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The call of the sea: how sound co-composes the place of the surfed wave

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Introduction

You flick to the stated page number, scan the title, confirm your choice. You read this now. You sigh, you fidget, you focus. Your eyes on the text, mind on the meaning of the words, you block out that which distracts: the noise of the couple chattering on the next table, the general din of the café, the cappuccino machinations; foot-falls; snippets of chat; tones and shrills. Zoning in on the words, maybe you hear them as your eyes read and brain processes; you perform them internally, the rah-'sp' of the r's, the kic-king k's, the silent pauses of punc . . . tuations. But mostly you skip along; falling onto a form of words you are familiar with, and resonate with what you feel you may need to know. But now, pause for a moment, turn your head, listen: perhaps you can hear the sough [suff] of the sea.

Hold this page close to your ear – you can almost hear the 'whomp' followed by a 'phhsssh' noise. Isn't it magical? (Selway 2009, p. 55)

This chapter explores the sound of the sea, in particular the sound of surf. According to Nguyen (n.d.), the word 'surf' originates from a corruption of the work 'sough', meaning a rushing sound, and may also derive from the Indian word 'suffe', used with reference to the coast. Here we suggest that the rushing sound of surf is a crucial, but underexplored, dimension of surfing, and drawing on the authors' extensive work on surf riding practices in Europe, Australia, and North America, and directly on surf literature (see, for example Anderson & Stoodley 2018; Anderson 2012; Olive 2016; Farmer 1992), this chapter examines not only why this may be the case, but also why the vitality of these rushes, and the rhythms they create, become integral to the momentary experience that defines the place of the surfed wave.



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Figure 6.1 Surfer

Listening to hydro-logics

This chapter, and this volume, is part of a paradigmatic shift within the social sciences to sense our world differently; to examine how our world may be different if we ‘think critically about the heard environment’ (Smith 2000, p. 92). Drawing on a range of scholars (including Anderson et al., 2005; Bull, 2000; Connell & Gibson, 2003; Gallagher, 2011; Hudson, 2006; Matless, 2005), social scientists, and human geographers in particular, have come to recognise that sound is one vital component that ‘takes and makes’ the places of the world. As Gallagher and Prior argue, ‘sound [is] involved in the construction and mediation of urban, rural, public and private environments, the production of identity and difference, and the exercise of power through space’ (2014, p. 267).

If we listen to these scholars, sound is therefore vital to any approach to the world. It offers not simply an audible augmentation to the ocular, a further means through which to understand power, place and politics which supplements the dominant ‘lens’ of sight, but it also encourages us to experiment with an alternative way of apprehending space and our relation to it. As Attali (1985, p. 3, also cited in Smith 2000, p. 615) outlines, ‘for twenty-five centuries Western knowledge has tried to look upon the world. It has failed to understand that the world is not for beholding. It is for hearing. It is not legible, but audible’. Smith (2000, p. 617) concurs with Attali, suggesting that taking sound seriously requires us to ‘imagine space as a listening, to recognise that ways of hearing

are ways of being and becoming'. Thus, in the process of pausing, and shifting our head position in relation to this page, in reorienting our ears to our object of interest rather than our eyes, we not only focus our attention to the world in a new way, but open up the possibility of entering into new relations with that world – a world that is heard, not held; a world that becomes (us), not one that is given and taken for granted.

In this chapter, we explore how these ideas play out in relation to the water world, and, in particular, one specific component of this hydrosphere: surf space. Exploring sound in relation to the hydrosphere is itself part of a broader 'watery turn' in human geography and the social sciences. As there is growing acknowledgement that human life is shaped by sound, there is also a similar recognition of the extent to which human life is shaped by water (Anderson & Peters 2014; Brown & Humberstone 2015; Steinberg 2013; Steinberg & Peters 2015). In brief, a move towards 'hydro-logics' within the social sciences is concomitantly a move away from the defining 'geo-logics' of its many constituent disciplines (see Peters et al. 2018). Where geo-logics would focus its attention on the land, hydro-logics focuses on water. Where geo-logics would tend to frame the landed world as constituted by fixed, durable, locations, as points on a map that are discrete and essential; hydro-logics tends to frame the water world as in flux, dominated by flows, trajectories, and coming together, where places are emergent in the moment (Latour 2004) through a constellation of forces and processes intersecting at a singular site (Massey 2005). Following poststructural and relational theories (for example Deleuze & Guattari 1987; Butler 2004), hydro-logics contends we live in a world of 'ongoing composition' (Anderson 2015). From this perspective, the hydrosphere, or specific places within it – such as surf spaces – are 'not [conceptualised] as points or areas on maps, but as integrations of space and time; as spatial-temporal events' (Massey 2005, p. 130). This 'wet' worldview (Steinberg & Peters 2015) posits that sound is one component that assembles with others to 'take and make' the nature and quality of places. As Revill puts it, 'where sound is concerned, space is made and shaped [in part] by the qualities of sound itself' (2016, p. 244; see also Carpenter & McLuhan 1973; Pocock 1989).

Hydro-logics, with its emphases on relational emerging and entities/processes becoming through the moment of performative practice, 'echoes' recent work in sound studies. This latter work seeks to move away from a logic that is premised on fixed 'things' which are discrete, essential, and durably formed. This work posits that, like a hydro-logical water world:

the world of sound is [also] an event world, in contrast to that of [geo-logical] vision which is an object world (Ong 1971): [sound] is a world of activities rather than artefacts, sensations rather than reflections (Scha"fer 1985). It is dynamic: something is happening for sound to exist. (Pocock 1989, p. 193)

This approach discourages any framing of sound that positions it as part of an object world – a world of stabilised material 'things' acting in isolation. Rather it encourages registering sound as integral to an emergent world of

assembled processes that produce momentary ‘events’. This approach resonates with Massey’s view that the world comes into being ‘in the simple sense of the coming together of the previously unrelated, a constellation of processes rather than a thing’ (2005, p. 141). In this approach, sound is therefore not an isolated ‘artefact’, but realised through the intersection of various components that are themselves constituted by other components temporarily coming together. In practice, these components include, first, a generator of wave distortion – an entity/process which disrupts the equilibrium of energy in a given context. Second, it requires a medium of transmission, a means through which the initial distortion can travel; and, finally, a means through which this distortion can be registered, that is, an entity/process with the capacity to ‘hear’ it. In contradiction to approaches to sound that focus solely on the listener in isolation, which Revill contends ‘may fail to give due weight to the materiality of sound itself’ (2016, p. 243), sound ‘as event’ only comes into being when a process begins which distorts audio waves in a continuum, that distortion is transferred across space, and it is ultimately registered. As Revill summarises, sound becomes when:

the ‘thingness’ of sound [is] co-produced by the act or processes of making, the materials which carry and transmit, and the means of receiving, sensing and making sense. Sound is made within the contingent interplay of each of these realms simultaneously. (2016, p. 253)

In this framing, sound is not ‘geo-logic’ in nature – it is not the ‘passive connection of two or more discrete entities’ (Revill 2016, p. 246), but rather it is ‘a relational making simultaneously involving production, transmission, reception and interpretation through and within entities and materials’ (p. 245). Indeed, this approach confirms that the sound world (and perhaps the world itself) is ‘not for beholding’ (Attali, 1985, p. 3). Instead, it is an emergent, eventful, process – an experience that assembles temporally, then dissipates and disassembles again. This new epistemological approach to the soundworld is thus a new ‘way of seeing’ it (Rorty 1979, emphasis added) – so much so, that the conventional vernacular which underpins this philosophical approach and betrays the dominance of the ocular is initially betrayed, then outmoded.

There are resonances therefore between the epistemological innovations which broadly characterise both watery and sound turns within the social sciences. It is perhaps unsurprising that it is possible to identify geo-logics giving way to hydro-logics when considering sound and the sea. As Capp (2004) outlines in the following account, the soundworld of surf space is no longer an ‘image’ that is ‘legible’, a stabilised ‘thing’ that can be held (after Attali 1985); rather it is a coming together of conflicting elements which produce a momentary event. Sound is central to this relational emergence, an assemblage which cannot be captured or held, just experienced whilst the process temporarily becomes:

where sea and land collide, the ocean as an image of eternity takes on a mortal, human dimension. . . . [t]ime cannot be held[;] when the energy silently coursing

through deep water finally explodes upon the shore in a burst of white noise, the eternal becomes the now. Every wave is a perfect expression of the present tense: it can't be grasped or prolonged, only ridden. (Capp 2004, p. 115)

Sounds of the surf

Reorienting oneself to the sounds of surf spaces, to the magical 'whomps' and 'phhssh's' of the breaking waves, prompts a reconsideration of surf space. One can experience a mediated encounter with this sensory emporium through the following website: <http://www.spatialmanifesto.com/research-projects/surfing-places/the-sounds-of-surf> where the authors have collected various sounds of the sea in order that the reader can register for themselves the different coming-togethers that produce the soundscape of the shore in those particular moments of emergence. In many of these events, the silence of the seas can be their defining aspect (as registered during this moment at Caswell Bay, Wales, <https://youtu.be/8KVIImJnEZCU>), whilst in others the sound of the wind is the dominant presence (as in this case of Freshwater West, Wales, <https://youtu.be/R13nnzYPfC4>). From the shore, the contributions of water molecules on rock or sand offer a key sound to the scape (as in these cases of Hawaii, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6f0y1Iaorug&t=52s>, and Kirra, Australia, <https://youtu.be/jqzd24tOXk8>, https://youtu.be/ZRiDJ_DdJIs). There is, of course, nothing essential or guaranteed about these sounds, they are surf 'music' performed on the day they were recorded, and replayed at and for our leisure. If we were to return, these sounds would not be heard as their energised components have long disassembled.

Everywhere where there is interaction between a place, a time and an expenditure of energy, there is rhythm. (Lefebvre 2004, p. 15)

In many cases, the dominant characteristics of the sound of surf spaces are the rhythms generated between wind, water and land. The 'expenditure of energy' between these different elements creates a sound attributed to these events that is perhaps unique to this particular category of location. The ear and the body register vibrations produced through the rasp and roar of energies moving through air molecules (wind), this aerial energy in turn encounters and transfers to the surface of the sea, and drives forward (and often conflicts) with deeper currents, swells, and tides, then meets the terrestrial impediments of continental shelf, reef, rocks and beach. Following Elden (2004), there is an organic and apparent unpredictability to these multiple rhythms, yet, despite this, a semblance of continuity appears which renders the sound of a piece; as Simpson notes, drawing directly on Lefebvre (2004, p. 6):

There is, therefore, '[n]o rhythm [here] without repetition in time and space, without reprises, without returns, in short without measure'; but equally 'there is no absolute identical repetition, indefinitely . . . there is always something new and unforeseen that introduces itself into the repetitive: difference'. (2012, p. 426)

The sound of the sea, the sound of waves breaking through the wind and onto the shore, creates a polyrhythmic soundscape. There are the constant, rhythmic ‘movements’, as in a musical composition, with each constitutive ‘instrument’ contributing a percussive layer to the overall piece. Although the overall composition can be sensed in the sound, as with any musical performance, it is also possible for different aspects to capture the attention of the listener at different times, producing different relational sensibilities – or affects registered in the human through their coming together within an assemblage (including, in this case, sea, wind, riding technology, shore, etc.; for more, see Anderson 2009, 2012) – in the aspiring surf rider.

The calm serenity of particular surf events (for example in Rhossili, Wales, <https://youtu.be/6qhyIHsv6jg>), renders it possible for the aspiring surf rider to gain a relational sense of calmness and tranquillity through their engagement with the sea. This relational sensibility is well articulated by Allen:

Shifting, yet motionless, I dance across the reef, ever so gently. The tide now is extremely low. Islands appears where I once rode days earlier when the tide was in. My senses awaken in the cool water and again I ride . . . The coolness is invigorating to my soul, my senses are heightened, the sounds and smells add to the experience. I paddle in slow motion as if a strobe light were upon me. Each drop of water that I lift up with my hand as I raise it back out of the water, drops back from which it came, each in succession. The first appearance of randomness is soon overshadowed by the existence of natural rhythm within spontaneous movement. Within spontaneity, arises rhythm, beautiful sound emitted from each reaction to my own gestures.

The kelp beds themselves, move in rhythm to the incoming swells. Flowing, with each successive movement form the winds, tide and rolling waves. (2007, pp. 77–78)

When we begin to realign ourselves to the sound of the sea we become part of a hydro-logical world. Indeed, it is possible that listening to surf spaces encourages us to get ‘wet’ both philosophically and practically, as it pulls us centrally into the water world. As Handel outlines, “Listening” is centripetal; it pulls you into the world. Looking is centrifugal; it separates you from the world’ (1989, p. xi, see also Smith, 2000, p.622). If this is the case, then valorising the auditory enables us to be more mindful of the assembled relations of which we are a part, and shakes off the urge to position ourselves outside an emergent network, viewing it as if we were ‘solitary knower’ (Haraway 1988) spun out from the context which co-defines us. We can recognise this centripetal experience in relation to the soundworld of surf when aspiring riders first encounter a new wave break. This is well summarised by the following excerpts. The first two are written by Susan Casey and document not only her visit to meet big wave surfer Laird Hamilton in Hawaii, but also her encounter with the wave break ‘Jaws’:

So I had come to Maui. This was where tow surfing had been brought to the world’s attention, and Jaws was still the gold standard for giant waves. It was also

the reason why Hamilton lived on this island, at the top of these pineapple fields: Jaws was literally in his backyard. During a big swell he can feel the wave before he sees it. The ground shakes for miles.

‘That’s Jaws beach,’ Hamilton said, treading water and pointing toward the shore. I could make out a small, crescent-shaped indentation about eight hundred yards away, filled with rocks. More than that, I could hear it. As the waves swept in and out, the rocks rolled forward and backward, making a sound like an avalanche of bocce balls. It was a rasping, raking noise that was frankly terrifying. (2010, pp. 32 and 41)

The next extract is from Jack London’s seminal account of wave-riding, ‘A Royal Pursuit’:

The grass grows right down to the water at Waikiki Beach . . . One after another they come, a mile long, with smoking crests, the white battalions of the infinite army of the sea. And one sits and listens to the perpetual roar . . . (1911, p. 75)

In these extracts, the sound of surf is definitive to the becoming of the space itself. In the initial encounter from the shore, the polyrhythms of molecules pulsing through and into the elements of air, water and land come together to create an orchestral cacophony of noise that is bracing in its scale and novelty:

Surfers . . . improvis[e] against the orchestra of the grinding sea, concentrating on intense, short solos and raucous codas. (Bleakley 2016, p. 97)

From and even on the sea itself, different sounds are generated. Here the aspiring surf rider is closer to the water, and they themselves contribute to its auditory and physical ‘movement’. This may be through board, boat or body, depending on the technological means of flotation and ride, and also through the chosen means of propulsion – arms, legs or paddle. As in the following examples (Caswell, Wales, <https://youtu.be/IAv8MnhT2ng>, and Rhossili, Wales, <https://youtu.be/jEjWldibUzs>) one can detect the rhythmic sound of paddle entering and exiting the aqua-assemblage, whilst also the mild bounce of boat on water. On the sea, therefore, new sounds contribute to the ‘complex polyrhythmy’ of this water world (Edensor 2010, p. 69), its emergent nature emphasises how these hydro-places are ‘always becoming, and a human, whether stationary or travelling, is one rhythmic constituent in a seething space pulsing with intersecting trajectories and temporalities’ (Edensor 2010, p. 71). Aspiring surf riders need to register and be attentive to these complex rhythms in order to successfully negotiate, and eventually ride, breaking waves (see, for example, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qJUyZA5d0cQ>). Being out of sync with these material and melodic rhythms marks the human out as a poor reader or register of the sounds and vibrations of the surfing event. Such (lack of) awareness makes any attempt to catch a wave almost impossible, and the effort to simply be on the sea drainingly difficult (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y3hZwZ9ksu0>).

However, if one can register the rhythm of a surf space, one can catch a wave. When this occurs, one senses the ‘shhhhh’ of incoming rustly waves, a marked crescendo, often a quiet moment of rise, and sometimes slap! (as in this case at Port Eynon, Wales, <https://youtu.be/eKJuZCldSNM> and Porthcawl, Wales, <https://youtu.be/ce2IMGviNEQ>). From these examples, we can identify a centripetal intensity (after Handel 1989 above) to encounters with surf space, both from the shore, and on the sea itself. These encounters with the event world are akin to an assault on the auditory senses, engagements so powerful that ‘we are sucked into this soundworld network . . . [as a result, listening] evokes and organises collective memories and present experiences of place with an intensity, power and simplicity unmatched by any other social activity’ (Stokes 1994, p. 3, also cited in Smith 2000, p. 622). However, it is important to note that during some attempts to ride the surf, other senses compete to drown out the intensity of the sound world. Consider, for example, the following articulation of a tube ride¹ by acclaimed surf writer Tom Anderson:

After about five attempts to get in and around the tube[s breaking at this spot], one virtually landed on my lap. . . . I paddled, coolly focusing my breathing and senses to channel the excitement in my muscles into the economy of motion needed to negotiate the drop. Building up paddle momentum I got over the ledge well in time to avoid any kind of freefall, but still deep enough along the reef to find a long wall of mercury-like water rising up in front of me. Way beyond, out in the flats and a world I had left behind, I could see [my co-surfer] Rhino sitting up and raising his hands into the sky. . . . Time began slowing and my awareness of all around me heightened to a haywire crescendo. I could hear my breathing as my thought processes clarified. . . . This wave is going to do it . . . It’s going to do it . . . It’s going to . . . [become a tube].

The lip hooked itself outwards, piercing the flat water to my left, swallowing me in the back of its saltwater pocket. With so much room, my board was able to stick to a clean wave face and continue unhindered in its trajectory forward, towards the window of light that had now shrunk my view of the channel to merely a snapshot – with Rhino cheering ecstatically in the middle of it. This time the absolute change of sound, gravity and atmosphere indicated how far behind the portal I was. There was time to think, to stare, to marvel – then as quickly and predictably as it had thrown over, the exit suddenly flew towards me and I was catapulted out and back into reality, careering onto the shoulder with runaway speed and a grin that could be seen from the town centre. Taking a breather to register what had happened, I let the euphoria flood through me and waited for my psyche to adjust. I had to try and do it again. (Anderson 2010, p. 78)

In this evocative account, Anderson refers to the soundspace of this tube ride on two occasions. First, he ‘could hear [his] breath as [his] thought processes clarified’, this occurred as reality appeared to slow, the tube formed, and he was well-positioned to become part of it. The reference to his own breath suggests that, despite him being drawn in to this particular water world, his own body remained a key component within this forming assemblage, and contributed in a significant way to the sound of the space. The second reference to sound

occurred at the moment Anderson is in the pocket of the tube; here he refers to the ‘absolute change’ in sound quality and constitution when compared to the cacophony that he has become used to through hours of surfing at this spot. At this moment he experiences a break in the normal soundscape – what Bleakley (2016, p. 51) refers to as a ‘holiday’ from the accepted and normalised composition. Following Redgrove (1999), it could be suggested this break represents a ‘hole in the day’, a ‘rest’ in the orchestral rhythm which provides the surf rider with a moment many refer to as an experience of the transcendent. So perhaps, to continue the wordplay, it may be usefully referred to as a ‘whole in the day’, a rest which draws surfers back to the swell again and again.

It is equally important to note that Anderson only refers to sound twice in his account. It is possible to suggest three processes at play which may help to explain the relative underscoring of the musical movement in this passage. First, and as this chapter has noted above, humans have the ability to block out that which distracts from their sensory registers. In the risk-ridden world of the breaking wave, other senses become more vital than sound to the survival of the surfer. One must look, touch (through the paddle, board and body), and sense in aggregation in order to appropriately time and position oneself in the oncoming rhythmic swell. In order to execute the take-off perfectly, and potentially experience a ‘holiday’ on the waves, sound needs to be blocked out, or rather merged into a more co-constituted set of senses, put in order to function successfully. This is summed up neatly by big wave surfer Mike Parsons, in reference to surfing Cortes Bank in the Pacific Ocean; he states when you are on this wave, ‘Your senses tell you where [it’s going to break]. I guess noise [does] play a role, but it’s more a feeling. You know the second it’s gonna hit. It’s all timing’ (quoted in Casey 2010, p. 255). Second, buffering or integrating ‘noise’ into one’s direct experience becomes possible due to the surf sounds noted above becoming increasingly expected and ‘normal’ to the surf rider. Utilising the vocabulary of Anderson (2015), the ‘novelty’ of aurally registered distortions have now become ‘the norm’, perhaps even ‘the natural’ sounds that are expected to be heard by surfers at this particular break (see also Bourdieu 1985). As such, the constancy in polyrhythms render it possible for the experienced rider to block them from dominating their senses in order to safely navigate the assemblage of surf space. Third, and relatedly, it may also be the case that due to the surf rider buffering out the natural sounds of the site, as well as being able to focus on their centrifugal self when lost in a centripetal movement, they are less able to remember, and also re-present, the sounds they register and produce. The surfer may not simply have the recall or the lexicon to faithfully communicate whatever fragments of the soundworld resonate not only with themselves as the rider, but also the reader. It is here that the movement of which they were a part is simply what it is – it does not refer outside itself for external meaning or understanding, and cannot be translated, interpreted or represented through another medium. It simply has to be experienced.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have begun to explore the soundworlds of surfspaces. Following what we have termed the hydro-logic turn in the social sciences, we have presented a processual and performative account of surf sounds, which resonates with new approaches to sound across many disciplines. We have seen that sound contributes at a vital level to the event that is the surfed wave, suggesting that the motion of the sea could be understood as the movement of a soundscape, with polyrhythmic contributions performed by the coming together of sea, land, air and, often, surfers. This surf music is often difficult to ignore, but sometimes easy to forget; its momentary nature can define the relational sensing of the sea, but can also be impossible to re-present beyond that pulse of experience. As a consequence, the sound of surf is often marginalised from its spectacle – the ease with which the image of the breaking sea can be ‘held’ and commodified encourages surf to be framed as an object world to be fossilised and fixed. What we suggest in this chapter is that another world is possible; by tuning into the sounds of the sea, our water world becomes one (and many) which has no meaning beyond the immediate, where mobility gives way to simple movement, and sound is vital to the co-definition of the place of the surfed wave.

Note

1. Under the right conditions a wave may form a moving ‘tube’ as it breaks. Tube riding is a term surfers use to describe riding inside this ‘tube’.

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