

Wayback Sound Machine: Sound Through Time, Space, and Place

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Abstract

This is the second post in *Sounding Out!*'s July forum on listening in observation of World Listening Day on July 18th, 2013.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Acoustic Ecology, Acoustics, Article, Digital Media, Field Recording



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This is the second post in *Sounding Out!*'s July [forum on listening](#) in observation of World Listening Day on July 18th, 2013. World Listening Day is a time to think about the impacts we have on our auditory environments and, in turn, its affects on us. To read last week's post by **Regina Bradley** (and to read more about World Listening Day) click [here](#).

When I travel to somewhere I'm unfamiliar with to create a work, I've become in the habit of bringing my VLF receiver, hydrophones, and underwater camera in order to explore. Whether what comes out ultimately becomes part of the work or not, my interest in these particular tools stems from a fascination with obscure events around me, real and happening, that I cannot perceive. But it also marks my wonder at events and elements in our world that have been, while changing, continuous in a time line extending much further than my own. Similar to the sense one may get when experiencing a desert, or an ocean, with time and patience, what might at first seem bleak, barren, or monotonous, begins to give hint to a rich world hidden from our day to day.



Photo by the author, Saint Michael's Mound, Marazion, Cornwall

Two autumns ago, finding myself with a day off from a project I was working on near Penzance in Cornwall, I decided to take the day to hike the lesser known British arm of the Santiago Pilgrim

Route: the St. Michael's Way. Dating back tens of thousands of years, St. Michael's Way enabled pilgrims and missionaries traveling from Ireland or Wales to choose to abandon their ships and walk across the peninsula, rather than navigating the treacherous waters around Land's End. In the days of such pilgrimages, the way was fraught with all sorts of dangers, and the path itself splits a few times, veering off towards a church near the harbor where they would get the boat to cross them. There they would meet a guide who would offer safe passage from the many thieves and pirates along the way. Still marked with the iconic scallop shell symbol of the pilgrim route, the path was nevertheless neglected, and overrun with all sorts of modern obstacles such as busy roads and farm irrigation systems.



Photo by the author, Gulval, Cornwall

As I got lost time and time again making my way towards Saint Ives, I found myself marveling at all sorts of new and heretofore unknown sensations. My ears tuned from the project I was there working on, I was especially taken by the sound. Toward the middle of the path—located at the top of the hills inland of the peninsula—the wind from both sides carried over pieces of the day to day from the villages; a tractor, grazing animals, bits of conversation in Cornish, and church bells wisping by as quickly as they came, like ghosts. It is fitting that St Michael, after whom the route was named, is the patron saint of high places.



Photo by the author, Ludgvan, Cornwall

I began to wonder what this path may have sounded like back in the time of thieves and pirates, back when the occasion to use it was a shared occasion celebrated with the voices of people, priests, prayers, and the markets and fairs along the way to fuel all this activity. As I continued walking, I began to wonder how it may have sounded even before then, before the hills were blanketed with crops and cattle, before the many battles that must have been waged, and villages built and grazed. . .were there more birds then? Were there more trees? Were there more boar and foxes? What about even before these hills were hills, could there be a way to sonify these hills forming? I started to dream of a “wayback machine” for sound. What if as you walked this path, you could listen to time spinning back, listen to how it might have sounded, listen to its history? And what could you take from that experience? *Could* something be taken from this? In the two years since that happenstance, this idea has since stuck with me. Beginning tentative research and practice to apply these thoughts, I continue to unearth more questions than answers, so I began to seek others experimenting in a similar vein. While acoustic ecology is a growing field, I still have not found many researchers working with sound in/as time.

One person who has come close to this idea is acoustic ecologist, musician, and sound recordist Bernie Krause, whom last year I interviewed in an article on the sound of disaster about disappearing sounds as a [signal of impending crises](#). The prelude of Krause’s book *The Great Animal Orchestra: Finding the Origins of Music in the World’s Wild Places*, is the beautifully written, “Echoes of the Past,” which takes a meandering listen to how the world might have

sounded sixteen thousand years ago. With that trip in mind, perhaps something could come from working with people in various fields of statistical analysis to see what sounds are projected to go extinct from a soundscape with time, and what this could mean in terms of how the sound line will be extended into the future. In the section “First Notes,” Krause describes working with a graduate student, Kristin Junette, who reasoned that based on fossil records and the known sounds of insect species today, we might be able to re-create the insect ambience of about sixty-five million years ago. Then, based on acoustic physiology of the skull of a Hadrosaur, a dinosaur of the time, Krause and Junette were able to re-create a representative vocalization of its call to place in this early soundscape (for the Discovery Channel’s vision of how the hadrosaur might have sounded click [here](#)).



Hadrosaur skull, Image by Flickr user e_monk

I was also excited to learn of the research of Miriam Kolar, who has been working with various techniques and with people in various disciplines on a team studying and “recreating” the [acoustic architecture of the Chavín de Huántar](#), a 3,000 year old ceremonial center, predating the Inca in the Peruvian Andes. Chavín de Huántar is a complex underground maze of rooms and twisting corridors connected by air-ducts. When they were being excavated, archeologists noticed the rooms played strange acoustic tricks on them. “This environment is not only a physical maze, but it’s a sound maze,” says Kolar. For one example, some rooms have interconnected spaces that multiply echoes and bounce them back to the ear so rapidly that the sounds appear to emanate from all directions at once, while other areas seem designed for absorption. The team has been using 3-D computer modeling and specialized recording equipment to try and recreate the auditory effect. “If you have archaeology and no acoustics, you’re deaf,” says archaeoacoustician David Lubman. “And if you have acoustics and not the other, you’re blind. You need both” to understand ancient places like Chavín.



Chavín De Huántar

Inspired in part by the research of Krause and Kolar, “Passageira em Casa/The Traveller at Home,” one of my projects from the two years since my walk in Cornwall, begins to explore the notion of the wayback machine with sound in geography. Passageira em Casa is an intermedia and interdisciplinary performance inspired by the journey to define the concept of home. The narrative is a partially fictionalized and personalized account of the Maritime history of Portugal, enacted by a dancer, vocal performer, live video, and live electronic sound composition that creates a geography through the narrative and space of the project. From a dawn chorus in Lisbon to underwater earthquakes in the Pacific, field recordings along a maritime navigation route flow throughout the performance, giving a soundscape to the narrative’s location.

<https://vimeo.com/39332526>

The recent Australian version “Passageira australis” begins to explore sound in time. Recently developed at the [iAir](#) residency at RMIT, holds a focus on the debate behind whether the Portuguese were the first Europeans to arrive in Australia, based on the 16th century Dieppe maps of Jave la Grande and the myth/history of the Mahogany Ship. The soundtrack reveals a soundline based on the impact on flora, fauna, and overall soundscape on both countries.

<https://vimeo.com/66574320>

A two channel composition, different then stereo, one speaker represents Europe, the other Australia. As the dancer, our sailor, moves from one end of the space to the other, the sound in each channel is changed based on her approximate location to each “country”. With this experience, my hope is the audience comes away thinking about interconnectivity of the world, and how we impact the places we touch. Although I will continue to research when I return to Australia, already the project had me working with a map historian at the Victoria State Library, as well as consulting the thesis of geologist Andrew Pickering on using GIS technology to search for the location and story behind the presumed [mythological Mahogany Ship](#).

Based on hearing, listening (from an anthropological point of view) is the very sense of space and of time. . .By her noises, Nature shudders with meaning: at least this is how, according to Hegel, the ancient Greeks listened to her. The oaks of Dodona, by the murmur of their boughs, uttered prophecies, and in other civilizations as well. . .noises have been the immediate raw materials of a divination, cledonomanacy: to listen is, in an institutional manner, to try to find out what is happening. –Roland Bathes, “Listening”

Sound has a special importance to emotion, instinct, and memory, both individual and historical.. Hitting the oldest part of our brain, sound provides immediate information telling us where we are, whether it is safe, and how we should feel about it. The wayback machine would function as a sonic database that would not only help us to remember and learn about the past, but also to create new experiences within the complexity of changing soundscapes over a period that usually defies our human comprehension. I see this tool being helpful to researchers in many disciplines as a new kind of living archive, but also having a place in libraries, museums, centers, and perhaps “in the field” along paths such as the Santiago’s Way, where one could download an audio file from the map online, then listen with wonder and unique sensation as they walk back through history.



Photo by the author, Saint Michael's Mound, Marazion, Cornwall

Featured Image photo credit: Vahid Sadjadi, Joshua Tree State Park, California

Author's Note: A version of this post was presented at *Musique et Écologies du Son/ Music and Ecologies of Sound: Theoretical and Practical Projects for the Listening of the World*, Université Paris 8, May 2013. I slightly changed the original title of the paper to: “Sound through time, space, AND place.” Frank Vanclay said quite nicely in “Place Matters.” “Place” is generally conceived as

being ‘space’ imbued with meaning. Thus, it refers more to the meanings that are invested in a location than to the physicality of the locality.” He goes on to state sometimes it’s the biophysical characteristics that make the foundation for those personal meanings.

Maile Colbert is a multi-media artist with a concentration on sound and video who relocated from Los Angeles, US to Lisbon, Portugal. She is a regular writer for Sounding Out!



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