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ARTICLE

Landings: The moor and the ecological therapeutic practice of Richard Skelton

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Abstract

Richard Skelton's 2009 recording, *Landings*, is recognised as being intimately connected with landscape and the experience of place. This paper explores the use of therapeutic practice within the creation of the recording of *Landings*. Building on the work of cultural geographers who have emphasised the cultural and symbolic significance of landscape, as well as incorporating the work of geographers who have studied sound and music, the paper develops a non-representational analysis, emphasising the interplay of human experiences and therapeutic practice. The paper explores how Skelton's music transcends a simple representation of the moorland landscape. It shows how the music, created through Skelton's therapeutic practice, channels the essence of the landscape. Skelton acknowledges the healing nature of this creative process. It offers catharsis and solace while, at the same time, connecting to living systems and exhibiting an ecological principle. By exploring the music created by Skelton's therapeutic practice and its profound alignment with nature, *Landings* offers valuable insights for geographers and beyond.

KEYWORDS
therapeutic practice, landscape, moorland, music, creative practice

In some oblique fashion this music has come to work its way into the moor itself. Played over and over again at various times and places, it mediates my experience of this landscape. Conjures it. Summons it. *Suffuses it.*

Bowed, plucked and chafed steel strings. The sound of stones gently rubbed together. Soft soil sprinkled on resonant wooden bodies. Grasses and leaves intertwined around neck and fretboard. Bone and wood plectra. Sound folded on sound. A collusion of place and instrument

(Skelton, 2009)

1 | INTRODUCTION

Richard Skelton is a musician, artist and poet from the Northwest of England. His composition *Landings* (2009) possesses a profound connection to the moorland landscape. The instrumental nature of Skelton's music is characterised by its minimalism, occasional density and intricate layers. *Landings* is remarkable in that it goes beyond merely evoking and reflecting the West Pennine moorland landscape. Instead, the music strives to become an integral part of the landscape. Through Skelton's compositional practices, there is an engagement with ecological principles, emphasising the interdependence and interconnectedness of living systems.

This paper delves into the work of multifaceted artist Richard Skelton, focusing on the therapeutic and ecological aspect of Skelton's practice. *Landings*, with its profound connection to the moorland landscape, presents a fascinating subject for such an exploration. The aim of the paper is to go beyond the inherent intrigue of Skelton's music and investigate the process of Skelton's compositions. The paper explains how Skelton's music serves as a powerful tool for self-expression, emotional release and healing. Through this study, the paper aims to shed light on the therapeutic potential of music, its possible alignment with ecological principles, and its immersive, meditative qualities, thereby making it a valuable resource for geographers' discussions.

The paper provides an exploration of *where* therapeutic artistic practice take place. The characteristics of the environment deeply influenced both Skelton's mindset and emotional engagement, contributing to the effectiveness of the therapeutic process. The analysis involves a consideration of this interplay between space and therapeutic practice. *Where* the therapeutic artistic practice takes place contributes to both the artistic and therapeutic experience.

It should be acknowledged that Skelton's work will be understood and interpreted in different ways by different audiences. What is offered here is one way of understanding Skelton's work. The multifaceted nature of Skelton's work invites a myriad of auditory interpretations, each uniquely shaped by the individual listener's experiences. Indeed, this is a quality of Skelton's music—a quality that deliberately opens the door to a variety of diverse meanings and insights. Skelton's compositions unfold as a rich, resonant canvas, allowing listeners to embark on a personal journey of interpretation and connection.

2 | LANDSCAPE, MUSIC AND THERAPEUTIC PRACTICE

The exploration of landscapes has evolved beyond mere physical entities, as Cosgrove (1998) underscores, revealing their symbolic and ideological significance. Jackson (1989) extends this perspective of cultural landscapes by considering how people's perceptions and interpretations of space and place are shaped by cultural factors. Following this reshaping of the study of landscape and geography with the emphasis on the complex interplay between culture, power and the construction of place, this paper aims to further demonstrate that there are layers of landscapes, which are not static backdrops but dynamic arenas where human experiences, identities and ideologies are inextricably intertwined.

Smith (1994) argues against the visual-centric ideology that had dominated the concept of landscapes as texts. Smith (1997) maintains that sound is as important as sight in the study of landscape, and that music has as secure a place as the visual arts in the study of social life. Cohen (1995) and Leyshon et al. (1995) expand on this idea, suggesting that the interrelationship between music and place goes beyond a simple auditory experience. Matless (2005) draws on surveys of sound to show how debates about a regional landscape can be enfolded through a sonic geography. Whilst Boland's (2010) study of Liverpudlian identity argues that the identity extends beyond the contemporary political and geographic boundaries of the City of Liverpool with a 'sonoric landscape of spoken Scouse' (Boland, 2010, p. 1).

The intersection of music and geography has continued to evolve. Kirby (2019) and Kirby (2023) considers the geopolitics of instrumental music, emphasising its importance in conveying geopolitical concepts. Marshall (2011) explores the deep connection between British composers and the landscapes they were associated with, emphasising the profound influence of birthplaces or where composers had chosen to live.

Acknowledging the significance of sound in shaping geographical understanding, Arkette (2004, p. 160) adopts a 'phenomenological approach' to interpret the sonic environment. Anderson et al. (2005, p. 639) identify the influence that geography has had on the study of music, arguing that 'the practice of musicology' has gone from a substantially 'empiricist and elitist endeavour' to a study that has broadened out to embrace social and cultural theory, creating a series of vibrant debates in which geographers have played an active part. Wood et al. (2007, p. 867) argue that until recently these geographical 'musical methodologies have remained half formed, fragmentary, hidden, elusive, out of sight, beyond words'. Revill (2016) contributes a theoretical and conceptual framework to help understand the processes and practices

that make sonic spatiality distinctive. While Duffy et al. (2016, p. 50) develop a methodological approach for the analysis of sound, focusing on the 'embodied experience' of sound in specific geographical contexts.

As the literature expanded, geographers increasingly recognised the need for innovative methodologies. Hawkins (2015, p. 248) highlights creative practice, which emphasises 'experimental, artful' research methodologies which address the gap in practical methodologies. Such approaches draw on non-representational theory where instead of studying and representing social relationships, non-representational theory focuses upon practices. Macpherson (2010, p. 10) exemplified this shift by investigating walking as a 'non-representational approach' to understanding 'body-landscape relations'.

In the realm of therapeutic practices, Boyd uses non-representational theories and practice-led research methods to examine the sites and performances of a wide range of therapeutic art practices. These include painting and drawing, dance movement therapy, graffiti practice, and 'poetic permaculture' (Boyd, 2017, p. 49). By employing non-representational theories and practice-led research methods, Boyd redefines the nature of therapeutics as being ecological, spatial and material. However, Rugh (2017) and Pfeifer (2017) explain how environmental expressive creative art therapies represent a variety of practical approaches and tools for therapists to use to achieve multiple treatment goals and promote sustainable lifestyles.

Kopytin (2017) highlights the potential of expressive forms like music improvisation and narrative construction to expand the horizons of expressive and creative arts therapeutic techniques. This paper argues that Skelton has not only embraced these non-representational approaches and practice-led methods, but also takes a departure from conventional arts therapies that have traditionally merged the humanist ideals of personal expression and psychological introspection (as discussed by Ansdell and Stige [2018]). Skelton through his practice ventures into a realm of music and art therapy that addresses broader ecological considerations and marks a shift in the therapeutic approach.

3 | THE WEST PENNINE MOORS AND THE MUSIC OF RICHARD SKELTON

Skelton's approach to creating this music and his immersive experience of the landscape is noteworthy for its distinctive nature in several ways. Rather than treating instruments as separate entities, Skelton seamlessly integrates the instruments into the natural surroundings. Skelton also incorporates elements found within the landscape as musical instruments, blurring the boundaries between nature and art. Additionally, Skelton incorporates field recordings into the composition process, lending an authentic and organic quality to the music. Finally, Skelton's deep connection to the moorland landscape grounds the work allowing it to resonate with a profound sense of place. Skelton ('Richard Skelton Interview', 2009) explains that this deep connection to the moor is based on visits to the moor throughout his childhood.

Landings was the culmination of four years of dedicated work by Skelton. In a way it serves as a comprehensive exploration of the moor, with a particular emphasis on the moorland parish of Anglezarke. The recording serves as both a documentation and a lament for the elements that once existed in the landscape but have now been lost to time. It is also an intimately personal project, akin to a personal historiography, delving into Skelton's own history and relationship with the moors (Clayton, 2010).

Landings itself is a 70-minute album consisting of 12 tracks. Initially self-released by Skelton, the recording gained wider recognition when it was reissued in 2009 by the music label Type. Accompanying the music, Skelton released a book that delves into the themes explored in the album through text. The book serves as a narrative companion, tracing a profound connection with the land itself through its concealed stories of displacement and loss. It intertwines with memoirs of personal grief and the creative process of music-making, finding comfort in the regenerative cycles of nature (Clayton, 2010). Together, the recording and the accompanying book form a multidimensional artistic expression of Skelton's deep bond with the moorland environment, reflecting its influence on his music and his personal journey.

Within the compositions, there is a profound sense of space and expansiveness. The dominance of bowed instruments, playing simple melodies or drones, contributes to this atmospheric quality (Bell, 2011). The music, characterised by multiple layers of improvisation on various string instruments, interwoven with bowed melodies, engenders this vast and open sensation. Simultaneously, the music remains dynamic and ever-changing. Bowed string lines emerge and recede, seamlessly merging with harmonious tones, while a backdrop of tuned and reverberant textures adds depth and movement to the overall composition. Change permeates the music, offering a continuous sense of transformation and progression (Clayton, 2010). A sonic landscape is crafted that resonates with the vastness and mutability of the moorland.

In his book *Landmarks*, Robert Macfarlane observes that the acoustics of *Landings* are shaped by scarcity, emphasising how both the sound and the text within it serve as a form of echo-location, measuring the connections between

distant entities (Macfarlane, 2015). For Macfarlane, *Landings* is a poignant record-keeping, a textual summoning that brings back what has been lost and forgotten. It becomes a collection of litanies spoken against loss, capturing the essence of the moor's history and memory (Macfarlane, 2015). Hudson (2015) also states that *Landings* not only provides a means to narrate the multiple stories of the moor, but also initiates a broader way of contemplating the profound mapping of landforms and their embedded histories. For Hudson, few artistic projects can match the deep immersion in localities and the sustained engagement over time that *Landings* embodies.

The West Pennine Moors, like other moorlands in the North of England, primarily comprise uncultivated hillsides. This land was vastly different during the Mesolithic period when it would have been densely forested. Over time, deforestation has occurred due to a combination of human activity and the influence of climate change. In *The Moor: Lives, Landscape, Literature*, Atkins (2014) explains that the formidable moorland landscapes are not untouched wildernesses, but rather enduring landscapes with a rich history of human habitation. This perspective challenges the notion that these moors exist as pristine and isolated environments, emphasising their longstanding connection with people throughout the ages.

Morris (1996) explains that the moorland landscape in Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* enables an exploration of the inherent healing power found within living entities. It becomes a setting that facilitates the characters' discovery of the transformative abilities of nature. Additionally, Morris argues that the moor and garden spaces provide openings to alternate experiences, offering contemplation, healing, identity reflection, and an exploration of diverse possibilities.

The impact of landscape and place on the creative process has been a recurring theme throughout the history of art, poetry and music. Notably, the natural splendour of the Lake District has been exalted by Wordsworth and other Romantic poets for its profound influence. However the West Pennine Moors, where *Landings* was composed and performed, differ significantly from the picturesque peaks and valleys of the Lake District. These moors, although less striking in their appearance, bear a distinct significance as they are intricately linked to the neighbouring towns and cities. Unlike a remote and untamed wilderness, the West Pennine Moors cannot be classified as such due to their integration into the industrial landscape. This industrial connection adds a unique layer of complexity to their character, highlighting their multifaceted nature beyond the conventional perception of natural beauty.

The moorland and the town exist in a symbiotic relationship, intricately intertwined and mutually reliant. The town and city owe their industrial development to the surrounding moorland, placing them within an industrial landscape. The landscape not only offered crucial resources such as water and fuel but also played a pivotal role in initiating the process of industrialisation. The presence of abundant water sources in the form of streams and rivers facilitated the initial stages of industrialisation. Skelton acknowledges the proximity of the West Pennine Moors to the urban environment, emphasising this connection by highlighting the presence of the M61 nearby ('Richard Skelton Interview', 2014). For Skelton believes the West Pennine Moors are not isolated entities but intricately linked to the urban surroundings. Skelton points out that the sounds of Preston to Manchester commuters can be heard on *Landings*. Additionally, Skelton identifies the construction of vast reservoirs as evidence of this connection, as they were built to cater to the increasing populations of nearby towns like Liverpool and Manchester (Bell, 2011). According to Skelton, *Landings* tells the story of a rural exodus and the depopulation of the landscape, an auditory representation of the diminishing rural communities found amidst the decaying ruins of farmhouses scattered across the moors. These farmhouses serve as both inspiration and source material for Skelton's recordings on *Landings*.

4 | THE ECOLOGICAL THERAPEUTIC MUSIC PRACTICE OF RICHARD SKELTON

While many composers draw inspiration from specific places, Skelton's approach goes beyond mere reflection. His music is not simply a representation of the landscape; it is a creation intertwined with the very essence of the landscape itself, ultimately becoming part of the landscape. The music aims to not only evoke the landscape but to merge with it. The music becomes a space that is shaped by the landscape. It is a 'space made by the thing itself' (Skelton, 2013).

To achieve this profound connection, Skelton physically channels the landscape into the music. Skelton plays instruments in the landscape, forging a bond between the two. Skelton incorporates elements from the landscape, such as stones or bark, as part of the instrument-playing process. Through this exchange, a dialogue unfolds between Skelton and the landscape, allowing the essence of the land to flow through the music. These ecological artistic methods enable Skelton to channel the landscape. Skelton listens attentively to the landscape, recognising the multitude of audible and inaudible voices it holds, and translates this sonic landscape into a resonating string (Skelton, 2013).

Skelton contends that as a culture, we lack the necessary vocabulary, gestures, ideas and emotions to meaningfully explore our relationship with the non-human and the seemingly inanimate. Moving away from a humanistic therapeutic practice identified by Ansdell and Stige (2018), Skelton believes our mindset tends to hinder our ability to engage with these elements (Skeleton in O'Dair, 2015). *Landings* shows though that we can develop such relationships with our surroundings.

Skelton develops an almost ritualistic practice to communication with the landscape. During the creation and recording of *Landings*, Skelton embarked on dawn walks onto the moors, carrying a backpack filled with string instruments and recording equipment, actively seeking out suitable locations on the moor, playing beneath bridges or seeking shelter in ruined farmhouses. These choices enabled Skelton to anchor himself within the landscape, integrating the music with the physical and emotional aspects of the land (Bell, 2011). Skelton's approach thus transcends conventional musical composition. There is a merging of oneself with the landscape and the creation of a reciprocal relationship with the natural environment. Skelton identifies the significance of grounding oneself in the landscape as an integral part of shaping the sonic space. Skelton describes the music as a 'rendering of space, or more accurately, place', representing a distillation or transmutation of the landscape itself (Skelton, 2013).

The instruments are deliberately left in specific locations within the moorland landscape for a brief period, establishing a profound connection between the two. Skelton sought to imbue them with the essence of the surrounding environment. In some instances, Skelton even went as far as burying and subsequently unearthing an instrument, aiming to forge a deep bond between place and object ('Richard Skelton Interview', 2014). Skelton also employed elements found within the landscape as unconventional musical instruments, such as using bark plectrums, placing leaves in the mandolin, and experimenting with bowing barbed wire fences (Pittman, 2011). Skelton also incorporated the very fabric of the landscape into his compositions, employing the natural reverberations of ruined buildings and bridges in the *Landings*.

A portable tape recorder was used to capture audio recordings of the landscape, which were then incorporated into the compositions. The field recordings included sounds of streams and birds that subtly interweaved with the compositions, inviting listeners to immerse themselves once again in the moorland atmosphere (Clayton, 2010). In the song *Scar Tissue*, the distinct cries of curlews, the birds that inhabit the moors during March and April, can be heard. Skelton says they expressed their discontent with his presence, their wailing serving as a background lament, questioning the intrusion upon their space (Pittman, 2011). In *Green Withins Brook*, the recording captures the melodic flow of running water ('Richard Skelton Interview', 2009).

Landings therefore provides both an evocative tribute to and an auditory manifestation of the moorland landscape. Each composition on the album is intricately tied to a specific physical place within the moor, allowing us to embark on a captivating journey through locales such as *Noon Hill Wood*, *Green Withins Brook*, and *Shore*. Through the medium of sound, the listener is transported and intimately connected to these places. The sounds of *Green Withins Brook* on a cold winter morning allows the listener to hear the origin of the River Douglas ('Richard Skelton Interview', 2014). As the listener traverses the moorland, they encounter a dilapidated farmhouse, where the haunting echoes and resonances of the building envelope them can be found in the recording *Voice of The Book* (Clayton, 2010).

Skelton's deep connection to the landscape and associated practice is extended to the packaging of *Landings*. Originally, when *Landings* was released as a limited bespoke CD edition, it featured unique and intricate packaging that incorporated elements such as birch twigs or alder catkins. Skelton meticulously crafted these packaging designs, investing considerable time and effort as a labour of love. His intention was to create meaningful gifts for the recipients of his recordings. Additionally, each CD would include individual dedications and prints, further enhancing the personal and intimate nature of the release.

In subsequent releases, Skelton decided to forgo such artefacts, explaining that this shift was driven by both practical and philosophical considerations. On one hand, as his audience expanded, the labour-intensive and time-consuming process of creating bespoke packaging became unsustainable. On a deeper level, Skelton recognised the contradiction inherent in an artist who draws inspiration from the landscape, only to extract materials from that very landscape to augment his recordings (Skelton in O'Dair, 2015).

5 | CONCLUSION

The remarkable fusion of Richard Skelton's music with the West Pennine Moors reveals a profound connection that transcends mere artistic representation. Skelton's music does not merely provide a reflection of the landscape; it embodies

the essence of the moorland itself. The unique approach lies in the reciprocal relationship, where Skelton's compositions resonate with the landscape, and the landscape, in turn, finds its voice within the music.

It is an immersive experience that reflects Skelton's commitment to forging a therapeutic link between the auditory and the ecological. As explored in this paper, Skelton's creative process exemplifies a distinctive ecological therapeutic practice with the moorland landscape that sets the work apart. There is a profound interplay between music, nature, healing and personal growth. By intertwining the compositions with the moor, Skelton finds a renewed connection and affirmation of life through the music. Through a therapeutic practice, Skelton constructs a sonic place which physically and emotionally reengages with the landscape, fostering a sense of healing, grounding and reconnection to the world. The ritualistic engagement and practice with the moorland is striking. Skelton's dawn walks, the choice of locations, and the deep listening practices underscore a commitment to grounding the work in the physical and emotional aspects of the land. The outcome is not just music; it is a living embodiment of the moorland's rich history, memory and ever-evolving character.

Skelton's work serves as a testament to the power of an ecological music therapy practice. *Landings* not only evokes the moorland but coexists with it, embodying the interdependence and interconnectedness of living systems within the creative process. Skelton's ecological therapeutic music practice enriches our understanding of the work and offers a unique perspective on the enduring relationship between art and the environment, particularly in terms of the healing and grounding qualities it provides. By spotlighting the potential of expressive forms such as music practice, Skelton broadens the horizons of expressive and creative arts therapeutic techniques, thereby departing from conventional practices of just personal expression and psychological introspection, and widening into one with more expansive ecological concerns, heralding a notable shift in therapeutic and geographical approaches.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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