

# You Never Soundwalk Alone. Transversal and Transformative Potentials of Soundwalking

Jacek Smolicki  
Linköping University  
jacek.smolicki@liu.se

## ABSTRACT

*This presentation concerns my three year postdoctoral research into soundwalking. In my study, I approach the practice in question from the perspective of media arts, environmental humanities and philosophy of technology, putting particular emphasis on its transversal and transformative dimension. It is transversal, because despite its immediacy and situatedness soundwalking always spans broader temporalities, agencies, and locations. It is transformative, because it leaves marks, affects perception and reveals one's positionality within the surrounding environment while shedding light on their privileges and responsibilities. As part of the presentation, I introduce a written narrative from the "Lake that Glimmers like Fire," one of several soundwalk compositions I have developed as part of my practice-led postdoctoral research.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the context of this conference, soundwalking requires no introduction. Today, soundwalking is a widely recognized concept and practice embraced across various contexts, fields, disciplines, and communities. As John Drever suggests, its adaptability to different contexts proves that soundwalking is a constantly evolving rather than a fixed and transplantable practice [1]. The most popular form of soundwalking involves moving in a group while maintaining silence. While soundwalking, we are simultaneously alone and together. The purpose of such soundwalks is to immerse ourselves in the present moment, both individually and collectively. Thus, many of us would agree that soundwalking is about connecting (or reconnecting) with the immediate environment and embracing the present moment as it expresses itself through sound.

In my approach, the soundscapes we traverse are much more than products of the present moment. I perceive the passing moment as a complex composition that encompasses multiple spatiotemporal elements of the past, even the deep past, and simultaneously premediates the future, even the deep future. Consequently, in my approach, the combination of walking and listening becomes a gateway for temporarily complicating, expanding, and perhaps even alienating ourselves from familiar

worldviews—certainties, habits, conventions, biases, and preconceptions—to perceive and understand them more clearly. And critically. As a geographer and sound artist, AM Kanngiesser suggests:

*"Sound is not just about hearing and responding or communicating. It is about becoming aware of registers that are unfamiliar, inaccessible, and maybe even monstrous; registers that are wholly indifferent to the play of human drama." [2]*

My motivation is not to radically destabilize the listener's position in relation to the planet or the specific place they find themselves in. Rather, soundwalking serves as a means to facilitate "the repositioning of ourselves within the complex interplay of diverse scales, agencies, and temporalities" [3]. Thus, even in the most solitary instance of moving through space and listening, we never walk alone. Here, my perspective also aligns with Hildegard Westerkamp's concept of disruptive listening, which calls for embracing the unforeseen and even unwelcome emotions invoked through increased attention to the surrounding soundscapes, ultimately leading us to "a state of uneasiness" [4]. I believe that it is precisely in this state of uneasiness where the transformative potential of soundwalking can be realized.

Exploring this potential has been one of the main objectives of my three-year postdoctoral research project financed by the Swedish Research Council, conducted internationally between 2020 and 2023 and soon nearing its end. Drawing on an intersection of such fields and debates as environmental humanities, soundscape studies, media arts, postcolonial studies, and the philosophy of technology, in my project, I have been asking the following questions: Can soundwalking, a seemingly trivial combination of walking and listening, be approached as a spatiotemporal condition for reconfiguring how we sense and act in the world today? Can walking, listening, and recording unite into a technique for disrupting the familiar and familiarizing with the unknown, strange, uncanny, even inconvenient and monstrous? Following Anna Tsing et al. [5], how can "the tools of modernity be repurposed against the terror of progress to make visible" and audible "the worlds that modernity has ignored and damaged?"

## 2. SOUNDWALK COMPOSITION

This interdisciplinary, practice-based project has been pursued and communicated through a variety of formats and media, including two editions of a soundwalking festival (Walking Festival of Sound 2021 and 2022), an edited book (Soundwalking: Through Times, Space, and Technologies, Routledge 2023), several articles and audio essays [6] [7] [8] [9] [10] [11] [12], and, most importantly, several soundwalk compositions developed for specific geographies. These included *Intertidal Room* (2020), a soundwalk composition for the intertidal zones near Stanley Park in Vancouver; *Lake that Glimmers like Fire* (2021), a soundwalk composition for the shore of Trekanten, a lake in Stockholm, Sweden; *One Step at a Deep Time* (2023), a soundwalk composition for Canaveral National Seashore, a national park in Florida (see Fig.1), and *Discord, MA* (2023), a soundwalk composition for Walden Pond near Concord, MA, still under development.



**Figure 1.** Image from a group soundwalk at Spruce Creek Preserve in Florida, March 2023. Photo by Eve Payor.

In my work, I intentionally use the term "soundwalk composition" in contrast to "soundwalk," which has historically been associated with a collective practice of silently walking through a given environment with the purpose of listening to its immediate soundscapes. With the concept of soundwalk composition, a term already in use in the past [13] [14], I intend to experiment with it as a sonic mode of giving justice to the spatiotemporal complexity of a place while navigating through it. Soundwalk composition draws on a transversal approach to the site and its soundscapes. It means that, in contrast to many common ways of engaging in soundwalking – those that facilitate a state of immersion in the moment – soundwalk composition attends to listening as a form of engaging with different temporalities. It transversally cuts through the time axis, recomposing links between present and past events. In other words, in soundwalk compositions, listening becomes a relational practice in which present events, as expressed in soundscapes, are tightly connected to past ones, even those in deep geological time. By im-

plication, what we hear today might in part a premonition of what is to come. [15]

To enable this transversal journey across the past, present, and future in my soundwalk compositions, I draw on an assemblage of methods for mediating sound, each shifting attention to a different temporal aspect of the place we walk through. For example, I use real-time radio transmission, utilizing a technical setup partly inspired by Tim Shaw's technical arrangement for his Ambulation soundwalks [16]. While walking with participants, I share wireless headsets through which I transmit sounds from the immediate environment. These include sounds that are hardly perceptible on a day-to-day basis (e.g., underwater sounds via hydrophones and microvibrations via contact microphones or geophones) or even those completely imperceptible to our hearing (e.g., electromagnetic fields via custom built EMF detectors). Another layer of such a soundwalk composition is constituted by the moments of unmediated listening to the immediate surroundings. The piece is designed to accommodate intentional porosity for external sounds to leak in and periods of silence where participants are encouraged to take their headphones off. The third layer is composed of field recordings resulting from a series of recording sessions pursued before the soundwalk in the same location. This layer often includes archival sound material pertaining to the site in question, such as selected historical field recordings from the World Soundscape Project database I used in the case of the *Intertidal Room* soundwalk composition in Vancouver. Those prerecorded sounds are faded into the gradually evolving composition during the soundwalk at specific moments, depending on the place we find ourselves in.

Occasionally, I enrich the sonic fabric of my soundwalk compositions with results from sonification experiments using historical and environmental data. Lastly, my soundwalk compositions include a written narrative, which is a result of my (auto)ethnographic and historical research. Typically, the script takes the form of hybrid storytelling, combining elements of creative fiction, historical facts, field notes, and local legends. In some cases, the narrative is spoken and included as another sonic layer of the soundwalk composition. In other cases, it accompanies the walk in the form of printed text that participants are invited to read at the beginning or end of the walk.

## 3. LAKE THAT GLIMMERS LIKE FIRE

Below, as a closing section of this short article, I include selected fragments from the script accompanying *Lake that Glimmers Like Fire*, a soundwalk composition developed for the shore of Trekanten Lake in Stockholm. Due to the vicinity of industrial facilities, including a historical complex owned by Alfred Nobel, the lake has been considered one of the most polluted in Sweden. Recent efforts have helped improve water quality, but the place remains continuously contaminated by the historical residue of chemical compounds. Participants are in-

vited to walk around the lake while listening to a 40-minute soundwalk composition that connects the local soundscape with that of its distant relative, Rissajaure, a lake in Sápmi, a region in the Arctic Circle traditionally inhabited by the Sámi people. In contrast to Trekanten, Rissajaure (Lake that Glimmers like Fire in the Sámi language) has been described as the clearest and purest lake in Sweden (see Fig.2). Building on my field recordings of both lakes and their surroundings, the piece asks what constitutes purity and pollution in sonic and non-sonic terms.



**Figure 2.** Image from a field recording session at Rissajaure, a lake in Sápmi, a region in the Arctic Circle traditionally inhabited by the Sámi people. Photo by the author.

Despite its alleged purity, the soundscapes of Rissajaure have been persistently permeated by noises from extractivist industry, military activities, and increasing tourism. Intending to deconstruct the perception of Rissajaure as the purest lake in the country, the piece draws attention to the noise and disruption that the very practice of recording nature might be causing across various scales, geographies, and temporalities, both local and distant.

*I get off the train.*

*My suitcase rolls alongside, at times trailing behind, other times ahead of my footsteps. At once, reverberating in what it passes by and foretelling that which is to come. I am now surrounded by an aural apparition that not only concludes but also precedes events, including the end of the age.*

*Flimsy, plastic wheels carry the weight of my sensory extensions, assembled after their component bits were torn from some distant elsewhere. The bulk of my sound equipment, swirls of cables and square centimeters of black boxes, will soon be shifted onto my shoulders, back, spine, and legs, and through them, onto the body of the mountains that have never awaited me.*

*Polymerized and polycondensated oils roll through space, passively transporting the remnants of their relatives: minerals, metals, elements, and other compounds,*

*fragmented, processed, and forcefully assimilated into techno-cultural devices that promise to make sense of it all. Or at the very least, to give it a closer look and hearing. Taken from their invisible and inaudible milieux, they are utilized to make other habitats visible and audible.*

[...]

*Inspired by a giant linden tree that grew on their family homestead, after embarking on his higher education, Nils, Carl's father, changed his surname to Linnaeus. Entering academia elevated his family's status, from peasants and priests to scholars. The new surname had to reflect this upgrade. But if Latin was and continues to be a language that does not evolve, does this mean that entering academia meant (and still means) abandoning life? Linnaeus gradually transformed from an amateur botanist into the father of modern taxonomy: Princeps botanicorum. While, on the one hand, opening toward the richness of living creatures, his taxonomy became a highly paradoxical system: while naming, describing, and dividing the abundance of life forms it deploys a dead language.*

[...]

*Lichens are complex ecosystems formed by fungi, photobionts (algae or cyanobacteria), and, as some recent studies demonstrate, microbes. This infra relational complexity challenges the perception of lichens as an individual, self-standing species. It also calls traditional taxonomical systems, such as the one conceived by Linnaeus, into question. With their pendulous branches, hair lichens are particularly sensitive to environmental hazards, pollution, forestry, and climate change. Covering rocks in clean environments and gradually eroding them, over time lichens contribute to rock surfaces partly decomposing into the soil and, hence, the further redistribution of minerals. It is estimated that 6–8% of the earth's land surface is covered by lichens. One example of an Arctic type, known as "map lichen" (or, *Rhizocarpon geographicum*, to use that infamous dead language), has been dated at 8,600 years, which makes it the world's oldest living organism. If up to eight percent of the world is covered by lichens, does this mean that many environmental sounds we hear are affected by its presence? Muffled, distorted, mediated, or amplified by its layers?*

[...]

*An excavator at the beginning of the trail momentarily distracts my attention. Its clattering imposes new viewpoints and reconfigures those ones composed here over the millennia. The noises entropically flow in a multitude of directions, unrespectfully filling the surrounding valleys. I am made a witness to an imposition of a composition that serves one perspective: a human being's. Mineral displacement (not that minerals are forever fixed) is now accelerated at an unprecedented speed. Displacement is a prerequisite to placement. There is no place-making without place-unmaking. The temporarily pollut-*

*ed sonority of this place is only a prelude to a new, more constant soundscape to be orchestrated by an increased flow of visitors, including those like myself. Upon completion, this trail-in-the-making will join the web of threads that cleave the otherwise impenetrable, even monstrous, mountainous land, disciplining it into enjoyable landscapes and pleasurable vistas. The trail will feed the existing system of invisible wires that, like a muzzle, will curb and bridle the beast, making it appear completely neutral and entirely at the service of the ambling human body.*

[...]

*Is Rissajaure part of the soundscape, or is the soundscape part of Rissajaure? Sitting by the lake's surface, I am once again reminded that sounds and soundscapes do not belong to anyone or anything. Nor are they representative of something or someone. I pull out a little bottle that contains a few drops of water I collected from the one of the most polluted lakes in Sweden. I open it and let the droplets join the lake. I let them acquaint themselves with the unfamiliar purity. I stay with the lake and share a plethora of noises I have collected over the years from its distant cousins.*

*I am now in a multiverse filled with a richly audible silences and noises, a multiverse built of ever-changing micro-relations. All bodies of water diverge and converge. To get to know the soundscape of the Rissajaure, one would need to retrace all the connections it has ever been a part of. A journey up the stream of one of several slender cascades coming to their only allegedly final stop in the depths of the lake is certainly insufficient. Up there, overwhelmed by pink noise, I survey the surface of the lake. It glimmers like fire. Natural and artificial. Sitting up there, I eavesdrop on what should not be reaching my ears, or anyone else's.*

*Twelve times a day, the squeaks, wheezes, and whistles from a freight train can be heard through and beyond this northern edge of Sápmi. Every year, 26.9 million tons of crude ore are torn from the ground in Kiruna. Each of these twelve daily transports from Kiruna to Narvik carries 8,600 tons of that ore. Twelve times a day, the land shakes. At the same time, its soundscape reverberates the noise, carrying its echoes further and further, eventually delivering the message into the cavities of the ore's close and distant cousins, hard schist and dolomite limestones. The soundscape of the purest lake in Sweden is far from pure. To give it a proper hearing, one has to retrace the trails that the history, heavily orchestrated by human interests, engraved in the air, soil, water, bodies, and spirits.*

*I am back in Kiruna, where many roots of the Lapland's soundscapes begin and end. Because of the aggressive mining expansion, the town is being relocated two miles to the east. To be precise, the government-owned mining company is moving the town. In doing so, it turns a blind*

*eye and deaf ear to how this displacement is perceived and experienced by some of its longtime residents, non-human and human. Some of them I get to listen and talk to. Towns are not blocks, finite artifacts, objects that can be freely moved, shifted in space, and recomposed. Like lichens and soundscapes, they are complex relations evolving over time and through space.*

*I stop by in a park the authorities have left to its own devices, letting researchers study its ultimate collapse. The end of its days. I imagine the soundscape of this decomposition, resembling silence and yet having nothing to do with it. Apart from the traffic, the atmosphere is quiet. I feel like I can almost hear Rissajaure, 120 kilometers away from where my feet now touch the ground. I know it is not awaiting me, but I am sure one day I will be back there. One among an ever-growing bunch of adventitious wanderers. Unlooked-for. Besides some scarce wildlife, birds, and foxes, the park is home to a flock of sheep, animals I would expect to see everywhere else in the mountains, but not here, in an industrially polluted town. They look like holograms displayed by the mining corporation to make the space look more rural, friendly and lively.*

*The air soon becomes filled with the soft ringing of the bells from the Kiruna kyrka, an iconic church built in a Sami architectural style. This site will also fall victim to the said displacement. It's Sunday. I push the heavy door and enter the church. A group of teenagers is rehearsing before Confirmation. I slide my body into the row of benches, sit quietly and listen. One of the teenagers is wearing a traditional Sami outfit. The priest makes the group repeat the gospel after him: "Åt mig har getts all makt i himlen och på jorden. Gå därför ut och gör alla folk till lärjungar: döpa dem i Faderns och Sonens och den heliga Andens namn och lär dem att hålla alla de bud jag har gett er. Och jag är med er alla dagar till tidens slut." After leaving the church, the words still reverberate in my head "... to the end of the age... I have been given all authority in heaven and on Earth... to the end of the age." While looking toward Kiirunavaara, a mountain that contains one of the world's largest and richest bodies of iron ore, I cannot but think of the mining company, its uncontested authority in this part of Earth, and the end of the age it brings us all closer to with every act of extraction, and with every load sent daily on one of the twelve freight trains the mountains never await.*

*Abisko, Kiruna, Stockholm August–September 2021*

Full essay and the soundwalk composition can be found here: [www.para-archives.net/lakethatglimmerslikefire/](http://www.para-archives.net/lakethatglimmerslikefire/)

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