**Acoustigraphy**

**Soundscape as Ethnographic Field**

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For three years I have hidden the soundscape recordings from my fieldwork on a website, which I suspect has been visited only by the odd lost soul who landed there after having been (mis)guided by a second-rate search engine. In an effort to “do” something with the recordings, I posted them on the site, but I had no other plan at the time; the sounds have lingered in this virtual waiting room while I have contemplated their fate. Retrospectively, it has become apparent that I have been hiding these files in the recesses of the Internet so as to avoid the nagging feeling that they were not “meaningful” enough to justify wider distribution or more permanent archiving. I knew that the recordings were important in my production of a sound document of place, but I had not yet sorted out their independent meaning.

Since I began work in this area, a growing number of ethnographic manuscripts and edited volumes have appeared that dwell precisely on matters like soundscapes, the senses, affect, feeling, cultures of listening, smell and beyond (Erlmann, 2004; Bull and Back, 2004; Clough, 2007; Bull, 2006; Sterne, 2006; Stewart, 2007). This developing field of sensory and affective studies has helped me to reimagine the original aims of my recordings and to reinterpret the sounds contained therein with new ears and attuned senses. In what follows I explore this developing subfield, arguing for a praxis of sound recording and representation that considers the ramifications of constructing and conveying knowledge through sound.

**A Brief History of Sound in Anthropology**

The projects of anthropology and ethnomusicology started to merge in the 1950s, when figures like John Blacking and Alan Merriam began to make connections between musical and social structures. Merriam’s 1964 classic *The Anthropology of Music* promoted a disciplinary turn that challenged ethnomusicology to pay more attention to culture, and anthropology to music, through what he called “music as a part of human culture.” Moving the field away from Merriam’s positivism, his student Steven Feld’s additional training in experimental computer music and linguistics equipped him to hear the poetics of the Bosavi rainforest soundscape. Feld and others were partly motivated by two key texts that were published in English the same year (1977): R Murray Schafer’s landmark *The Soundscape* and Jacques Attali’s *Noise*. By introducing a consciousness to the importance of environmental sounds and acoustic fields as objects of study and by contextualizing the soundscape of modernity as one of political economic interest, the two texts figured as central among scholars concerned with sonic epistemologies.

These texts have been highly influential for what would develop to be a widely varied collection of work loosely organized around the anthropology of music, or what Steven Feld has called the anthropology of sound (Feld and Brenneis, 2004). Scholars like Louise Meintjes, Charles Hirschkind, Aaron Fox, Thomas Porcello, Veit Erlman, Bob White, and many others have gone on to push sonic methodologies into new realms. Determining what connects these disparate ethnographic projects is perhaps too difficult and less important than reading this body of work in terms of the various ways the authors use sound as an alternative modality to the visual or purely textual; that is, as a medium better suited to the ethnographic tasks at hand. These works represent cultural fields as lived and experienced sonically, thus pushing us as readers to rethink the ocularcentrism through which anthropology has generally constructed knowledge about culture.

**Aural Positionality**

If we are to imagine that there is something equivalent to visual anthropology in the examples I have collected here—an ethnographic production practice that works through and with the formal capacities of sound so as to make use of the medium’s potential in constructing representations of culture—then we must imagine that there is something equivalent to visibility’s point of view (POV) in sonic anthropology, something I would call “aural positionality.” The notion of POV enables us to understand how the perspective of the camera and filmmaker constructs knowledge about its subjects as “others,” hence constructing the other. For this reason, POV has been of particular concern to scholars of color and feminist theorists who have deconstructed representations that have reductively imagined the bodies of people of color and gender/sexual minorities for the purpose of scholarly or popular consumption. Similarly, aural positionality enables us to deconstruct the means by which the perspective and position of the recordist and recording equipment construct knowledge about sites and subjects.

Taking stock of the various methods and techniques used in recording and production alongside an analysis of how listeners are imagined and reproduced allows us to understand the aural imaginaries of mid-to-late twentieth century anthropology. Problematizing the positionality from which sound recordings are produced, and the aural perspectives that recordings attempt to elicit, enables us to ask: what kind of sonorous body is being materialized through these production techniques and what kind of listener is being produced through these representational practices? Although sonic representation could be said to be less reductive and more ambiguous than visual representation, sonic representations of culture nonetheless include an imposed layer of meaning mediated by the body and ears of the ethnographer, recordist, editor and producer.

**Acoustic Ethnography**

Soundscape are critical to the constitution of spaces and places. For those with the capacity to hear, sound helps to compose localities and imaginaries and contributes to the affective experiences of order and chaos. In my ethnographic fieldwork situated at a world music record company in San Francisco, California from 2002–04, I spent a great deal of time audio-recording different San Francisco soundscapes in order to establish my fieldsite through sound. I called this practice “acoustic ethnography” or “acoustigraphy.” By paying attention to cultural acoustics, acoustigraphy enables us to understand the sonic constitution of various sites as acoustic spaces and acoustic fields: the city of San Francisco, record company offices, clubs and rehearsal studios, and the world music consumer’s ear. I use the term “acoustigraphy” as opposed to other alternative concepts proposed by anthropologists (eg. Steven Feld’s acoustemology) to highlight both “acoustics” and also the etymology of the suffix *graphy*. Acoustigraphy, like ethnography, is a form of writing culture, with an emphasis on sound over other media, or sound alongside other media with a particular sensitivity to sonic culture.

Recognizing the ear as an acoustic space allows me to situate my own aural positionality. The vantage point from which my body and the attached microphone hear the sounds that are recorded and represented in the context of my ethnography impacts what listeners hear when they listen. My hearing in some ways tunes the sounds to my embodied sense of them. This tuning is maintained through the

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that draws in the listener in ways that are quite unlike other sensory media. There is a multi-dimensionality to recorded sound that envelops the listener in the space of the original recording event. As anthropologists and ethnographers move beyond the limitations of the logocentric and ocularcentric domains of writing and imagery, we must continue to be vigilant in our commitment to what Charles Hirschkind, writing in a slightly different context, has referred to as “the ethics of listening” and the ways in which the sounds of others implicate us, especially as we seek to produce knowledge and pleasure from those sounds. Sensitivity to cultural acoustics can enable ethnographers and recordists to not only produce valuable acousticographic work, but also to recognize the acoustic capacities of space and their own aural positionality, as well as the positionality that they construct for the listener.

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