



Bell Tower of False Creek

By Dr. Randolph Jordan

I'm looking at an archival photo of Vancouver's Burrard Bridge taken by James Crookall in 1936. The air is thick on the shore of False Creek and the view is eerily similar to what you might see on any January day after the fog has settled in for one of its regular winter sojourns blotting out the high-rise skyline for which Vancouver has come to be known as the *City of Glass* (Coupland 2009). On days like this it's easy to imagine slipping into a past filled with the smoke of industry and the clearance of indigenous dwellings. Such hindrances to visibility don't apply to sound and the 21st Century is well accounted for by the ear. Still, I wonder, what access might the present day soundscape provide to the world that Crookall heard as he focused his lens that day, not long after the bridge opened in the early 1930s?

Acoustic Profiling

It is on one of these thick January days in 2013 under the bridge when I first notice a particularly intense clanging sound emanating from the traffic passing overhead. I track the sound to a pothole that has opened up next to the metal connector that sits directly atop of the southwest concrete pillar on the shore (Fig. 2). You can see right through the hole to the water below, and each passing car activates the metal, firing a pair of mighty bellows down into the hollow structure. There they gather layers of reflection before exiting by way of the arched openings that grace each face of the support structures, leaving home to start their journey out across the land. I wonder if they have always been so loud.

Would Chief August Khahtsahlano have heard such sounds when the bridge first cut into Snauq ancestral lands in 1932, covering the exact spot that once featured the potlatch house of his childhood village? He didn't mention it to Major James Matthews over 20 years of conversation compiled by the archivist for posterity (Matthews

1955). Perhaps it took a while for such decay to set in. I listen to archival recordings from the World Soundscape Project (WSP) at Simon Fraser University. The sound of the metal divider is present on the original tapes recorded near the bridge in the early 1970s (World Soundscape Project 1973), but it is absent in the 1990s iteration (World Soundscape Project 1996). I wonder about the cycles of municipal maintenance that bring this sound out periodically before dampening it down again with asphalt. The seasons of neglect.

On assignment to add recordings to the WSP archive on the occasion of its 40th anniversary, I take a walk with microphones in hand. I define the boundaries according to the limits of the sounds' extension, treating this region as an acoustic community just as parishes of old were defined by the acoustic profile of the village church bell. As it happens, the pothole's profile is roughly equivalent to the east/west boundaries of the expanded Indian Reserve No. 6 established in 1877, later renamed Kitsilano, and which remains contested to this day (Barman 2007). It's poetic that the city's neglect for its own infrastructure sounds out the first phase of Native dispossession in the area, the reserve lands gradually carved up and sold off over the next few decades, justified at the time by claims that these first peoples were not maintaining the land according to principles of "highest and best use".¹ It's a work of cosmic genius that the best spot to hear the past resounding in this sound event now marks the first phase of restitution: the area beneath the bridge was awarded to the Squamish Nation in 2002 after a lengthy battle in the courts following the decommissioning of the railway's right of passage through the area in 1982. To complicate matters, this ruling came at the expense of competing claims by the Musqueam and Tsleil-Waututh First Nations, and so the land's return to reserve status has only heightened the complexities of its overlaps (Roy 2009).

As I walk, the Squamish plot intersects with a municipal park, private marina, public pier, condominium developments, and transient campsites paying tribute to the decades of squatting in the area prior to the major redevelopment of the 1970s that turned nearby Granville Island from dilapidated industrial wasteland to one of the city's most popular marketplaces. While usage differences along my route are clearly demarcated to the eye by fences, signs, paths, tended greens and barren expanses, the sound of the pothole cuts across all these spaces, enacting the reality that their intended separations are largely fictional on the ground. For critical geographer Nicholas Blomley, acknowledging the simultaneity of such overlapping claims to the land, and their historical depth, is an act of "unsettling the city" (Blomley 2002). I think about how the sound of the pothole fosters what some call "unsettled listening," moving without bias across the space, reflecting its many surfaces and inviting contemplation on their depth (Jordan 2014). To the unsettled ear, a village church bell maps out a community necessarily founded upon imperialist conquest, just as the "ringing" of the pothole sets the area's contested spaces resonating. These unsettling resonances are revealed most clearly as they bind together my conversations with people along the way, oral/aural histories of the pothole in the making.



Fig. 1. (Left) Archival photo of Vancouver's Burrard Bridge, 1936.
Fig. 2. (Above) Pothole atop of the southwest concrete pillar

Talking Points

I'm standing in the bike lane on the surface of the bridge, hanging my microphone over the recently installed concrete dividers into oncoming traffic as I try to get as close as possible to tires making contact with the hole. A middle-aged woman in sharp business attire with an armful of DVDs slows from her brisk pace to ask what I'm listening to. We're on city property sanctioned for use as a public walkway, and my transgression onto the bike path and partway into traffic has caught her attention. I tell her I'm interested in the breadth of this pothole's audibility, and for a bit of context I tell her about acoustic ecology and the quest for more humane sound environments. The irony of the traffic's challenge to our conversation isn't lost on her, and she wonders why more hasn't been done to quiet our city over the decades. Before we part she suggests that I also try to record the pothole from the other side of the span to improve my coverage. I forget to ask her what's up with all the DVDs.

Beneath the bridge, a young man with long hair and a denim jacket descends from the construction scaffolding set up for maintenance. In my many visits to this spot, I've never seen anyone up there, municipal employee or otherwise. He's trespassing on city property, and I ask him how it sounds up there. The rhythm of the traffic sounds like beats, he answers, though it's a bit sketchy on the rafters. We chat for a few minutes about the possible uses for my recordings. With him, I'm inclined to talk more about creative renderings than objective documentation, and I oblige his request for info on my handle so that he can look me up online. I think about how amazing it would be to get a recording from directly under the hole at the top of the scaffolding. I climb a couple of levels up, but quickly chicken out. The view is good, but I'm afraid of heights and this particular scaffolding appears to have seen better days. I can't help but wonder why it's always deserted, and how long it takes for any work to get done on the structure.

I make my way to Pier A on the east side of the bridge. I pass the traditional Snauq totem pole with arms stretched out in welcome over Cultural Harmony Grove, marking the spot where the Kitsilano Trestle Bridge once crossed the shoreline. My aim on the pier is to

capture some of this relationship between land and sea, marked here by boats of leisure rocking gently to the constancy of the rhythmic pothole sounding in the distance. I pass the electrical box feeding the various hookups for the boats, and I notice that the pothole is in tune with the 60-cycle hum. What's that about? A light rain starts to fall, activating the many tarps as I dip my microphone into the spaces between the decks and the rubber bumpers that squeak and scrape as the boats push them up against the dock. I poke around, tugging on ropes to facilitate a few sound events. This pier is publicly accessible, unlike the private marina directly beneath the bridge, but the boats are private property. The caretaker happens by and checks in with a certain measure of suspicion. "Can I just ask what you're doing?" "I'm recording sounds of creaking around the docks and stuff," I say. "Just for the integrity of the dock?" he probes. The possibility had never occurred to me, though I suppose one could learn a lot from the many forensically loaded sounds I've been capturing along the wooden structure. But no. I tell him about the World Soundscape Project. He has no follow-up questions, and parts with an "okay, well, knock yourself out. Glad you're not breaking into any boats." We both chuckle.

I finish my walk by heading south beneath the bridge where an art photographer requests that I avoid the field of the mammoth lens he has mounted in the back of a cube van to take a long exposure of a gutted computer case propped up against one of the support pillars. I'm amused by the fact that he's on reserve lands laying claim to a temporarily private enclave for his own profit. I'm pretty sure he's not Squamish, though I suppose I should assume nothing. As a fellow artist documenting the spaces under the bridge, I ask him about his project. He's reticent to give any details, though, and doesn't appear to care at all about what I'm doing. There's an air of irritation that he has to deal with even the scant public he encounters in this barren landscape. I want to press him further, but before I get the chance a cyclist who has been hovering in the background bursts in to ask me about my gear. When I reveal that I'm using a stereo mic with the aim of capturing a broad range of ambient sound, he asks if I can recommend anything on the opposite end of the spectrum. He wants



Fig. 3. Pillars of Burrard Bridge



Photo by Randolph Jordan

Fig. 4. Bridge today

to interview people in the field while minimizing background noise, and I suddenly realize that I've reached the limits of the pothole's profile as it's not audible anymore from this distance.

We're not far from the limits of the reserve plot itself, marked here by another pole. This one's electrified, selling the bridge's surface dwellers on everything from nasal drip to Native-owned casinos and global getaways. It's the first billboard in the area since they were outlawed by municipal regulation in the 1970s to comply with Vancouver's new self-definition as "spectacular by nature" (Noble and Fujita 2012, 6). But they aren't illegal on reserve lands, and while the welcome pole down by the water invites newcomers with carvings of traditional bird imagery, this electric pole is a giant flip of the bird to the city's empty gesture in relinquishing these ostensibly unusable lands to the Squamish. Not much can be done with the space under the bridge, but the sign rises tall enough to reach the eyes of daily thousands on the surface, generating millions of dollars in revenue for the band (Stewart 2010). How's that for "highest and best use"? It's dead quiet too, while remaining visible even through the thickest of January fogs.

Here Goes Nothing

A few months later, I return to the bridge's southwest pillar on the shore intending another attempt to climb the scaffolding with my recording gear, but the sound of the pothole is gone. I check the surface, and it has been filled in. My recordings have captured an auditory fixture that no longer exists, like so many other soundmarks in the WSP archive. R. Murray Schafer once pronounced gravely that the disappearance of some kinds of sound threatens the death of any culture in which they were embedded (World Soundscape Project 1974). I can't help but think about how tracking the sound of the pothole through this area revealed to me how quiet the return of culture has been here.

The Kitsilano Trestle Bridge was the first breach of the reserve in 1899 (Roy 2009), and the sound of trains rolling through the region and across the water to the downtown core would have been a staple of life on these lands before the first state-sanctioned clearances of 1913 (Barman 2007, 17), long before Burrard Bridge would begin pouring the sounds of automobile traffic into the region. Informed by this history, the metallic quality of the pothole's clanging and its coincidental profile recalled the lost history of the soundscapes of dispossession, while simultaneously mapping it out on the ground. What seems most fitting, though, is that this instructive soundmark was ephemeral, perhaps cyclical, awakened momentarily to open a pathway into the past only accessible now by occupying an unsettled position at the intersection of the area's overlapping claims to use. I want to use my recordings to make a piece that reflects this ephemerality, but I'm not sure how.

The evening that I finished my recordings, I go to the Western Front to sit as respondent for an Acoustic Cartographies event co-organized by the Department of Geography at UBC and the School of Communication at SFU.² Students present audio pieces mandated to explore the nuances of place, and one of the best ones deals with the community gardens that have sprung up all over the recently decommissioned railway corridors that criss-cross the city from False Creek stretching deep into south Vancouver. It opens with the sound of trains gradually receding into the distance and leaving in its wake the sounds of communal gardening amidst the urban din. It is a well-constructed piece, lots of clear and punctuating sound phrases that appropriately evoke the communal nature of these spaces. However, once the introductory train sounds are gone, there is no further indication that these gardens sprout between the defunct tracks, a fact that our eyes cannot escape in situ. Nor does the piece address the political implications of public trespassing on privately owned lands that the rail companies will

try their damndest to sell for their own profit rather than fulfill the original mandate that these revert back to reserve status once no longer in use (Barman 2007, 29). These are corridors of limbo where contest is marked by quietude. How can one make an audio piece about something we can't hear?

I find the answer for my own piece inside one of the pillars of the bridge that acted as receptacle for the energy of the pothole's blasts. The portals have been grated, but the one most accessible from the ground has been peeled back enough to stick my microphone inside of it. [Fig. 3]. The reverberation is astonishing, and the space acts as a nexus for all the sounds of the area that meet here to collide, mingle, and merge. Walking the land within earshot of the pothole emphasized the politics of movement through a variety of differently occupied spaces all bound together by a single sounding event. Here, inside the pillar, the situation is different, the point of overlap for each of the intersecting spaces I have passed through, a gathering place for the sounds that accumulate and become undifferentiated and interchangeable. In the amorphousness, we can hear almost anything, imagine almost anything, something like the auditory equivalent of fog. Traffic noise gives way to the possibility of any number of industrial activities that sonorized the region in decades past, the beating of drums in the decades before that, and even the winds and distant thundering that reach back further still into the mists of time. The sounds of the gulls pierce through this soundscape as effectively as they do outside, and when there's a lull in the thumping of traffic, a profound quietude emerges that belies the bustle of the area. Here I can cast my mind back to another time, even as the fog that obscures the visual complexities of the land lifts to reveal the downtown condos glistening in the sunlight at the bridge's north end. The soundscape inside the pillar remains fixed, a stability that will live as long as the bridge itself, and is perhaps just as old.

Funnily enough, the inaccessibility of the built environment inside the pillar makes it open to listening exclusively by way of the microphone. So it seems fitting that the space comes to serve as the point around which my soundwalk composition revolves. In "Bell Tower of False Creek," I position the interior of the pillar as the central point and track the pothole's acoustic profile outwards across the land, returning regularly to listen for how these sound environments relate to each other within the resonance chamber before moving out again once more. Grounding the piece within this space, I emphasize the role that technological listening plays in unsettling these lands for my ear, inviting continual reflection on how the sounds that I recorded in 2013 might cast back to those heard by James Crookall in 1936. If only he had sound recording equipment with him alongside his camera gear, we might be able to verify today if what he heard continues to resonate through to the present, architecturally enacting the very premise of documentary media practice itself.

About the Author

RANDOLPH JORDAN, PhD, is a Research Associate with the World Soundscape Project at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver where he is designing research methodologies to address the enmeshing of media and place. He is writing a book manuscript for Oxford University Press, entitled *An Acoustic Ecology of the Cinema*, in which he develops the theoretical framework for thinking about film sound by way of acoustic ecology. He recently completed a postdoctoral fellowship at SFU in which he applied this framework to a case study of the Vancouver soundscape on film. This work also informs his internationally exhibited filmmaking, photography, and sound art (www.randolphjordan.com).

Endnotes

1. Nicholas Blomley has a good discussion of how the concept of "highest and best use" plays into urban development issues in Vancouver in his book *Unsettling the City* (82-87).
2. The work is archived here as "Audio Work 1," <http://front.bc.ca/events/acoustic-cartographies-audio-works-2013/>

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