-appointed arts centre, repurposed from an old factory in Ribeira Grande. My installation was situated in a dark and moist basement storehouse. Archways of stone formed intriguing spatial arrangements within the listening area. The dust from this stone was palpable. With every breath, I was more and more aware of my throat, as though the volcanic deposit was forming a thick layer inside me. Being underground, it recalled numerous encounters from my residency: fumeroles, deep cut riverbeds, dark rumblings through stone, earthy vibrations. I was reminded of the permeability and instability of this island. At the same time, the antique arches and stone floors evoked aspects of sacred spaces: cloisters, cathedrals, mausoleums. This relationship in memory and the imagination encouraged quiet listening.

In that place, the air was very different is formed of sound pools, each a curated collection of recordings made on residencies in Slovenia, Catalonia, and so on. These pools are reproduced by a software application using an aleatoric algorithm, designed to maximise the potential for *accidents of listening*. Different regions of the room contain different admixtures of the sound pools. As a visitor traces a path through these zones, they actively create their own mix. This mirrors my own experience in recording the sounds in the first place. The recordings are not intended to represent any veridical truth, but are rather tokens of an ongoing process of creating place. The installation is inextricably bound to the preceding residency period; it could not exist otherwise.

I credit the success of this work to the many thoughtful listeners who committed to the experience. The positive responses reinforce my belief in the ethos expressed by this project. Though not didactic in its approach, *In that place, the air was very different* encourages us to

consider our embedded situation in a matrix of connections and flows. It proposes that we take responsibility for our impact on the places we inhabit.

São Miguel

We stand on a volcanic crest,
extruded from the sea.
On all sides
a jealous, oceanic mind
desires to reclaim its own.
It sends rip tides and zip waves
to wash us away.

On still nights
the distant thunder
of that ferocious beachhead
averts sleep.
I lie awake as waters roil
up abandoned streets
and echo off the hills,
in ambush.
Reverberation envelops the room
as phantom waves
fill my head.

Sleep comes at dawn's hour.
I dream of dark woods
filled with a wind,
humming through angry trees.
But the forest that's source
for this churning
lies offshore, deep,
drowned on terraces of magma.
The black effluent of volcanic process
is frozen
into this very place.
The mercurial sound
of lost midnight waves
betrays an infinite engine
with which we cannot compete.

If I lived here,
on this small island,
I'd worship a sea god
just in case.

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