

Place as Potential: queer futurity in the recorded landscape

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ABSTRACT

When thinking about the natural environment in the Anthropocene it can be hard to see beyond the present as we constantly try to defend that which remains. Some days it is hard to feel anything but despair. Informed by my experience of being queer in a straight society and José Muñoz's concept of queer futurity, I will argue that a psychedelic audiovisual art practice derived from soundscape composition and shaped by queerness can offer a glimpse into a concrete utopian future and beyond a seemingly inevitable climate collapse. This glimpse of a positive future driven by memory, emotion and desire can be experienced through the psychedelic performance and evocation of place. Beginning with an analysis of the sonic art of Hildegard Westerkamp and Phil Elverum I will explore two existing approaches to the representation of place through sound. Using examples from my creative practice I will demonstrate how abstraction, contradiction, and failure can come together to create a distinct affective, psychedelic future-facing experience, rooted in lived reality. I will show how these techniques can be deployed to transform field recordings and photographs of space into atmospheric evocations and performances of a possible future place. These transcendent spaces have the potential to reorient people toward an active, optimistic futurity and away from extractive, capital driven thinking through psychedelic experiences.

1. INTRODUCTION

The saturated moorland beneath my feet squelched with each step I took, the predictable rhythm punctuating the ever-changing ebb and flow of the wind noise roaring across my ears. I had drifted back from my family, still in sight but out of earshot; I was as alone as I could be, free to wallow in school-induced misery. I hated school. Dark, claustrophobic red brick corridors echoing with homophobic jeering. The suffocating smell of old linoleum mixed with Lynx body spray hanging like thick fog in the classrooms. The withering judgement of students and teachers directed toward those of us deemed weak, different or inadequate in some way. Shame, loneliness and anxiety permeated that place and spread like noxious fumes into every aspect of my being. I carried it with me onto the moors.

I passed a stream that cascaded down into a black hole that seemed to absorb the landscape itself. Sound, water, earth, disappearing into its gaping mouth. I paused by the opening and noticed I felt lighter. Perhaps the landscape was absorbing some of the misery along with the stream or perhaps it was blissfully doing nothing at all.

Growing up queer I was always looking for ways to escape a present that wasn't made for me. I found relief in the moors, in music and eventually in queer spaces – places that felt like they transcended society, capitalism and straight culture. It was a release from the seemingly arbitrary rules that we live by, it was a promise of a future in a world that told me I didn't have one. This imagined future was constructed from the feelings I had when I listened to music, when I walked on the moors and when I was surrounded by people like me. The art practice I have developed since is an attempt to capture and evoke the potential I found in those places a representation of the miserable present transformed to evoke a concrete utopian future. In this paper I will outline the strategies I use to transform recordings of space into an evocation of futurity and a chance to feel a utopian future in the recorded landscape.

2. PLACE IN SOUND

Two artists who have had a strong influence on how I think about place in sound are Hildegard Westerkamp and Phil Elverum. In her piece 'Kits Beach Soundwalk'[1], Westerkamp has recorded the soundscape of Kitsilano Beach. She playfully undermines the perceived veracity of recorded sound by altering the levels of the city and the 'small sounds'. Immediately the seemingly fixed fact of the soundscape is revealed as changeable. Going further, Westerkamp removes the sound of the city all together, focusing the listener on the sound of the barnacles as she transforms them into an otherworldly twinkling. Place here is not just represented, it is shown to be full of potential. Kits Beach shifts and changes and becomes something nearly unrecognizable but still rooted in the grain of reality contained within the original recordings. At the heart of the piece there is a yearning to escape the 'monster' of the city, to be 'far away', exploring the sounds of dreams. This is demonstrated both explicitly in the text and in the playful way Westerkamp manipu-

lates the sounds of the city to make them seem to disappear. By the end of the piece Westerkamp acknowledges this play as a way that she can ‘face the monster’ of the city and its overbearing sound. The potential of Westerkamp’s sonic play meets the exploration of dreams in the context of a soundscape perceived as negative. This is not an explicitly utopian exploration of place but instead shows a utopian impulse – a desire to escape the conditions of the present and a yearning for something better, than that which currently exists.

By contrast, Elverum does not record the landscape at all. The landscape is instead embedded in the sublime atmospheric memories depicted in his work. For example in ‘Pale Lights’ the roar of the ocean is mirrored in the roar of Elverum’s guitar, the flickering lights on the horizon in the shimmering keyboard drones. The significance of these sounds alluded to in lyrics as he sings ‘Pale lights from other islands/Slow flashing/Through blue dusk/Across the water/Seeing island shapes/Who is there? I call/A small yelp on the wind/And then/More roaring’ [2]. Here the landscape is intertwined with memory and the human experience. In *Microphones in 2020*, Elverum looks back at his career and his relationship with place in music. Throughout the song his lyrics weave together the landscapes he moves through with memory, emotion and meaning [3]. Though he does not directly record the landscape its presence within his music is clearly felt as a complex palimpsest of memory and emotion. He describes himself as blurring with the ‘actual churning dirt of this place’, speaking ‘with the voice of the weather’. Ultimately, he concludes that his music is simply him standing on the ground and looking around and can be summed up with the words ‘Now only’ and ‘There’s no end’. In the song he is simply a passive observer embedded within the infinity of the world.

These two contradictory approaches to landscape through sound demonstrate two important ways of relating to the world. Westerkamp shows place as elastic, a world that can be shaped and molded through a utopian impulse, a desire for a better future. Elverum believes that the landscape is immutable but demonstrates that place is not simply a collection of sounds to be heard but an ever-evolving palimpsest of human experience and emotion. To put it another way, in ‘Kits Beach Soundwalk’ the potential is in the changing shape of the landscape and its recording while in ‘Pale Lights’ the potential is within the emotional resonance the landscape itself harbours.

3. QUEER FUTURITY

The landscapes we find ourselves in, the spaces that shape us and that we shape, are not incidental. In *Queer Phenomenology*, Sara Ahmed shows how the spaces we move through (and do not move through) as queer people determined by our queerness [4]. The more we move through queer spaces, the more they shape us and the more likely we are to continue to deviate from heteronormative life. I found myself on the moors and in the rainforest precisely because I am queer, because of the

lack of societal pressure in those wild places. The more I go, the more I long for that cathartic feeling of being in what feels like another world. For José Muñoz, queerness is itself potential. More than that, “...queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present” [5]. In his book *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz conceptualizes queerness as something that cannot exist in the present or it would not be queer [5]. Queerness therefore must always be on the horizon; queerness must always be potential. According to Muñoz, by acting on queer desires and forming queer relationships (that is relationships that do not fit a heterosexual or heteronormative framework) we are opening up a temporary glimpse of a potential future in the present based on our experience of a present and past that is not built for us.

As a queer person I am constantly striving toward this potential future. It affects the spaces I move through, the people I interact with and the way I interact with them. I am constantly shifting between present and future, an oppressive straight world and attempts to bring a queer world into the present. The sonic worlds I record, alter and create are inevitably a product of this queer futurity.

4. PLACE AS POTENTIAL

4.1 Transcendent Place

The utopian impulse of Hildegard Westerkamp in ‘Kits Beach Soundwalk’ runs parallel to the queer utopian impulse. Westerkamp seeks to escape the present and mold the soundscape she experiences into something new, just as queer people seek to create a future within the present through queer actions. The queer potential-laden contradiction of a simultaneous present and future informed by a past of oppression is evoked in my work through an embrace of contradictory aesthetics. This begins with the field recordings I make which are laden with what many would consider failure.

In my piece, *The Here and Now is a Prison House*, pristine soundscapes are interrupted with the sound of the recordist, the sounds of nature pierced by the rustle and rattle of bags, equipment and gore-tex [6]. Like Elverum’s music, the artist is explicitly situated within the landscape. These compromised field recordings, an audible representation of space from my perspective form the foundations of my sonic art. In the first part of my piece *Ephemeral Futures*, field recordings of the sea are layered with noise and screeching feedback as well as ‘pretty’ harmonic vocals and drones [7]. The constant shifting movement of filters and smaller sounds contradicting the overall looping stasis of the piece.

According to Joanna Demers these types of contrasting aesthetics and their constant pushing and pulling against each other can create a maximal affect which can be a gateway to a transcendent experience for those who hear it [8]. Through its internally contradictory aesthetics, *Ephemeral Futures* has the potential to create this trans-

endent affect rooted in the simultaneous reality of the field recordings it is based on.

4.2 Feeling the Past, Feeling the Future

As Elverum shows in *Microphones in 2020*, place is more than just the sum of the objects within it, it is a palimpsest of emotional memory. The spaces I document are overflowing with personal memory, ranging from the mundane to the exceptional – often spaces I am intimately familiar with due to their significance in my life regardless of how many times I have been in them. In the past this has included the site of numerous transcendent musical experiences and a panic attack as I came to terms with my sexuality, the train I commuted on to the miserable job where I worked on job application after job application in an attempt to escape, and the streets in the city I lived for years where I had experienced heartbreak, ecstasy, mundanity and grief.

The memories from these places are drenched in atmosphere as defined by Gernot Böhme [9], that is to say they are not just informed by the specific events that happened there but also coloured by the life-context(s) in which the memories occurred, the mood I was in at the time and any other events that were happening in my life. These layers of atmospheric memory are built into my perception of place from its foundations creating a complex palimpsest that I try to reflect in the way that I record and process the sounds of that space. If I found a space overwhelming I will make it sound overwhelming either through volume, frequency, density and/or any other method available to me.

In *Ephemeral Futures* I take field recordings of spaces in British Columbia that had significance to me when I was living in Vancouver and attempt to imbue them with the emotional resonance of the memories they contain, both with a spoken narrative referencing my personal connection to the landscape and through their very aesthetic. Like Westerkamp I aim to undermine the idea of field recording as truth and expose the sounds of the landscape for what they are: a part of a complex emotional interaction between person and place. By the very nature of queer experience these memories and interactions for me are a jumble of ecstasy and misery. In order to evoke this as accurately as I can I layer my field recordings with processed versions of themselves, synthesis and voice. The aesthetics of each element adding an aspect of atmosphere and emotion just as my memories do to the places I record, whilst crucially leaving the original recording audible. One part of *Ephemeral Futures* for example is based on a recording of the sea at a beach I frequented. Through the use of harmonic vocal material, distortion, visceral bass frequencies and slow-moving synthesis it is layered with the hope, bliss, pressure, anxiety, optimism and rest that make up the palimpsest of memory in that place.

This approach creates a complex sometimes even contradictory sonic landscape that is both psychedelic but clearly rooted within reality. It goes beyond

sonic descriptions of space and instead performs my perception of place in all its complexities. In combination with the transcendent potential of sonic representations of place this approach allows the audience to not just have a transcendent experience but to feel the memories of the past and feel the ecstasy of escape from the present and into a possible future.

4.3 From Running to Doing

The constant drone of fast moving cars on tarmac emanated from behind the layers of trees on the slope beneath us, flashes of colour appearing and disappearing in an instant through the layers of branches below. Above us, the edge of the hill curved away revealing nothing but more tree trunks, leaves and sky, all sights and sounds of the park behind masked by the uniform shape of the man-made slope and roar of the traffic. We had quietly rushed through the flower gardens avoiding dog walkers and found a quiet moment to slip unseen into the woods that ran around the perimeter. The ground was sharp and brittle beneath my knees and as I gently adjusted my body, dead leaves crackled and twigs snapped leaving deep red trenches in my skin. The pain that spread through my knees was counteracted by an intense and overwhelming, transcendent ecstasy that was emanating through my whole body. It felt almost impossible to contain, as if it was bursting from every pore. It wasn't just the pleasure I felt as his dick moved toward the back of my throat, it was an ecstasy derived from the fact it was happening at all. A thrill of possibilities unlocked in those woods that felt like the rush of a first kiss in the back of a dark cinema magnified a thousand times.

When I was younger being in the forests, hills and on beaches was an escape from a judgmental world as I came to terms with who I was. As I got older, my love for the outdoors remained but its character shifted. Increasingly as I acted on my queerness I found myself not just choosing to be there but also pushed there. Instead of being a place of escape it became a place of possibility, a place in which friends, partners and I could explore our personalities, identities and sexuality away from closeted homes, homophobic schools and threatening queerphobes. Though we found ourselves there due to negative circumstances we created our own new world, structured by hope, desire and optimism. It is through this optimistic, active lens that I see the environment – not in fixed collapse but full of potential ready to bloom if there was the will to move beyond imagination and actively bring it into being. It is this utopian lens which I hope to impart to others through my art and any transcendent experience it may trigger.

4.4 Possibility, Potential, Every Place

Feeling the past and feeling the future is not the final outcome of my work but instead, a queer means to an end. In transforming representations of space into atmospheric evocations of place laden with potential, I create the con-

ditions for an intense emotional, atmospheric and psychedelic experience rooted in place. In *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz shows how acting on queer desire is a radical act in itself as it prioritizes the emotions, needs and happiness of its participants in the context of a society which values economic productivity and reproduction. Similarly, in *Acid Communism*, Mark Fisher recognizes the radical potential of psychedelic experiences in music-oriented spaces, spaces in which your perception of space and time is altered and the demands of capital drift away as become consumed by sound and camaraderie with fellow audience members [10].

By creating a transcendent space rooted in the aesthetics of place and queer futurity my work reorients the audience's perceptions away from the priorities of capital and toward an experience of unproductive emotion, desire and happiness that is not just escapism but is rooted firmly within the real world aesthetics of recorded space. This is the crux of the utopian tendency in my work – the concrete utopia is the potential of every place to be oriented around the needs of its inhabitants rather than the needs of capital. The places we move through and exist in are sites of potential rather than permanently existing in the state or on the trajectory that they are currently on. As a young queer person I explored my identity and sexuality in forests, on hills and on beaches. Places which seemed ordinary became exciting glimpses into a life I could lead and a world that could come into being.

In *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz shows us how being queer (that is, attempting to bring a new future and way of relating to one another into being through acting on our queerness) allows us to see the system in which we live and its institutions from the outside, exposing its 'irrationality' [5]. The transcendent spaces I create in my artwork through queer means, mirror this. They create a space which draws on the potential of place imbued with queer futurity to reorient people away from work and money, and towards fulfilment and desire, if only for a little while. It is my aim that this experience will allow them to experience place as I do, not as site of inevitability but as sites of potential.

The futurity in my work ultimately is in the exposure of possibility and potential that a transcendent sonic experience could open up. The realisation that the ways things are is not the way that things will, can or should always be.

5. CONCLUSIONS

In his unfinished introduction to *Acid Communism*, Mark Fisher said of psychedelic music:

If the very fundamentals of our experience, such as our sense of space and time, can be altered, does that not mean that the categories by which we live are plastic, mutable? [10]

The complex sonic assemblage I have created in *Ephemeral Futures* of maximal aesthetics, narrative spoken word and atmospheric sound has the potential to give its

listener a transcendent experience rooted in lived reality. Drawing from the sonic play of Hildegard Westerkamp and emotional palimpsests of place of Phil Elverum, it exposes that the world around us is not on a fixed trajectory but is in an ever-evolving and malleable complex ecosystem of memory and atmosphere. A transcendent experience based around a specifically queer futurity could show the people who experience it that the society in which we live with its privileging of heterosexual and heteronormative relationships, its prioritizing of capital and its seemingly inevitable drive toward environmental collapse is not a fixed fact. Every place has the concrete potential to be the site of something better, to prioritise the wellbeing of the human and non-human inhabitants of the space rather than the extractive, I hope that my artworks open people's ears and eyes to this optimism through a new experience of place through sound.

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