SOUNDWORK

Intertidal Room: A Soundwalk through Timescapes of Vancouver's Coastline

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The soundwork file is openly available online on the UBC Library Open Journal Systems website: https://ojs.library.ubc.ca/index.php/bcstudies/article/view/194008/version/16418.

Intertidal Room is a soundwalk composition developed for the Vancouver coastline near Stanley Park, unceded territory of Coast Salish peoples - the xʷməθkwəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and Səl̓ílwətaʔ/Selilwitulh (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations. The composition invites the listener to embark on a soundwalk during a period of slack water. It is a moment when the tide is at the lowest point and soon about to return. By attending to the fugitive nature of intertidal zones, this soundwalk intends to provide a temporary room for increased aural attention to the ways people have been not only cultivating and affecting but also disrupting various imperceptible layers of these complex environments.

Intertidal zones are coastal areas where the sea meets land in the constant interaction of low and high tides. Those zones are characterized by highly diverse ecosystems and inhabitants who have long adapted to these ever-changing conditions. However, intertidal zones are also particular kinds of borderlands. There, human activities interact, collide, compete with, and often disrupt other-than-human realms. These

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interactions produce specific practices, sites, temporalities, artefacts, and soundscapes.

Among estuaries, wetlands, and grasslands, an intertidal zone is an example of an ecotone. Etymologically, ecotone means a home or habitat (from the Greek *oikos*) characterized by tensions (*tonos*). Ecotones are hence sites wherein "species from adjacent ecosystems interact," bene-fiting from the spatial, geographic, and environmental characteristics of "more than one ecosytem."[1] Inspired by discussions within environmental studies,[2] sound scholar Andra McCartney turned to ecotone as an in-spiring concept for rethinking how soundscapes come to be. Drawing on this notion, McCartney proposed a critique of dominant approaches to soundscapes as constellations of unambiguous, easily identifiable, and indexable signals and soundmarks. Instead, she advocated for relational listening in which soundscapes unfold as complex territories intrinsically equipped with ecotonal qualities. She asked: "What would it mean to listen for characteristics of ecotonality in a soundscape rather than searching for single clear signals devoid of problematic noise?"[3]

Intertidal Room is an exercise in such ecotonal listening. However, besides approaching intertidal zones as aurally rich sites composed through an interaction (or inter-tensions) of multiple species, this soundwalk composition also offers a temporal perspective on the site in question. In other words, it approaches soundscapes as not merely sonic manifestations of various processes taking place at the current moment but also as aural environments whose roots stretch back into the past, even into deep time, while also extending into the future. In this sense, soundscape becomes a *timescape*. By coining this term, Barbara Adam aims to foreground temporal and dynamic aspects of our lived environments.[4] She suggests that human impact on the environment is often imperceptible because it happens over a long period time. This impact slowly affects the temporalities of other species, which are radically different from our human sense of time. *Intertidal Room* offers such an expanded, "transversal" sonic perspective on those ecotonal territories.[5] On the one hand, it does so by opening up to diverse listening

[1] Andra McCartney, "Ethical Questions about Working with Soundscapes," *Organised Sound* 21, no. 2 (2016): 162.

[2] James R. Gosz, "Ecotone Hierarchies, Ecological Applications," *Ecological Society of America* 3 (1993): 369–76.

[3] McCartney, "Ethical Questions," 163.

[4] Barbara Adam, *Timescapes of Modernity: The Environment and Invisible Hazards* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 10.

[5] Jacek Smolicki, "Minuting: Rethinking the Ordinary through the Ritual of Transversal Listening," *VIS – Nordic Journal for Artistic Research* 5 (2021): https://www.en.visjournal.nu/

positions and vantage points, human and other than human, a kind of oscillating subjectivity.[6] On the other, it does so by moving along the time axis, thus constituting space for imagining historical processes, such as colonial transformations, that once stood at the origin of today's soundscapes.

This oscillating subjectivity, in Robinson's words, "seeks not to apply other critical listening positionalities but instead to find greater levels of relationship between the strata of positionality."[7] Similarly, by means of sound, *Intertidal Room* shifts the listener's perspective by carefully attuning to those various spatio-temporal strata and positions within them. In this sense, the project also speaks to the recent turn in humanities that opens up towards the intrinsic entwinement of humans and other species. It does so by recognizing historically discriminated worldviews and Indigenous knowledges, which, as Åsberg suggests, have always already been informed by post-humanist thought.[8]

However, in alignment with Robinson's postulation, the project is far from applying, assimilating, or incorporating Indigenous cosmologies and epistemologies as "methods" or "tools" for "fixing" human relationships with places in question. Instead, the soundwalk respects and responds to local Indigenous knowledge by attuning to and amplifying its attendance to time, space, human, and other-than-human entities as always already interdependent elements of the environment.[9] This Indigenous conception of connectedness reverberates in the way the piece attempts to interrogate colonial soundmarks' problematic repercussions across complex, multi-species networks, present and historical.[10] The piece brings attention to how the acts of aural kinship and communication among diverse actors of the environment – to which Indigenous knowledge has long remained attuned – have become disturbed and separated throughout the past two centuries. In this sense, the focus of the work aligns with what Zoe Todd and Anja Kanngieser have recently described in terms of a "kin study." "Kin study" as opposed to "case study"

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[6] Dylan Robinson, *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2020).

[7] Robinson, *Hungry Listening*, 60.

[8] Cecilia Åsberg, "Feminist Posthumanities in the Anthropocene: Forays into the Postnatural," *Journal of Posthuman Studies* 1, no. 2 (2018): 185–204.

[9] Zoe Todd, "Indigenizing the Anthropocene," in *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies*, ed. H. Davis and E. Turpin, 241–54 (London: Open Humanities Press, 2015).

[10] Vanessa Watts, "Indigenous Place-Thought and Agency amongst Humans and Non-Humans (First Woman and Sky Woman Go on a European Tour!)," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education and Society* 2, no. 1 (2013): 20–34.

is a form of attention "to the separations that case studies insert between place, thought, and relations."[11]

In its compositional structure, *Intertidal Room* consists of several narrative-based storytelling techniques: historical, mythological, and sensory-ethnographic.[12] As the composition evolves, the main protagonist undergoes a metamorphosis: it transforms from a deterritorialized human to a nutrient and resilient component of a multi-species environment. This narrative is organically intercepted by a series of observations that connect current processes and aural practices of Vancouver's coastline with historical events. For example, noises of metal detectors in the hands of individuals who regularly show up in the intertidal zones searching for lost rings, coins, and other treasures send listeners back to the period of gold rush and mineral extraction in the middle of the 19th century. Sounds of mollusk shells being picked by a serendipitously encountered amateur collector but also dropped by seagulls on the hard surface of the asphalt connect participating soundwalkers to a story about the construction of roads along the seawall. To reinforce them, colonial settlers used the material, including shells, from a midden that accounted for the activity of coastal Indigenous people in this territory for millennia. With this construction, this proof was destroyed. Several soundscape compositions, a result of field recording sessions undertaken in summer 2020, accompany these verbal narratives. Here, the soundwalk also draws on selected material from the archive of the World Soundscape Project (WSP), an educational and research group established by R. Murray Schafer at Simon Fraser University in the late 1960s to study transformations of local and global soundscapes. The soundscape recordings from the WSP archive, such as lumber mill and stock market noises, are set in new critical contexts, missing in the original project: environmental, by touching upon extraction of natural resources in the region, and postcolonial, by indicating how social injustice and colonial legacy are continuously embroidered in the social and hence sonic fabric of the place in question. Additionally, the composition comprises intentional porosity, gaps, and pauses that in various moments enable soundscapes of places that the listener is walking through to leak in, resonate, or dissonate with the pre-recorded content.

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11 Anja Kanngieser and Zoe Todd, "From Environmental Case Study to Environmental Kin Study in Decolonizing Histories in Theory and Practice," *History and Theory* 59, no. 3 (2020): 385; see also Zoe Todd, "From Case-Study to Kin-Study: A Citational Politics for Studying Environmental Violence," lecture, Postcolonial Tensions: Sciences, Histories, Indigenous Knowledges Workshop, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, April 12–13, 2019.

12 Sarah Pink, *Sensory Ethnography,* 2nd ed. (London: Sage, 2015).

Besides its informative and imaginative potential, the soundwalk intends to inspire the listener to rethink his/her/their relationship with the place and its historical transformations. It explores how attentive, or what Hildegard Westerkamp would call disruptive, capacity of listening, in this case to cyclical rhythms, can help question a toxic addiction to constant, linear growth, and extractive progression of interest.[13] In this light, the piece draws particular attention to the crisis of attunement to cyclic rhythms that had for centuries organized human and other-than-human lives in this region before the arrival of white settlers. This arrival established a point in time from which linear rhythms took precedence over cyclical ones. For Henri Lefebvre, the tension between the cyclical and linear organization of time is one of the strongest characteristics defining modernity and its progress-orientation. In contrast to cyclical rhythms originating "in the cosmic, in nature: days, nights, seasons, the waves and tides of the sea, monthly cycles," the linear rhythms are typically superimposed by humans through artificial means, technologies, and societal conducts.[14] Moreover, they are often conceived of so as to dominate and transgress the cyclical rhythms. To interrogate this tension, *Intertidal Room* asks whether listening to and from the perspective of cyclically attuned, transient organisms whose lives remain imperceptible yet often crucial to our and other-than-human ecosystems may help reconfigure our daily conduct on a personal, collective, or even planetary scale.

Between 28 September and 29 October 2020, *Intertidal Room* was available via daily live-stream on a dedicated website. The exact times of the streaming were synchronized with Vancouver's low tides. This site- and time-specificity resulted from a gesture of respect to the significance of place to Indigenous communities and the cyclical variations of gravitational dependencies between the moon, earth, and sun that facilitate life of and around intertidal zones.[15] It was also an exercise in providing more focused and grounded conditions for a technologically mediated experience in the times of information overload, unimpeded access to digital content, and what Bernard Stiegler calls a short-cir-

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[13] Hildegard Westerkamp, "Disruptive Nature of Listening: Today, Yesterday, Tomorrow," in *Sound, Media, Ecology*, ed., Milena Droumeva and Randolph Jordan, 45–64 (Palgrave Studies in Audio-Visual Culture, Southampton, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

[14] Henri Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time, and Everyday Life* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 8.

[15] Eve Tuck and Marcia McKenzie, *Place in Research: Theory, Methodology, and Methods* (Abingdon, Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2016).

cuiting of attention.[16] Free access to the entire soundwalk composition was available upon special request after contacting the author. Several collective walks took place in situ near Stanley Park in September and October 2020.

Above, you can listen to the excerpt of the soundwalk. If you wish to experience the entire piece, feel free to get in touch with the author via email jacek@smolicki.com. Some additional information about the project can be found on the project' website www.para-archives.net/intertidalroom.

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[16] Bernard Stiegler, *Symbolic Misery, The Hyperindustrial Epoch* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014); and Bernard Stiegler, *What Makes Life Worth Living: On Pharmacology*, trans. D. Ross (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016).