

SOUNDWORK

The Myth of the Suffering Artist in the Mind of the City, or Hinterscapes: A Textured Circuit

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SUSAN WOOD'S NAME appears often in discussions of Canadian science fiction, and in the present piece of storytelling I take a particular interest in her life and work as referenced in a 2013 interview between William Gibson and his biographer Gary Westfahl.¹ In the interview, Gibson describes his short story "Hinterlands" as having been written in the influence of Wood's death.² Gibson's earlier story "Fragments of a Hologram Rose" had also resulted from Wood's intervention, as he wrote it at her request and for her UBC class in science fiction.³ At this nexus – the earliest pieces of what would be called cyberpunk, the development of early ideas of cyberspace, downtown Vancouver as a geopolitical context, and Wood's legacy – I think we can learn something about the relationship between land and cyberspace as mediated through colonization and neuronormativity. Consequently, I enter a dense matrix of concepts and audio channels to extend Istvan Csicsery-Ronay's argument that cyberpunk is neuromantic – that the genre romanticizes the limits of communication and continues an expressionist legacy.⁴ I connect this notion of romanticized noncommunication with the historical motivations of early network studies: to track runaways, to analyze who has escaped or rejected the system

¹ Gary Westfahl, *William Gibson* (University of Illinois Press, 2013), 170.

² William Gibson, "Hinterlands," *Omni* (October 1981): 105.

³ William Gibson, "Fragments of a Hologram Rose," in *Burning Chrome* (Ace Books, 1987).

⁴ Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, "Cyberpunk and Neuromanticism," *Mississippi Review* 16, no. 2/3 (1988): 266.

that commissions the *network* as a mode of capture.⁵ Elsewhere, I've used the neologisms *holophor* and *holophoria* in reference to the idea of a whole-space transposition – to wholly immerse oneself in an alternate world – and to the fantastical, unfulfillable desire to be so transposed.⁶

My story will participate in a critique of the idea that “the land” has something inarticulable about it that supports a universally legible, latent emancipatory politic. This critique requires precise tuning. It has the potential to resonate with Zoe Todd's argument that theoretical abstraction, ontology, can function as a mode of extraction when it separates from ongoing practical logics and the people who work on them.⁷ I've made a related argument elsewhere – explaining why I moved away from studying Vancouver's tiny punk music venues – that the context removal William James called “vicious abstractionism” functions in music studies as a way of mining artists' expressions from within the more comfortable world of analysis.⁸ More recently in audio discourse, the *American Vandal* literary theory podcast has militated for the importance of historicism,⁹ and this is why the critique needs tuning, because, by moving away from the idea of the land as a material ground apt to cast aside simulacra, we go from a discussion of what the land is to what it becomes. This becoming is multiple, and no way exists to record it directly or in total hi-fi.

The response that I produce cannot succeed as a representation, so I've chosen a method of extreme hypermediation.¹⁰ Specifically, you will hear my voice together with a single Vancouver soundscape recording,

⁵ See the analysis, foundational in network science, of those who ran away from the Hudson School for Girls as discussed in J.L. Moreno, *Who Shall Survive? A New Approach to the Problem of Human Interrelations* (Nervous and Mental Disease, 1934), <https://archive.org/details/whoshallsurvive00jlmo/mode/2up>; Stephen P. Borgatti, et al., “Network Analysis in the Social Sciences,” *Science* 323, no. 5916 (2009): 892–95, <https://doi.org/https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.1165821>.

⁶ See the attempted development of the term *holophor* in Matthew Horrigan, “Nulltopia: Of Disjunct Space,” *Acta Ludologica* 5, no. 2 (2022): 67.

⁷ Zoe Todd, “An Indigenous Feminist's Take on the Ontological Turn: ‘Ontology’ Is Just Another Word for Colonialism,” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 29, no. 1 (2016): 4–22, <https://doi.org/10.1111/johs.12124>.

⁸ Matthew Horrigan, “Puppers Not Yuppies (On Abstractive Mnemonics),” *Society for Ethnomusicology Student Nexus* 18, no. 1 (2022), https://cdn.ymaws.com/ethnomusicology.site-ym.com/resource/group/dc75b7e7-47d7-4d59-a660-19c3e0f7c83e/publications/18_1fieldwork/horrigan_semsn_18-1.pdf.

⁹ Matt Seybold, “Always Historicize? (A Tale of Today, Episode #4),” *The American Vandal*, Substack newsletter, 1 October 2024, <https://theamericanvandal.substack.com/p/always-historicize-a-tale-of-today>.

¹⁰ “The logic of hypermediacy multiplies the signs of mediation and in this way tries to reproduce the rich sensorium of human experience. On the other hand, hypermediacy can operate even in a single and apparently unified medium, particularly when the illusion of realistic representation is somehow stretched or altogether ruptured.” Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (MIT Press, 2000), 34.

Em_ty's "Port Recording_14.wav."¹¹ The soundscape recording is already of an industrialized land – the seaport, with its clanking vehicles – and my electroacoustic treatment further operationalizes it into a network of channels fed back into one another. Using the digital audio workstation REAPER together with the IEM plugin suite developed at Graz's Institute of Electronic Music and Acoustics, I routed an Ambisonic channel array back into itself. I then used an IEM "binaural decoder" plugin to render my audio in a two-channel stereo format. (The term *binaural*, as opposed to *stereo*, differentiates audio designed to give a sense of up and down and forward and backward along with left and right when listening through headphones. However, hacking ambisonics somewhat confounds their support for binaurality.) My misuse of ambisonics through feedback interprets the disturbing neural feedback loops that Gibson attributed to cyberspace in stories such as 1982's "Burning Chrome," where touching the wrong piece of online data causes instantaneous brain injury through overload and infostress.¹² Not exactly a site-specific response, this spatialized audio is my attempt to join an expressionist critique of modernity and of Kantian priority, a critique in which space and time are not given but warped to meet the effects of each communicative situation. My accompaniment was a Vancouver soundscape, but its processing goes beyond recognition through layers and layers of recursive change.

My approach to soundscape is therefore another removal, dispossessive according to the logic of a specific situation. I am a settler, coming from Ottawa, and the most recent of my ancestors to reach Turtle Island came from low-class lives in Ireland. Settling for me is always a verb, a craving of persistent, reliable space and consequently of justification for it. My relationship with the land where I live now – this is q'ic'ay' (Katzie), sc'owaθən məsteyəxʷ (Tsawwassen), q'wa:ńłəń (Kwantlen), W̱SÁNEĆ, Semiahmoo, and Stó:lō territory – has an empty anxiety to it, hungrily minding, seeking signs of legitimacy mediated digitally and financially.¹³ The dynamic rather than the spoils of such cultural object hunger gives cyberpunk fiction great resonance for me, with its stories of hackers chasing precarious persistence by stealing, ever mobile.

Around here, Vancouver specifically, and the west coast of Turtle Island generally, is a place of the recuperation of trauma into economic

¹¹ Specifically, Em_ty, "Port Recording_14.wav," *Freesound*, 23 January 2014, https://freesound.org/people/Em_ty/sounds/215181/.

¹² See especially William Gibson, "Burning Chrome," *Omni* (July 1982).

¹³ A related type of cultural capitalization is famously the theme of Dylan Robinson's *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies* (University of Minnesota Press, 2020).

circuits. That recuperation has been built and rebuilt into the structure of our economy. As is widely known, Lek'leki (or "Lekleki"), "grove of beautiful trees,"¹⁴ is a Coast Salish name for a certain place where you can find a sign saying Carrall Street. The beautiful trees are mostly gone, but "Carrall" remains an aesthetic object of generations of extractive observation. This is the irony, or maybe tautology, that haunts Vancouver streets: that the damage of colonization can itself be exploited in colonial ways. In the eighties and nineties and noughties, in a long trail of underfunded communities tasked to absorb psychiatric deinstitutionalization amid a wave of corporate-driven narcotic overprescription, our Downtown Eastside took the shape from which writers and filmmakers would derive copious cultural capital with a body of memoirs, documentaries, and studies. In that body, junkyard spectacles of Hastings Street channelled the legacy of Hollywood's genre of social problem films.¹⁵ The "derelict" vibe of such media is the result of an extractive apparatus feeding palimpsestically on the aftermath of yesterdecade's extractive apparatus – colonization iterating and re-cursing from fish factories to image factories.¹⁶ At the risk of hypothesizing after the results are known, it makes sense that cyberpunk should have started here, where the layers of industry of extraction from industry of extraction were beginning to become hypervisible in their human, machinic, and biochemical consequences, even as the appetites of image industries abounded.

The hinterlands, as an incommunicable, fetishized place, thus become what Friedrich Nietzsche called with utmost skepticism a "Hinterwelt,"¹⁷ a back-world, otherworld, afterlife, or true world, the spectre of which acquires meaning in contrast to the present now. Such are the hinterlands whose vestiges return again and again in the histories of network sciences and network aesthetics, where rejection, departure, vacancy, motivate grasping, mathematically modelling, informatically

¹⁴ See *Canadian Encyclopedia*, "Gastown," by Lani Russwurm and Nathan Baker, last updated 21 November 2017, <https://thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/gastown>.

¹⁵ Compare the attention economies of Gabor Maté, *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts: Close Encounters with Addiction* (Knopf Canada, 2008); "Through A Blue Lens | Full Documentary | National Film Board of Canada," *Through a Blue Lens*, directed by Veronica Alice Mannix (NFB, 1999), posted 11 November 2010 by NFB, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gwFRsfATaag>.

¹⁶ The term *derelict*, for poverty-inspired fashion, comes from the 2001 fiction film *Zoolander* but prefigured similar real-life developments: Daniel James Cole, "Dumpster Chic and Haute Homeless: Placing Brother Sharp in a Fashion Industry Continuum," *Critical Studies in Men's Fashion* 5, no. 1–2 (2018): 29, https://doi.org/10.1386/csmf.5.1-2.25_1.

¹⁷ Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (C.G. Naumann, 1893), 37, <http://archive.org/details/NietzscheAlsoSprachZarathustra1893>.

processing, surveilling. The phantasmal obsession in the production of (cyber)space is of its unmappability, for just as models and neural nets have always grasped at what escaped them, what they might infer, what is latent, and what they feel destined for, it is difference that signifies, negative space that makes positive space. Without decentralization there is no centralization. Without dereliction there is no gentrification and no gentry. Whatever thinks itself the centre pulls from its surrounding hinterland, dreaming what it hears of the liminal backrooms there.