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THE SOUNDSCAPE IN POETRY

Language is the very voice of the trees, the waves, and the forests.

DRONING

Poetry is as much an oral as written form of expression. While poetry often relies on imagistic details to convey a sense of place, an event or experience, meaning also resides in the rhythm, rhyme, and sounds that comprise a poem. In this way, poems have an acoustic aspect to them, but how does this work?

We humans are immersed in an acoustic environment that entrains our bodies towards certain rhythms and that influences life worlds (all planetary life) spatially, in addition to temporally. From a critical social-Marxist point of view, contemporary rhythms are tied to production, consumerism, and to cultivating consumers as producers (Lefebvre, 1991). It follows that human listening habits— their focus, sophistication, and rhythms—are changing and adapting to these shifting acoustic environments, narrowing our capacity to hear the diversity in sound while the soundscape itself is flattening, a phenomenon that entered soundscapes with the industrial revolution where sounds are increasingly highly redundant (drone-like), have a low information value, and an eclipsed attack and decay. When observed graphically, as R. Murray Schafer (1977) first noted about the shifting industrialized soundscape (pp. 77–82), these type of sounds show as a continuous flat line. Instead of listening to a train whistle travelling across the prairie to know about local weather systems (the classic Canadian example), we are aurally re-tuned to the mono/tones and undifferentiated rhythms of traffic, a common market-driven soundscape effect. This fits with contemporary western society’s mon/ocularity, vision being selective in perception and rhythm – we can always shut our eyes to control what we are experiencing visually. In other societies and in other times, people have relied more on hearing, which tends to be polymorphous and immersive – we adapt to the sound environment as, without ear-lids, we continue to hear even when sleeping or unconscious.

The contemporary degradation of acoustic environments is leading to a degradation of our hearing capabilities, perhaps our perceptions and thought processes as well. More startling than the effects of loudness are the effects of non-discrete, non-interrupted sounds that dull our abilities to hear complexity. We are less able to distinguish between sounds, to hear over distances, hearing’s tonal range is diminishing and flat-lining. The organic curvature in natural sound is
being replaced by the abruptness of digitized sound—not to mention the impact of mono-sound on creatured worlds.

The activity of researching a soundscape re-tunes the ear and hones listening skills in order to critically analyze and develop an appreciation for one's place in its fabric. It is a practice of appreciation of Derrida's différence. First, however, the researcher engages with the soundscape experientially and aesthetically. In posing the question of what we hear when we listen in on the natural world, it becomes apparent that it is highly subjective. While music and film theorists focus on the music of nature, Fisher (1999) points out that this is part of the values we bring to nature (pure, good, rejuvenating, originary); that we ascribe music to nature whereas nature itself exceeds our definitions of music. Whether music originated in nature or whether our constructions of nature have formed music is arbitrary; nature is socially mutable and there is no one nature, static and ahistoric just as there is no one music. As a social phenomenon, I agree with Fisher that we bring our worldviews to that which we have constructed as nature but we are also not separate from it. There is music in nature but how are the values we bring to nature shaping natural acoustic soundscapes in profoundly human ways?

**SOUNDS POETIC**

A cultivated hyper-sensitivity to sound profoundly influences my being-in-the-world, my artistic practice, and the substance of the poetry I craft. It shapes the poem’s content, melodic qualities and rhythms, sometimes to the expense of intellectual and word meaning-making, with the aim of re-creating an acoustic rather than as well as an intellectual or imagistic experience. I refer to rhythm rather than meter because rhythm is experiential and embodied, whereas the metre of a poem is a measuring device, an applied abstracted discipline. These nuances into where the meaning of a poem resides also creates awareness of the give-and-take interrelatedness of acoustic environments, of bodies making sounds and listening within a matrix of lived experiences, natural and man-made. The natural soundscape can be understood as a tightly woven auditory fabric, where each creature occupies a locale, each locale has a unique soundscape signature, and everything occupies a niche that is its place, the place of its sound-making body—in order to send and receive vital spatial information. Like with the train whistle I mentioned earlier, sounds mark relationships of close/distant, movement and topography. Pitch, tone, frequency, and rhythm are only a few of many qualities that comprise a veritable information highway of sound where each creature has their own acoustic register. Old growth habitats are matrixes of sounds that reveal animal and plant biodiversity, weather systems, and the physical geography of the area within specific acoustic ranges. An acoustic ecosystem is a system-in-echo, a complex of things bouncing off and absorbing each other, tracing outlines as well as interacting, merging, resounding, and resonating. It is noteworthy that, “The prefix eco derives from the Greek oiko(s) or dwelling, habitation, or house, ecology being the study of the spacing of organisms, people, and institutions and their resulting interdependency” (Dancer, Ecology and Environmental section, 2008). If ecology is dwelling’s study, then an ecosystem (although system does not