

Sounding grief: The Severn Estuary as an emotional soundscape



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 16 January 2015

Received in revised form

3 June 2016

Accepted 3 June 2016

Available online 21 June 2016

Keywords:

Sound

Emotion

Loss

Grief

Landscape

Louisa Fairclough (artist)

ABSTRACT

This paper explores sound infused creative responses to grief and related emotions of loss and landscape in the context of the tidal Severn Estuary (UK) and its particular sonic qualities. We draw principally on the practice of artist Louisa Fairclough, linking to wider discussions of emotion, sound and the body, in shared autotopographical explorations of self and family in landscape. Like other estuaries, the Severn Estuary is a deeply rich (in socio-ecological terms) landscape which includes the tidal liminalities of the lower reaches of the Severn river, the mid estuary, and the lower areas which merge into open sea. The whole estuary, in geomorphological, ecological, and related social terms, is particularly dynamic as it has the second highest tidal range in the world. This means that vast volumes of brackish water wash up and down the estuary in a series of rhythmic cycles which play across and between day, month and season, mixing physical spaces and processes (e.g. land-sea; salt-fresh water). This ceaseless ebb and flow brings marked spatial, visual and aural richness to the estuary and places along its shores. This includes the Severn bore which, when at maximum height, is a powerful tidal wave washing up the upper estuary and tidal river with a loud sonic richness. Owain Jones (geographer) has previously written on this landscape and its memorial emotional qualities in relation to his family history and challenged geographical self. Louisa Fairclough (artist) has re-turned to it as performative art practice, to sleep by the River Severn, and produces a series of works consisting of field recordings, drawings and a series of installations of expanded films. These use river sounds and vocal recordings to interact with the tidal landscape and its margins in creative expressions of grief. This paper sets out these works, their background, shared responses to the estuary, and explores in particular the sonic registers of the landscape which, for us, listen, and speak to, loss and trauma.

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Often at the time of the full moon, with my young son in tow, I cycle to the Severn to pitch the tent on the riverbank. A tidal river, the Severn is strangely compelling: as we stand at the edge of the river listening to the roar of the oncoming tide rushing in from the sea, I am (in my head) shouting across the river into the night. The tide carrying with it my grief to the river's source before being pulled out to sea. (Louisa; notes from Ground Truth).¹

1. Introduction

This paper offers interacting autotopographical (Heddon, 2008) explorations of landscape, loss and grief by the two authors, Owain

Jones and Louisa Fairclough (Owain and Louisa from here on), with a particular emphasis on the sonic qualities of the tidal Severn Estuary (UK) (Fig. 1) in relation to emotion (grief) and affect. The paper draws principally on artworks (field recordings and expanded films) made by Louisa along the River Severn between 2008 and 2012 and then staged in a series of works and exhibitions.

We first set out the background of the authors' relationships with the estuary, and then explore, through Louisa's work in particular, aspects of the sonic registers of the landscape and its potential to speak to, and of, loss and trauma both have experienced in different ways and, for Louisa, to serve 'as a powerful metaphor for the inconceivability of death itself' (Smyth, 2011; online).

In what follows we introduce the Severn Estuary and its tides, as the nature of this landscape has an agency which folds into the work of Owain, Louisa, and other artists and writers (some of whose work is also briefly refereed to). We then focus on the estuary as a soundscape and offer a brief note on method more generally and in relation to Louisa's practice. Then we discuss in

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¹ From *Ground Truth—Prologue*, by Louisa Fairclough (Danielle Arnaud Contemporary, London 2011).

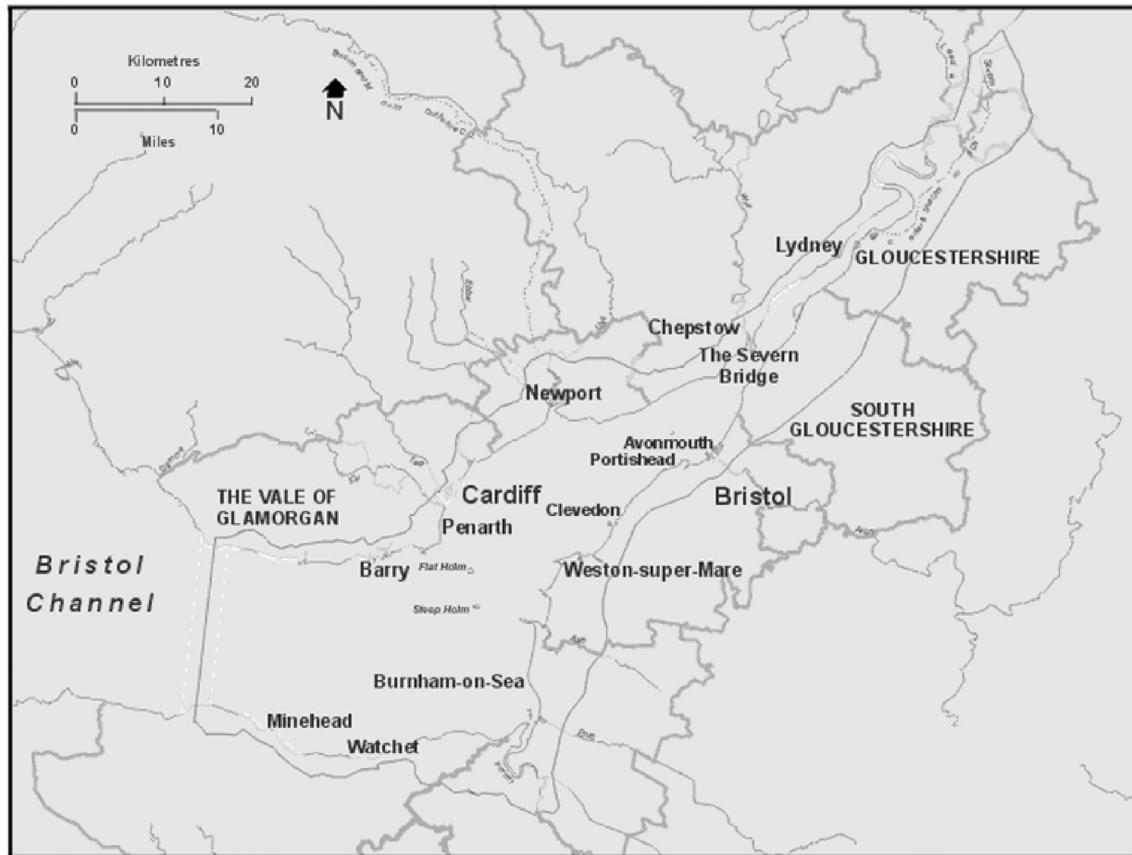


Fig. 1. The Severn Estuary, South West England. (Source Severn Estuary Partnership).

some depth three works by Louisa, *Body of Water*; *Song of Grief*; *Bore Song*, including commentaries on these works by art critics. The accounts of these works are interspersed with reflections on landscape, sound and emotion; and sleeping, breathing and the body. In the last sections more recent sound related work by Louisa is briefly set out, and the subject of her grief given voice. There is a brief set of concluding comments.

A few points of authorial clarification are needed at this point. The voice in this paper switches on occasion from shared voice (we) to individual voice (signalled by “Owain” and “Louisa”) when more individual accounts are in play. This paper has arisen out of a number of conversations and brief collaborations between Owain and Louisa, as their shared interest, and in some ways, emotional inflection of the estuary, became apparent to both. Owain’s direct work on the estuary and tidal landscapes and memory/loss (2015, 2011, 2010, 2005; Palmer and Jones, 2014) is briefly discussed, but the focus here is more on Louisa’s work. Bringing this to light (in academic terms of emotion, grief, sound, landscape) is part of Owain’s ongoing collaborative works on the estuary with a number of artists and academics.² Louisa’s expressions of grief with-in the landscape in response to the suicide of her sister are compelling, and differing in form and scale to that of Owain’s mourning. But both have, on many occasions, sought out the banks of the estuary for solace, and built this into their work.

2. The Severn Estuary and its tides

The Severn Estuary (South West UK) (Fig. 1) is one of the largest estuaries in Europe and forms the mouth of the UK’s longest river – The Severn. Facing west, it opens into the Bristol Channel and Eastern Atlantic and its funnel shape is what creates the extreme tidal range. Viewed from the shore it is a vast and ever-changing space of complex intertidal zones, and ebbing or flooding tidal flow.

It feels a profoundly ‘other’ space to the social (urban and rural) landscapes it interrupts. Around 18% of the estuary’s 557 km² is intertidal (100 km²). These areas vary markedly in type, but many are large expanses of shifting mud and sandbanks, only exposed at low tide, and almost uniquely inaccessible to human visitation. Views of such, and over the estuary, have been recorded by Owain in a series of photographs over many years (Fig. 2), and many other artists have been drawn to depict this flexing spatiality.³

As it has such a high tidal range, with the sea level rising and falling as much as fourteen metres at the perigee spring tides which occur at the equinoxes, the whole estuary, in geomorphological, ecological and cultural terms, is particularly dynamic. Approximately 80% of the estuary’s 370 km shoreline is lined with sea walls (regular, grassed earth banks in rural locations; concrete walls in ports and towns). These stop the very highest tides flooding low lying surrounding land and settlements. These sea walls are, in many places, open access and used for recreational purposes, the route of long range footpaths (The Severn Way), and accessing (here possible) and viewing the intertidal areas more generally.

The dramatic tides, and the intertidal areas they repeatedly

² The Severn Estuary Art Atlas (SEAA) compiled by Owain maps many of these artist responses to the Severn Estuary. <http://severnestuaryartatlas.wordpress.com/2011/03/03/hello-world/>.

³ The Severn Estuary Art Atlas (SEAA).

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