Singing the Landscape: A Meditation on Song, Sound and Community at the Fall Line of the James River

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Singing the Landscape
A Meditation on Song, Sound and Community at the Fall Line of the James River

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in the Department of Kinetic Imaging at Virginia Commonwealth University

By
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MFA Kinetic Imaging, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2019

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The James/Powhatan River and the surrounding Virginia landscape, my new home, for its nourishment, shelter and inspiration.

I would also like to acknowledge my debt to the peoples who called this landscape home before it was known by the name “Virginia,” as well as the peoples who were taken from their homes to be enslaved here, and the descendants of these groups. We must recognize this complicated history is embedded in the landscape underneath our feet.
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Abstract

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I work in the medium of song. A multidisciplinary artist and composer, I make work that is immersive, time-based and often participatory. I interact with landscape and the complexities of American history, bringing into focus local ecologies through the lens of song.

This document accompanies my thesis performance The Sound of a Stone, an immersive exploration of song, language, ecology and locational listening performed in a 4-channel surround format. In the semi-improvised composition, I sample live vocals, mandolin and found natural objects in a combination of roots music traditions and experimental techniques. Utilizing the software Ableton Live to process and layer the samples in real time, I build a series of "songscapes" which connect to a specific site: the fall line of the James River. The Sound of a Stone premiered April 8, 2019 at Sonia Vlahcevic Concert Hall, W. E. Singleton Center for the Performing Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia.
I.

Song is a vessel. A song can carry history, memory, feeling, identity, spirituality as it unfolds over time. Embedded in a song’s structure is breath. It is meant to be sung—privately or communally—and thus has ceremony to it. Song implies voice, an author, a story. Song is made up of intervals—the melodic space between notes, the temporal spaces which make up rhythm. Like a ship, it carries us from one shore to another.

I work in the medium of song. A multidisciplinary artist and composer, I make work that is immersive, time-based and often participatory. I interact with landscape and the complexities of American history, bringing into focus local ecologies through the lens of song.

My use of song is meditative. As I walk the land I find the rhythms and forms of nature constructive to the brain’s neural processes. As I walk, I navigate a network of connections among living things and the earth as well as among landscape, history, cultures and music. These pulsating connections break down the space between opposing terms such as natural and man-made, past and future, local and global, remembering and forgetting. According to artist Agnes Denes, “the whole earth is becoming one interdependent society with our interests, needs and problems intertwined and interfering … One pull in any direction can distort the whole fabric, affecting millions of threads” (Mills 24). It is my sensitivity to this
interconnectivity that has brought my work into the spheres of ecology, history and folk traditions.

My use of song is transformative. I work with found materials; I respond to my environment. My role could be variously described as gleaner, diviner, interpreter or conjuror as I uncover the song embedded in a place, object, data set or text. As I walk Richmond’s James River Park System, I listen to the river, the trees, the wind and hear echoes from the past. I am conscious of the layers of time, history stratified under my feet. On these walks I collect bits of natural matter which I have begun to incorporate into my songwriting.

Song amplifies language; it enhances attention, comprehension, emotional response and memory. I am interested in the structure of language—a culturally-binding code made up of sounded phonemes and written loops and lines. I am interested in the poetry of simple language, its meaning built up from the careful placement of common words. I am interested in the language of myth, folklore and folk song—stories which have evolved over centuries through oral tradition.

A sense of place offers the same potential for history, memory, feeling, identity and spirituality that is found in song. Landscape plays a major role in defining our cultural identities. In the past, this connection used to be more direct. The local soil, climate, geology, flora and fauna all contributed to determining what our houses looked like, what food we ate, what clothes we wore, even our vocabulary. In today’s global economy, we are no longer reliant on local natural resources for survival, and our sense of place has been diluted, homogenized.
Removed from the source of our supplies, we are also removed from the consequences of our consumption. Issues of resource over-consumption and climate change are some of the most critical concerns of our time. Through my work, I strive to reawaken environmental awareness and responsibility in our collective consciousness.
When facing anxiety about the future, remember to breathe. It is the one vital sign we can control, through which we can affect organs like the heart and the brain (Alderman). In an effort to keep anxiety and the blues at bay, I have been practicing meditation techniques. As I lie on my back and focus on my breath, I feel my chest expand with the pressure of the air inside my lungs. I push it back out with my stomach muscles. And again. And again.

My thoughts inevitably wander; I try to redirect them to this void inside of me. I focus my sight on the phosphenes which glide across the screen of my inner eyelids; when I am completely relaxed, the images behind my closed eyes become a hypnotic movement of concentric circles.

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{In} \rightarrow \text{Out} \\
\text{In} \rightarrow \text{Out} \\
\text{In} \rightarrow \text{Out}
\end{array}
\]

While focusing on respiration, the breath becomes a timekeeper in an infinite space. The intervals between breaths are regulated. The heart, soothed, slows down.
If I were to translate meditative breathing into melody, it would look something like this:

```
In-----------  Out----------------
```

The late sound artist Pauline Oliveros dedicated most of her life to meditation practices, inventing “deep listening” techniques which she taught to people of all walks of life, musicians and non-musicians alike (Software for People 141). This focused attention to sound is something I’ve found myself fine-tuning more and more over the past two years. I have also been realizing the importance of listening together in a “community of the moment,” as Oliveros puts it, “so that everyone, everything, every sound is included” and acknowledged (Blackwood 00:05:04-00:05:20).

Oliveros found that after trying to listen to “everything all the time,” she “began to hear the sound environment as a grand composition. The rhythms and relationships that occurred began to enter [her] work consciously” (Software for People 182). As I write this, I am sitting outside, listening to a recording of Oliveros’ droning accordion. In Vedic scripture, the drone of the mantra “om” represents the primordial sound, the original vibration caused by the first creation. An overhead airplane just joined in—a long, descending sigh which complemented the composition perfectly.
Stone Circle IV, participatory performance (2018) led by the artist (third from left).
III.

The Greek word *pneuma* (πνεῦμα) combines the concept of “spirit” as well as “breath.” In Stoic philosophy, *pneuma* refers to “an underlying essence or life-force that runs through all things of nature and animates or illuminates them with Mind” (Viola 258).

From a young age I have seen all organic matter as equal in importance to humanity on this planet. Perhaps it is because I grew up in the land of earthquakes and volcanoes, giant sequoias and wild Pacific waters that I have always felt humbled by the voice of the earth. Every summer my family of nine went camping at Mount Lassen Volcanic National Park in Northern California—I even climbed the volcano while still a fetus in my mother’s belly—and these experiences most certainly engendered my love of walking in the outdoors and of listening to and learning about nature.

Taking solo walks by the James has become one of my Richmond pleasures and another way I have been battling climate change anxiety. I find being in natural spaces calms my mind in a unique way. As the artist Bill Viola wrote, “The natural landscape is the raw material of the psyche” (253), reminding us that humans have lived and evolved in a natural habitat for many more millenia than an urban one. Land artist Robert Smithson also draws parallels between natural matter and the mind: “One’s mind and the earth are in a constant state of erosion,
mental rivers wear away abstract banks, brain waves undermine cliffs of thought, ideas decompose into stones of unknowing, and conceptual crystallizations break apart into deposits of gritty reason” (82).

The Russian mineralogist Vladimir Vernadsky (1863-1945) highlights the chemical processes in human bodies which connect us to the elements:

“The material of Earth’s crust has been packaged into myriad moving beings whose reproduction and growth build and break down matter on a global scale. People, for example, redistribute and concentrate … elements of Earth’s crust into two-legged, upright forms that have an amazing propensity to wander across, dig into and in countless other ways alter Earth’s surface. We are walking, talking minerals.” (qtd. in Bennett 11)

I take a stone in my hand and turn it over and over. I take a word in my hand and turn it over. And over again. “Words and rocks contain a language that follows a syntax of splits and ruptures. Look at any word long enough and you will see it open up into a series of faults, into a terrain of particles each containing its own void” (Smithson 87). The sense of myself degrades the more I think about me. Words lose meaning over time.
Emerson wrote, “Language is fossil poetry. As the limestone of the continent consists of infinite masses of the shells of animalcules, so language is made up of images … [which] have long ceased to remind us of their poetic origin” (275). I find the language of folk song and myth to live in the same category, penned by everyone and no one—flashes of insight which over time have been pieced together in a patchwork, mended and amended. “All important words … are keys to the universe, to the dual universe of the Cosmos and the depths of the human spirit” (Bachelard 198).
Still from *One Rock Cast for Two*, 2-channel video installation (2017).
IV.

“Listening in wild places, we are audience to conversations in a language not our own.”

—Dr. Robin Wall Kimmerer, plant ecologist

I’m sitting by the river and the sounds that I hear fan outwards from me as if I’m the center of a map. According to sound artist R. Murray Schafer, “the rivers of the world speak their own languages” (18). I write down the sounds as if I were going to speak them, arranging them spatially on the page to reflect the locations of origin. My paper fills up with onomatopoeic strings of phonemes.

In the middle ground, the mass of the river’s continuous roar:

\[
\text{shhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh}
\]

In the background:

\[
\text{khhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh}
\] – the roar of more distant waters.

And in the foreground, individual moments of eddies and gurgles:

\[
\text{tsh \quad tssl \quad glg \quad swp \quad shlp}
\]

The James River was once known as the Powhatan, after the confederacy of indigenous nations who inhabited the region between Richmond and Chesapeake Bay. I wonder what
sounds from their language—an Algonquian tongue now long lost—would they have used to
describe the river?

Schafer postulates that the first sound heard by early humans was “the caress of the waters” (15). Water is central to many indigenous American origin myths including one from the Secotans, who lived on the coast of present-day North Carolina and are now extinct as a separate tribe. “First they say were made waters, out of which by the gods was made all
diversity of creatures that are visible or invisible” (Hariot 48). Though paraphrased in 1588 by a white colonist who also discussed at length the ability of the English to conquer the landscape and convert the indigenous people to Christianity, this fragment of myth is revealing. The Secotans saw water as containing a vital force that gives life to all beings and also plays a role in the mysterious aspects of nature.
SONGSCAPE I
THE JAMES / DOWNHILL RIVER
CROSSING THE FALL LINE
(SUBURB TO SEDIMENTS,
MOUNTAINS TO THE SEA).

V.

“Rivers reflect a continent’s history. … They also reflect a people’ history.”

—Dr. Ellen Wohl, geoscientist

The James River courses through the heart of Richmond, revealing the geological fall line which runs north and south through the continent, roughly following Interstate 95. The fall line is located where the hard continental crust, made up of metamorphic rock, meets the soft, sedimentary rock of the ocean crust, made up of layers upon layers of broken down organic material. As rivers cross the fall line, waterfalls and rapids are created as they cut into the soft sedimentary rock and create a sudden elevation change.

*From Mountain to Sea (sing stepping down any scale):*

Mountain

Mound

Mourn

Mouth

South

Seethe

Seer

Sea

It is no coincidence that the major cities of the eastern seaboard are located along the fall line. Richmond’s location on the fall line of the James, which is the farthest inland one can easily navigate by boat, has historically made it a strategic hub for industry, including mills and
quarries, as well as transportation. Richmond’s canal system, championed by George Washington, was built with the intention of reaching the profitable trade route of the Ohio River. Most of the grueling hard labor was performed by black slaves hired out by plantation owners for months at a time (Robertson). The advent of the freight train superseded the river bateaux and the canal project dead-ended near Roanoke, VA.

In 1831, the first Virginia railroad began to carry coal to Richmond, and today the coal cars continue to trek from the mountains to the sea. The tracks were laid adjacent to the canals and, thus, right next to the river. In Richmond, the train has almost as much prominence as the river—its whistles are heard across the city and they sing a familiar song of American wanderlust, of being in one place and yearning for another, of activating the path (or interval) between two points.

Freight train, freight train, run so fast
Freight train, freight train, run so fast
Please don’t tell what train I’m on
They won’t know what route I’m going
—Elizabeth Cotten, “Freight Train” ³

Trains speak in codes. The universal “all’s well” whistle:

hooooooooo hoooooooooooooooooooo hoo hoooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

It is hard to walk the James River Park System without seeing a freight train roll by with its rhythmic chugugugug, its seemingly endless line of open cars piled high with coal. The
nakedness of the coal always strikes me with awe. It has a material presence and is an undeniably
reminder of the excess of resources that we consume. This is stuff from the belly of the earth: extracted, refined, sold, all to keep capitalism running.
High Water Mark, mixed media installation with sound (2018).
VI.

Local history, song, language and environment came together in the work I presented for MFA candidacy, a 7-channel site-responsive sound installation entitled *A Brief and True Report*. It was an unusually hot, clear April day. As visitors entered a small quarry in Richmond’s Pump House Park, they were met with chromatic vocal lines and hammered metallic tones which seemed to emerge from the landscape itself, evoking a simultaneously idyllic and unsettling atmosphere. As the visitors wandered among the rocks, the intermittent tones and clangs emerging from myriad directions offered an ever-changing spatial reading of the site and cultivated an attention to the existing natural sounds in the intervals.

Woven into the musical piece are words from Thomas Hariot’s *A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia*, a 1588 British manuscript which advertised the plentiful “merchantable commodities” and consumable natural resources of the New World. The text reads as a “shopping list or inventory of goods available at the vast supermarket that is Virginia” (Adams 93). Some of the named resources can be seen at the site today. Others are now endangered. Some terms are antiquated or incorrect. Many of the words were written by Hariot in Carolina Algonquian, an indigenous language which has been extinct for hundreds of years. These various terms are sounded with equal consideration as I sing them, slowly ascending a chromatic scale until, at the high end of my vocal register, the words are filled
with urgency. The hammering sounds were recorded at a bridge on-site and are reminiscent of the traditional technique of breaking stones by hand.

*A Brief and True Report* reflects upon two landscapes that no longer exist: the Edenic vision of Virginia from early European contact and the chunk of earth and stone that was removed from this quarry. The quarry itself becomes a physical manifestation of loss—a negative space filled by the positive space of sound. Or, positive and negative may be flipped and the authored sound may become a backdrop for the existing landscape. In focusing on lost landscapes and lost languages, this work critiques the deep-seated history and ongoing practice of the overconsumption of American land and resources and the resulting displacement of peoples.
A Brief and True Report, 7-channel site-specific sound installation (2018).
VII.

“Take a walk at night. Walk so silently that the bottoms of your feet become ears.”

—Pauline Oliveros

It is late February and as I approach Pump House Park, I notice what sounds like an alarm going off in the distance. “Oh great,” I think, “sound pollution.” But as I listen more carefully, I notice it is actually a cluster of individual sounds—high-pitched, with a slight pitch raise as if asking a question.

```
```

I can’t quite place the sound—birds? insects?—so I try to get closer, but I can see nothing. At certain times I can distinguish a single trill coming from the trees just to my left, with a response from my right. I take a path down into the canal and the alarm slowly ceases. After hiking back up to an outcropping of rocks, it builds up again.
Later I discover that what I had witnessed was the mass mating calls of male spring peepers, a common species of chorus frog whose habitat spans the eastern half of North America. (Though a familiar sound on the east coast, it was foreign to my Californian ears.) These inch-long tree frogs make calls that can be heard up to a half a mile away. They channel air from their lungs into vocal sacs on their throats which look like little balloons and serve to amplify the call. After withstanding sub-zero temperatures in the winter, they come out at the first sign of spring to breed in shallow waters. The seasonal waters of the canal create the perfect wetland for their mating rituals. Frogs have complex acoustic talents. The females seek out their mate by latching on to his specific call pattern and localizing the sound while tuning out the others (Wilczynski et al. 577).

Since amphibians cannot self-regulate their body temperature, their activity corresponds to changes in environmental temperature. Studies have already shown that frogs’ calls have gotten higher and shorter and their bodies smaller, due to warmer temperatures in recent years (Narins and Meenderink 1). As the planet continues to warm, how will this affect the ubiquitous early spring peepers’ call?
All living entities breathe. The fish, fern, the forest. The river, too, breathes as it takes in and emits oxygen throughout the day. This daily cycle of respiration is closely tied to its plant and animal inhabitants, with the dissolved oxygen level an indication of the overall health of the river. In freshwater tidal areas, including the James at Richmond, algal blooms are a common problem, causing oxygen imbalance in the river (Bukaveckas and Isenberg 1219). Fed by wastewater nitrates, the algae initially increases the amount of dissolved oxygen in the water as it photosynthesizes but ultimately causes oxygen depletion as it decomposes. This deprives other water species of the oxygen they need to survive.

Each part of the river ecosystem is interwoven in a network. This means that each member of this community—both living and non-living—contains a force which acts upon all others.
“A functional river ecosystem is connected to everything around it: the atmospheric and oceanic circulation patterns that control precipitation over the drainage basin; the soils developed on the hillslopes adjacent to the river during thousands of years of weathering of the underlying bedrock; the plant communities growing on those soils, and the animals that pollinate and consume the plants; the processes by which precipitation filters down to the groundwater and raises or lowers the water table that is intimately connected to most streams; and on and on.” (Wohl 6)

I have come to a deeper understanding of the river not only by walking in its company but also through conversations with water ecologist Dr. Paul Bukaveckas of VCU Life Sciences and VCU Rice Rivers Center. Bukaveckas has shared with me a vast repository of James River water quality data which I have been translating into a musical composition. The resulting project, *Breathe, River*, will be presented as a 4-channel sound installation inside the Pump House in May of 2019.
Excerpt from score for *Breathe, River*, site-specific sound installation (in progress).
IX.

“Singing is like breathing.”

—Meredith Monk

The voice is an ancient instrument, a universal instrument. It is certainly the most mobile and perhaps the most vulnerable. My voice is an organic part of myself; it is how I carry song with me. Composer Meredith Monk, known for her use of voice, believes “the voice is limitless. Singing is like breathing” (Robson). Sound artist Susan Philipsz explains that the unaccompanied voice is a “powerful tool,” one that is “intimate and exposing. The voice is capable of evoking memories, or triggering a specific time and place” (Barnard). The voice is a well-loved instrument, perhaps evolutionarily wired into our brains to strengthen the bond between mother and child.

Song is an accessible genre. It is this very accessibility that I harness in order to build trust with my audience, create an emotional, communal experience and ultimately lead the listener into the unexpected. As Susan Philipsz points out, “listening to something that is intimate or private in public can have an unsettling effect, making people more aware of their environment, appreciating the qualities of the here and now” (Philipsz et al. 96).
Why do people sing? The composer George Benjamin suggests, “To pray, to march, to gain unanimity, to mock, to celebrate—that’s public singing. Private singing—feeling good, feeling ecstatic. Equally, grief. The only way to express grief is through non-verbal sound—to cry, or to sing” (Mead). The blues comes to mind as a genre that encapsulates intimate moments of grief. The act of singing the blues is therapeutic, a way of coping with the mental state the blues is named after. As the seminal blues composer W. C. Handy said, “‘Blues music’ was created to chase away gloom” (Muir 80).

\[
\text{Got the St. Louis Blues, just as blue as I can be} \\
\text{That man’s got a heart like a rock cast in the sea} \\
\text{Or else he wouldn’t have gone so far from me} \\
\text{—W. C. Handy, “Saint Louis Blues”}^5
\]

In early blues such as this work published in 1914, the “blue note,” typically a lowered third in the musical scale, was often offset rhythmically with its major-scale neighbor, creating an interval of tension. Handy’s language contains a sparse beauty typical of most folk blues. He transforms the expression “heart of stone,” with its implication of a cold, lifeless substance, into one that attributes agency to this mineral. The phrase “a heart like a rock cast in the sea” draws an arc, an interval in time and space which mirrors the distance between the singer and her estranged lover as well as the heaviness of her own heart.
“So-called inanimate things have a life … Deep within them is an inexplicable vitality or energy, a moment of independence from and resistance to us and other bodies: a kind of thing-power.”

—Jane Bennett, political theorist

A pair of resonant sticks that I picked up from the ground in Pump House Park. A couple of palm-sized granite rocks, rough-hewn from a quarry, that I pulled from the shore of the canal in downtown Richmond. A pile of smooth, round stones ranging in color from dark brown to gray, plucked from the James at Texas Beach. A rattling branch of seed pods from a Paulownia tree. These gleaned materials are my current collaborators. They maintain a connection to the sites where they were collected and are infused with a potential energy. They form an archive of my walks but also comprise a collection of voices in their own right.

Objects have individual stories to tell. Like the artist Jimmie Durham, my interaction with objects is dialogical, having “an awareness of the object as experience, of how the object impinges on our consciousness and potentially changes our understanding of the world when we encounter it” (Durham 77). Objects have the ability to act upon us.
And yet, the word “object” is not quite right. Ecotheologian Thomas Berry suggests, “we must say of the universe that it is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects” (qtd. in Kimmerer 46). Humans share the planet with countless non-human subjects, each with a story of their own. “The recognition of Earth others as fellow agents and narrative subjects is crucial for all ethical, collaborative, communicative and mutualistic projects that involve them, as well as for place sensitivity” (Adams and Mulligan 66).

By bringing a dialogue with such humble subjects as sticks, rocks and seeds into the foreground of my sound practice, I challenge my audience to listen closer, to slow down their read of their surroundings, to welcome mystery and enchantment and, ultimately, to adjust one’s sense of place to acknowledge multiple points of view. “Sense of place is not simply the affective response to a particular place that people might have; it includes a growing sense of what the place demands of us in our attitudes and actions” (Adams and Mulligan 176).
The Sound of a Stone, 4-channel sound performance (2019). Photo by Terry Brown.
In the year leading up to my thesis performance, my work has been shaped by the idea of performance as an intimate exchange—a shared experience among audience, performer and sonic materials. The fact that sound is transmitted in waves, thus activating our sense of touch as well as hearing, contributes to this intimacy. As R. Murray Schafer writes, “hearing is a way of touching at a distance and the intimacy of the first sense is fused with sociability whenever people gather together to hear something special” (11).

Musical performance is therefore an act of ritual. Friends and strangers typically gather around a stage of some kind, whether formal or implied. The performer(s) create vibrations which touch the audience’s ears and bodies. It may provoke joy, nostalgia, sorrow, ecstasy. It may cause swaying or dancing. It may evoke narrative or abstract imagery. If especially inspired, the performer may find herself transcended to another realm somewhere between the interior of the mind and the vastness of space, transporting the audience along with her.

The artist Cecilia Vicuña writes, “a collective ritual is an act of learning. Together we go into a phase transition, an invisible metamorphosis, a different state of consciousness, in order to see” (106).
On April 8, 2019, I gave my MFA thesis performance, *The Sound of a Stone*, at Sonia Vlahcevic Concert Hall in VCU’s W. E. Singleton Center for the Performing Arts. Arriving audience members were led across the traditional proscenium threshold onto the dimmed stage where, behind the curtain, an intimate seating area half-encircled a small, softly-lit stage area. Four speakers stood at attention in the corners of the listening space, ready to transmit their vibrations.

I consider the framing of nature in this indoor realm analogous to Robert Smithson’s concept of a “Non-Site”—an earthwork shown in a gallery which is intended to refer to a specific location in nature. “Between the actual site … and The Non-Site itself exists a space of metaphoric significance” (Smithson); for me this interval is filled with language and musical interpretation.

I selected an interior environment rather than an outdoor site for my performance for a number of reasons: a focus of attention, ideal acoustics and a sense of intimacy. I wanted to be able to isolate sounds against a background of quiet. “Rituals acknowledge the power of silence, just as they exploit the otherworldly aura of sound. Though silence is supposedly an absence, the withdrawal of noise (in all its senses) is replaced by a louder phenomenon, a focusing of attention, an atmosphere, which we mistakenly describe as silence” (Toop 42).
The Sound of a Stone, 4-channel sound performance (2019). Photo by Terry Brown.
“When I say ‘spirit’ or ‘spiritual’ … I’m talking about the whole body. It’s not just the mind. It’s one’s whole existence. For me it has to do with nature and one’s feeling about awe-inspiring nature.”

—Joan Jonas, artist

“We tried to make the mountain higher, but our attempt was futile.”

—Zhang Huan, artist

My thesis performance, The Sound of a Stone, is an immersive exploration of song, language, ecology and locational listening performed in a 4-channel surround format. In the semi-improvised composition, I sample live vocals, mandolin and found natural objects in a combination of roots music traditions and experimental techniques. Utilizing the software Ableton Live to process and layer the samples in real time, I build a series of “songscapes” which connect to a specific site: the fall line of the James River.

The three movements are structured according to geological formations. Part I, “The Fall Line,” begins with a word poem sung in a descending line, charting the path of the James River from “mountain” to “sea”. I grind quarried rocks together, transforming the sound into an
earthquake-like groan, which crescendos under vocals (“Time seems to open and close like shutters on an old house”) before giving way to a shower of wooden taps.

Part II, “Shockoe Strata,” conceives of Virginia’s myriad cultural histories as layers of sedimentary rock—solidified over time, with fossilized ghosts escaping into the wind. The mandolin drones, then breaks into a blues which references the melodic phrase “That man’s got a heart like a rock cast in the sea.” “Shockoe” refers to one of the oldest neighborhoods in Richmond, the name of which comes from the indigenous word *shocquohocan*, which means stone.

Part III, “Standing Stones: As We Gaze Upon the Horizon,” begins with a fictional narrative of a community affected by a flood brought on by climate change. The piece concludes with a vocal meditation out of which emerges the folk song, “The Storms Are on the Ocean,” transformed by an improvised melody which folds upon itself like a canon. The vocals, multiplied and spatialized in the four speakers, simulate the circle of hymn-singers at the heart of the spoken narrative.

*The storms are on the ocean*

*The heavens may cease to be*

*This world may lose its motion, love*

*If I prove false to thee*

—traditional, recorded by The Carter Family in 1928

9
Nature, like language, like the human psyche, like romantic love, is at once vast and intimate. The storms are on the horizon and environmental concerns have never seemed more urgent. *The Sound of a Stone* is intended as a call to action amidst the climate crisis, pushing forward the value of song, community and place sensitivity as stepping stones towards positive change. But the piece also offers a coping strategy: meditation, which I found has grounded me and offered me an even stronger connection with my surrounding environment.

The image that I keep coming back to is that of the circle gathering. With each person facing one another, everyone becomes linked in a network that grows even stronger when vocal chords vibrate in unison. I recently attended a lecture by writer and curator Laura August who has also been exploring circling as a survival strategy. “To circle together is to know you face a certain abrupt end or that you have survived when others have not and yet to insist that the gathering is still, even still, a method of resistance, a way of embracing the coming unsettlements, a response to the pummeling rhythms of many kinds of floods” (August).

To effect real change in our global capitalist culture, I believe what is called for is a realignment of our shared values, starting with the circle. We need to slow down, reconnect with each other and our natural surroundings and remember to be thankful for the gifts the land provides, even as the storms threaten overhead. Dr. Robin Wall Kimmerer, plant ecologist, author and member of the Citizen Potowatomi Nation, discusses the importance of gratitude in indigenous societies and how adopting this ethic could radically change capitalist culture: “Gratitude doesn’t send you out shopping to find satisfaction; it comes as a gift rather than a commodity, subverting the foundation of the whole economy” (87).
Appreciating the gifts of the earth can begin with a simple undertaking. “Plant a garden,” Kimmerer suggests. “It’s good for the health of the earth and it’s good for the health of people … Once you develop a relationship with a little patch of earth, it becomes a seed itself” (96). By engaging with our environment on a local level, by circling together, singing and listening, we can begin to shift our value systems and create a global network of humans who consider and act upon our connections and responsibilities to the planet.
The Sound of a Stone, 4-channel sound performance (2019). Photo by Terry Brown.
And here we are.
We turned to each other as if we had
Just woken up.
We looked at the score. Did you write this? I didn’t think—
In all my years,
I never thought it would come to this.

But we’re here now. We have to listen to
The mute things,
We must take root
In the vital matter right here, right
Here at our
Feet.

Carbon creatures,
We must care for
The things that move us,
The things that teach us,
The things that breathe with us,
So we can cultivate a
New network.

And out of our fingers
Mycelia will grow.
And from our throats
Song-threads will fly
Like airborne seeds
To touch the thoughts
Of faraway ears.
Notes

1 Kimmerer 39.

2 Wohl 1.

3 Cotten 00:00:00-00:00:19.

4 This is the entirety of Oliveros’ “Sonic Meditation V: Native” from Sonic Meditations.

5 Handy 5. Handy’s lyrics, originally published in 1914 in a stereotyped African-American vernacular, are presented here in standard English.

6 Bennett 19.

7 Jonas 56.

8 Zhang 23.

9 Carter Family.
Works Cited


August, Laura. “Dance to that Flood Song / Or, a Series of Unsettlements.” Virginia Commonwealth University Department of Art History, 18 Apr. 2019, Richmond, VA. Guest lecture.


Narins, Peter M., and Sebastiaan W. F. Meenderink. “Climate Change and Frog Calls: Long-
Term Correlations along a Tropical Altitudinal Gradient.” *Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences*, vol. 281, no. 1783, May 2014, pp. 1–6.


Robertson, Gary. “Canal Was Carved with Slave Labor / Waterway’s Construction Was a Demanding Task.” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 26 Sept. 1999,


Further Reading

*Sound Art & Music:*


Art & The Environment:


Walking & Nature:


Richmond/Virginia History:


Appendix
Documentation of MFA Thesis Performance

Video documentation of *The Sound of a Stone* available at:
[vimeo.com/sarabouchard/sound-of-a-stone](vimeo.com/sarabouchard/sound-of-a-stone)

Further documentation available at:
sarabouchard.com

Performed April 8, 2019
By Sara Bouchard
Sonia Vlahcevic Concert Hall
W. E. Singleton Center for the Performing Arts
Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA

Video recording by Brian Charles Patterson
Sound recording by Stephen Vitiello
All music © 2019 Sara Bouchard

Narration text:

*Everything is going to be OK.*
*They promised the weather will cooperate.*
*They stuttered to tell me*
*Out of the earth hellfire would come.*
*But instead it came from the sky.*
*It rained for days,*
*The river rose.*

*The water pounded through the rapids.*
*Trees shivered in its wake.*
*Undulating swells,*
*A deafening noise.*
*The water filled in the shapes between the houses*
And we dragged our asses to the roof.

—Let’s be quiet for a moment and listen to the buildings exhale.—

On the third day, the water was shiny and dead
Like a much-fingered coin.
It crinkled and slurped as we waited.
We held our breath,
We waited.

When the water receded, the buildings were marked
With strata of debris.
The scientists came and took measurements.
The artists came and took photographs.
Without knowing what else to do,
We gathered in a circle to sing hymns.

We stood like standing stones, heavy.
We tried to make sense of the sky.
We wondered what we had done to disturb this place.

We breathed.
We breathed the same breath as each other,
As the trees,
As the cars,
As the river.
We breathed together.