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Field Recording or Field Observation?: Audio Meets Method in Qualitative Research

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Abstract

The field observation, an ethnographic practice of collecting data and information about a given social setting and situation is often used in preliminary research to have an understanding of the community one is researching. However, from an artist/musician's perspective, the field observation has many commonalities with techniques used in audio field recording. How can field recording be used in parallel with field observations to explore and understand a community through art? This essay will begin with a comparison of field observations and field recordings as methods in their own disciplines, and continue with the concept of "attention" in art, music, science and anthropology. It will follow and conclude with a project that looks at combining qualitative research and art to explore a community of gardeners through recorded interviews and sounds. The work of Pauline Oliveros, Walter S. Gershon, Clifford Geertz, Anne McCrary Sullivan, and Steven Feld will be important in making the connections across disciplines.

Keywords

Science Technology Studies, Situated Knowledge, Arts Based Research, Pauline Oliveros, Anthropology of Sound

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Field Recording or Field Observation?: Audio Meets Method in Qualitative Research

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The field observation, an ethnographic practice of collecting data and information about a given social setting and situation is often used in preliminary research to have an understanding of the community one is researching. However, from an artist/musician's perspective, the field observation has many commonalities with techniques used in audio field recording. How can field recording be used in parallel with field observations to explore and understand a community through art? This essay will begin with a comparison of field observations and field recordings as methods in their own disciplines, and continue with the concept of "attention" in art, music, science and anthropology. It will follow and conclude with a project that looks at combining qualitative research and art to explore a community of gardeners through recorded interviews and sounds. The work of Pauline Oliveros, Walter S. Gershon, Clifford Geertz, Anne McCrary Sullivan, and Steven Feld will be important in making the connections across disciplines. Keywords: Science Technology Studies, Situated Knowledge, Arts Based Research, Pauline Oliveros, Anthropology of Sound

Field Observations and Field Recordings

shhhhhh (leaves and wind?)
 mmmmmm (?)
 MMMM (?)
 mmmmmmm(?)
 CAW CAW CAW
 something turns on. hummmmm. (generator for water?)
 ssssss (hose) splatter (water droplets on leaves)
 (bird wings flapping)
 tinny high far off radio music can't hear what it is exactly.
 MMMMM (?)
 sssSHHHHHshhhhh (wind comes and goes)
 MMMMMMM (?????????)

The above sound poem¹ is compiled from field notes written directly after a short audio based field observation in Provincetown, Massachusetts, early June 2014, approximately 5pm. I was preparing to engage in an arts based inquiry and research project at the B Street Gardens, where I had just received a community garden plot. I listened, and hand wrote my notes in my notebook after the exercise. My intention was to create a soundscape that engaged with ethnographic methods in this garden.

As I wrote down the notes, I expressed the sounds phonetically. Next, I qualified what I thought the sounds were. I was not sure how closely my note taking correlated to Clifford

¹ A sound poem is a poem created out of articulated sounds. It does not contain words, but contains enunciations. In Western Art History, this comes from the Futurist tradition.

Geertz's ² "thick description" but I wanted to do my best. The most mysterious sound was the MMMMM. mmmmm. Sometimes it was louder. Sometimes it was quieter. What was that sound? and what did it signify? How might that sound change my conceptions of the community garden in which I was doing my arts based research?

For purposes of this paper, I would like to compare two methods of collecting data that are employed by two different disciplines. One is the field observation, in which the anthropologist writes field notes, often utilizing thick description while working to accurately capture the essence of the environment and people and interactions within it. The other method I am comparing is the idea of the field recording, in which the musician or sound artist puts the ambient sound of the environment on recorded media while in the field. Or in a field as the case might be. Both methods require different modes of attention, and both converge in the field of qualitative research as well as sound studies.

The shared components of field observations and field recordings have parallels. In both cases, the researcher or artist goes to the site, and gathers information about a given site, and then works with that information later, and shapes it to her or his purposes. In both cases, this process could be considered "editing." However, since these two processes are from significantly different disciplines with different histories, it serves my purposes to differentiate them in some small part.

Field Observations originate in the discipline of anthropology. The products of field observations are typically jottings or field notes. According to Emerson, Fretz and Shaw, "Fieldnotes are accounts describing experiences and observations the researcher has made while participating in an intense and involved manner." (1995). With field observations, the data collected are generally focused on human beings and their interactions within a specific socio-cultural context. Initially, field notes often take the form of "jottings" or quick markings and words notated WHILE someone is in the field. The jottings are filled out later with full sentences, and then interpreted.

Ambient audio field recordings typically have a non-focused purpose that is more akin to awareness than attention. I draw here on the work of Pauline Oliveros, a musician, sound artist, and faculty member at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. Oliveros wrote about the difference between human attention and awareness in her book *Software for People: Collected Writings 1963-80*. I use as my point of departure her essay "On Sonic Meditation." This seemed to relate most specifically to the disciplines of music and ethnography. She writes "Attention is narrow, pointed and selective. Awareness is broad, diffuse, and inclusive. Both have a tunable range: Attention can be honed to a finer and finer point. Awareness can be expanded until it seems all-inclusive. "

Listening in the Field

"If you can, take a good long listen around you - for a few days. Whether or not you can listen yourself, consider what others are hearing. How many of the sounds in everyday life existed ten years ago? Twenty? Thirty? Fifty? That's just the sounds - but what of the contexts in which they happen, the ways of hearing or non-hearing attached to them, the practices, people, and institutions associated with them?" Jonathan Sterne

"...Listening is a qualitatively different experience than watching, that often requires a kind of slowness and attention that text and video do not." Walter S. Gershon

² Clifford Geertz was an anthropologist in the 20th century noted for constructing ethnography as interpretive. Thick Description is a strategy, which describes human behavior in context with the surrounding culture and environment.

One of the first works to combine the anthropological approach to sound recording and production was the work of Steven Feld. His study of poetics and song from Pacific Islanders in New Guinea (published in 1982) utilized a structuralist and linguistic approach in describing the people and songs he was observing and recording. The postscript to his research, written in 1989, although it by no means disavows the structuralist approach, describes a return visit in which he worked WITH a particular Kaluli group to make “dialogic”³ sense of his work. Feld begins this chapter by saying “A major topic in the current literature of interpretive ethnography is the need to situate knowledge, power, authority, and representation in terms of the social construction of literary realism.” This is either a nod, or a confluence with Donna Haraway’s conception of “situated knowledges.”⁴ Whether one or the other, the resulting epilogue is filled with some honest observations about the reception (literally) of his book in by elders and members of the Kaluli group with whom he had worked. It includes a very surprised picture of himself opening the package that contains his book, while he is next to Kililye, a non-plussed and apparently unimpressed tribal elder.

This postscript does include some honest appraisal of Feld’s previous work, and an acknowledgement of his positioning as a “yellowskin” (a name given to him and the other anthropologists) in the home of the Kaluli. He also describes the reaction to his musical recordings, which have much more interest to the tribal elders and members than his book. He worked with them to create “Voices in the Forest”,⁵ which was a musical remix (with some tribal members) of his original recording “Music of the Kaluli.”⁶ Here is where his dialogic process seems to work the most. Through mixing and editing “in the field” he involves them directly in making meaning. Perhaps the next step in this remix is to hand “Voices in the Forest” the current generation of Kaluli, who very likely have the means to remix the remix.

To be entirely fair, one can’t leave Feld’s account in 1989. In a 2004 interview/dialogue with Donald Brenneis, Feld holds a rather pessimistic view of the academic world and research. He says “Yet, like film and video, which are still incredibly marginal [to the academy] I think it is going to take considerable time before a more sophisticated use of these sound technologies takes hold in ethnographic practices. Until then, the anthropology of sound will continue to be mostly about words.” As far as academia is concerned, I don’t find his pessimism unfounded, but the next musical generation of the Kaluli is probably already remixing, and so perhaps it is not so important to wait for academia to catch up.

When listening to Feld’s work in context today, his work with soundscapes and subsequent music work seems to have a material connection and benefit to the communities he was studying. As a musician and artist myself, I admire his craftsmanship. Feld described himself as “a musician-composer-engineer, and as an anthropologist,” (Feld & Brenneis, 2004) in which he could “maintain a creative and analytic relationship to both the materiality and sociality of sound.” This materiality is embodied by being in the field, being in context with the sounds, and being in the sonic environment in which his fieldwork was conducted. Perhaps Feld’s work could be situated within the context of Qualitative Arts Based research, where the craft of the artwork and the craft of the academic writing are always under discussion. Arts-Based researcher and practitioner Patricia Leavy claims “While arts-based research texts must be rendered with consideration for the aesthetic qualities, so too must audiences or evaluators be cognizant that these are not *pure* artistic representations but rather *research texts*” (2009).

The work of Walter S. Gershon, an anthropologist of education at Kent State University clearly reflects an understanding of the processes, paradoxes, and struggles in the work of

³ This term was used in the Postscript. Feld describes a live layering of speech and interpretation used by the Kaluli people in conversation and daily life. From this idea he derived the concept “dialogic editing.”

⁴ See also Haraway’s “Situated Knowledge’s or the Science Question and the Privilege of Partial Perspective”

⁵ <http://www.folkways.si.edu/voices-of-the-rainforest/world/music/album/smithsonian>

⁶ <http://www.bosavipeoplesfund.net/rec.html>

Steven Feld. Using the science classroom as both a site of field observation and field recording, Gershon names a process called “Sonic Ethnography”, which he defines as the “sounded representation of ethnographic data” (Gershon, 2013). Gershon worked with students at the Portage Path Elementary School to create music around the science topics they were learning. One of the productions of his work was a four-channel sound/installation at the Akron Art Museum comprised of student compositions. Gershon writes “...this sound/installation was a practical manifestation of the possibilities for sound in qualitative research” (Gershon, 2013).

In addition to the students’ compositions, and Gershon recorded the process of their putting together the composition. He provided it ⁷ on Sound Cloud. The piece is 5 minutes 8 seconds in length. The listener gets a sense of process...a slow gathering of ideas, voices of the classroom, electronic beeps, shouts of “It’s recording.” At the end of the piece, the finished composition is played and the listener can hear all the elements from the previous moments coalesce. I speculate that perhaps Gershon’s musical and work in the field is a response to Feld’s pessimism, and indeed his work very much belongs, amongst other places, situated within the arts based research umbrella.

Attention, Art, and Science

“How did they matter, those lappings and squishings/the bubbling and thousands of clicks/the small collisions/claws and carapaces?” Poet and arts based researcher Anne McCrary Sullivan

Earlier in this essay, I mentioned Olivero’s idea of awareness, and attention. Here, I focus on the idea of attention. To do that, I would like to present the work of Anne McCrary Sullivan who is an arts based educational researcher (ABER). McCrary Sullivan specializes in teaching the arts in qualitative research. She works with educators from around the world and helps them understand and practice the value of the qualitative.

In her “Autobiography of Attention” she presents a series of autobiographical poems, centered on growing up with her mother, who was a marine biologist. McCrary Sullivan writes “My mother, the scientist, taught me to see. She taught me attention to the complexities of surface detail, and also attention to what lies beneath those surfaces. She taught me the rhythms of tide and regeneration, and the syllables of the natural world rubbing against each other. In doing so, she made me a poet” (2000).

This eloquently states McCrary Sullivan’s view of the importance of attention in art and science. Her poetry writing about her experiences in marine biology describes very specific details and observations. In “An Autobiography of Attention” (part 2), she writes in essay format about the meaning of these lived experiences with her mother. She asks, “What are the implications for researchers who are trying to make visible the invisible processes of cognition?” (2000).

McCrary Sullivan’s essay also brings to light a few other ideas: the ability to utilize the processes of observation in an artistic format, and the ability to bring art (in this case) into an often-unwilling academic world. Perhaps the medium of words fit a little more comfortably between the paper pages of academic journals than a field recording or a video. Nonetheless, through her poetry based qualitative research approach she is paving the way for the concept of arts based forms as essential to the construction of method and knowledge in qualitative research. The currency of research today is the written work in digital or paper format. I speculate that some of those paper pages can be crinkled with new media and poetic forms in the future.

⁷ <https://soundcloud.com/vibrational affect>

An Interview with Musician Pauline Oliveros

While McCrary Sullivan asks “What are the implications for researchers who are trying to make visible the invisible processes of cognition?” musician and composer Pauline Oliveros makes those processes “audible.”

In August of 2014, I interviewed Pauline Oliveros, founder of Deep Listening Practice.

This methodology (in qualitative research terms) is now under the umbrella of the Center for Mind and Society. The web site and describes Deep Listening as “...a way of hearing in which we are fully present with what is happening in the moment without trying to control it or judge it. We let go of our inner clamoring and our usual assumptions and listen with respect for precisely what is being said.” Olivero’s work has been a considerable influence on my work both as a recording artist and an ethnographer.

In our interview, she spoke about the ideas of merging attention and awareness into one practice, and described these kinds of attention as “inclusive” and “exclusive.” Because of her work and teaching, I utilized a Deep Listening practice in the garden where I was doing my fieldwork prior to doing my interviews. This added a richness to my fieldwork in ethnography. The following is an excerpt from the conversation in which I talked to her about this experience.

Interview with Pauline Oliveros (excerpt)

sam smiley: I did a Deep Listening practice in the garden before I even started the interviews. I did bring my audio recorder with me that enhanced my practice, but I also ignored my audio recorder after I turned it on. And the thing that was really interesting and I think I did it for about 10 minutes, there weren't mosquitos there at the time, was that I heard a low hum, and when I opened my eyes, I realized it was the grocery store behind it.

Pauline Oliveros: [laughs]

sam smiley: So I heard an incredible amount of birds, I don't know how to identify birds, I heard, I have to rewrite the environment, but..that was the surprising thing. I said, "you know what? until I did this, I didn't realize you could hear the grocery store."

Pauline Oliveros: Really. Really, yeah.

sam smiley: And that informed all of my opinions about [the research]..and I mean the grocery store is fine, this is reclaimed land..but it totally changed what I had..my pure nature conception of this community garden.

Pauline Oliveros: Yep. Wonderful! You know, these are all very very enlightening kinds of experiences to share. Because you know what? you can't argue with experience. Experience is true. This is what happens. This is how I am, what I have felt and done. And this is it, you know, and this is what I offer. And it's not theoretical. So you don't have to criticize it in that way, you can't. [Laughs]. You can't go criticize somebody's experiences, pass judgment on the experience. Because that's where it is. [Car Honk] That's where you can draw so much information FROM that.”

The Qualitative Researcher and the Ethnographer

The overlap between the ethnographic researcher and the sound artist converge in the field. There, sounds and data can be gathered and preserved for interpretation later. A sound artist employs many of the same techniques as an ethnographic researcher might. An analogy that fits both the model of the recording artist and the qualitative researcher is an open ended recording inquiry, in which the soundscape of the location as a whole is recorded, in tune with Oliveros "awareness" model. More often the sound artist uses this model, but it is a useful one for ethnographic fieldwork as well. In ethnographic fieldwork, usually the "attention" model is a visual one that is used to focus on specific events. The field of ethnography could benefit from modes of awareness prior to the attentive process of traditional data gathering.

To describe the ethnographer's and recording artists' toolset, I do need to differentiate the ethnographer and the sound recording artist. Since much audio recording of the ethnographer is primarily oriented around "events" or attention based data gathering, usually the fidelity of the recording or the esthetics are not that relevant. The prime objective of traditional ethnography (in the interview process) is to preserve the data, words, sounds in such a way so that they can be transcribed to the word. In that respect, most recording devices really need to have a clear on/off button, and enough space or bandwidth so that the ethnographer can record as long as he or she likes. Often the recording device utilizes a "compressor limiter" so that the loud sounds and the quiet sounds are narrowed to the same bandwidth. This boosts the quieter words and lowers the louder ones. For example, if there is a lot of human dialogue, that is the pertinent information. Other information is not relevant. In the attention model, there is a signal that is important, and everything else is noise.⁸ The end result is that the ethnographer pays attention to one specific aspect of inquiry.

The sound artist may also have a use for focused attention. The model of focused attention is organized around getting as many sound effects as possible, to either keep for one's own uses, or to upload and share, much as an ethnographer gathers snippets of conversation, and sounds as content or specific events. For example, if there is a train sound, the recording artist is specifically attentive to capturing the essence of that sound and organizes his or her equipment and time accordingly. However, if the recording artist wants to record a "birthday party", this is an open-ended project that requires awareness. Where the sound recorder is placed, what microphone is used, all of these factors are essential to this project. Here the awareness model of the open ended "field observation" and "field recording" converge in the disciplines of sound recording and ethnography.

Audio Toolset for the Qualitative Researcher

In my own experience of doing sound recording, I find that my awareness is heightened to the landscape, as described in the introduction of this paper. In essence, I am one of the instruments of data collection through my mode of attention and awareness. So I would like to posit that any audio recording process is a human machine hybrid in the tradition of Donna Haraway's work via Norbert Wiener. Another theoretical position from the field of Science Technology Studies (SCOT theory) is the idea of the socio and historical construction technological tools and artifacts. Wiebe Bijker's work on the social and historical construction of the bicycle comes to mind. However, in a less theoretical mode, I also would like to talk about the types of tools that can be used by the human ethnographer and human sound artist in the field.

Beyond the recording artist/ethnographer as an instrument, or the instrument as a social construction of human beings, there is the practiced based matter of the technology employed

⁸ Referencing Claude Shannon/Warren Weaver's "A Mathematical Theory of Communication."
<https://archive.org/details/AMathematicalTheoryOfCommunication>

to gather the sound. The instrument through which the sound is filtered is the microphone. The esthetic of the field recording is determined by the type of microphone that is employed in the gathering of recordings. Below is a table that describes microphone pickup-patterns in relation to the types of data that can be gathered for both a recording artist and an ethnographer. Note the omni directional microphone will pick up the best ambient or environmental sound, whereas the cardioid microphone is more commonly used for vocals. The shotgun pickup pattern is very directional and can be used for discrete sounds.

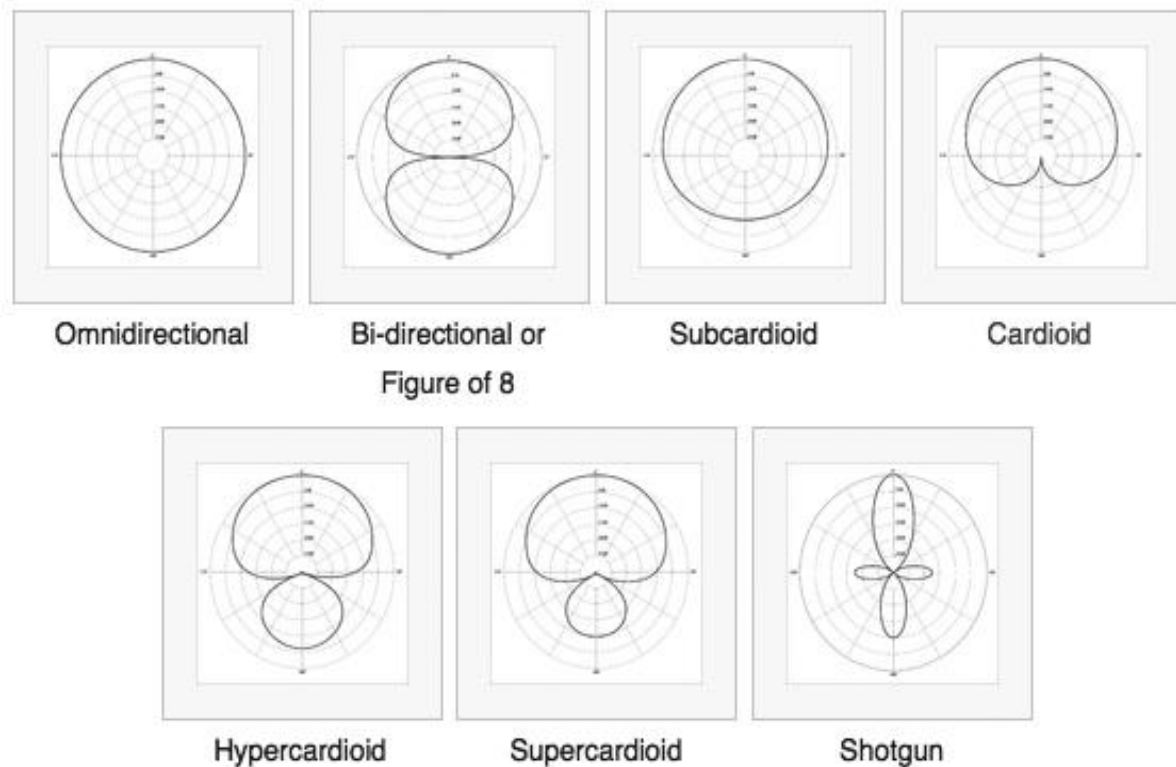


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<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/User:Galak76~commonswiki>

If a microphone is omni-directional, or stereo, or even mono, each model creates a different reproduction of the environment. Insofar as the instrument can accomplish this, a large amount of diffuse information is collected over a period of time. Rarely do recording artists use cardioid microphones in their field recordings, more often these microphones are used for field interviews. A shotgun microphone can be used and in using this instrument would allow the information collected to be localized.

Other socio-technological issues to take into consideration are the recording devices used to store the sounds for further retrieval. Here the socio-technological path of the ethnographer and the recording sound artist diverge. The ethnographic purpose of a recording device is typically to gather interviews that are later needed to transcribe. Therefore, the actual quality of the sound collected does not necessarily have to be that high. The words have to be discernable, but typically the “context” or background sound is not a part of the information. This determines the technology needed. The Zoom H5 Handy Recorder can serve the purposes of both the ethnographer and the recording sound artist, and Zoom, Tascam and Roland companies are reputable for recorders in the \$100.00-250.00 (USD) range. The Nagra and

Roland company more for the professional media artist and technician in the \$300.00 (USD) and above price point.

I present all of this with the caveat that technology changes quite a bit, especially with items that are under \$100.00 USD. In general, the concerns of the ethnographer should be how easy is it to use (for example, a big red record button) how well the device captures dialogue so that it is transcribable, as well as considerations for how the data or files are taken off the device. If any of those are in doubt, the product is not worth the use. Some people have used their iPhones or equivalent devices. However, the challenges there are that the device might summon the interviewer with a ringtone, or text message, or that the person who has the iPhone may not have cleared enough recording space for the interview.

If an ethnographer or a recording artist decides to use their iPhone or other equivalent devices, the challenges are as follows.

- Not enough space on the device
- No clear way to take sounds off the device
- Unclear how to have some control over the fidelity of the sound vis a vis the apps
- Substandard microphone on the device

However, if the above factors are taken into account, an iPhone or equivalent device can be very useful. The main reason is because most people have their device with them at any given time in this technological time period of 2015 in the United States.

Usually in gathering sounds in the field for future use, the recording sound artist can catch a very wide mode of “awareness” with an omni-directional microphone so that it catches a surrounding ambience (such as an outdoor market with all of its various permutations). Alternatively the “attention” of a directional microphone such as a shotgun microphone can be used, for example to get the sound of a bell that is attached to a cart. In my research in the Brown Street Community garden described at the beginning of this essay, I began by collecting the overall ambient sounds of the garden, as opposed to one specific bird song or conversation. That awareness mode allowed me to hear the grocery store in the background, and shifted my epistemological stance and inquiry of the research.

Listening, Hearing, and Observing in a Field of Weeds

As I mentioned at the beginning of this article, my current arts based research is at the Brown Street Community Gardens in Provincetown, Massachusetts. I am drawing from the fields of qualitative arts based research, but the end result is a sound sculpture, and a video. My sound art has been informed by ethnographic methods as I employ data collection to describe what I am doing. For my data collection, I have done interviews with gardeners where I interview them on my topic, weeds and invasive species.

I told a colleague that I have had many interruptions in the garden as I do my interviewing, and she said “Why don’t you do it in a quiet room?” I thought about this, and upon doing some reading, realized that interviews about gardening are more effective in the garden itself. (Flachs, 2013). What may appear to be interruptions are new sources of information, that can upend the interview in a productive way. New conversations get opened up by rabbits jumping into gardens, cats on leashes, blue herons flying overhead, and the smell of someone’s cigarette.

INTERRUPTION: I walk to the garden in late August of 2015. I arrive at 6am in the morning with my dog Frida. My awareness is scrambled because of the earliness of the hour. I have very little attention except to my warm coffee cup handle in my right hand, the movement

of my feet on the ground and the gentle pull of the leash. I walk to the driveway that opens up to the B-Street garden. My sleepy eyes notice a large dog looking at me, lying on the ground, effectively blocking my passage. The dog is grey and white and does not have a collar. She makes no sound, but observes me. Frida's awareness has been much sharper than mine. She is hiding behind me. As I begin to notice the morning birds, I realize I am not looking at a dog but a coyote. The coyote gets up and takes two steps closer to Frida and me. I lower myself reflexively and growl. She sits on her haunches. I return upright to my human self, and make tracks with my little dog away from the garden, both my attention and awareness greatly heightened.

As I return to the garden later that week, I notice there are no rabbits in the garden this year. Gardeners (including myself) have seen the coyote early in the morning and at sundown. Conversations revolve around the coyote and who might be feeding her. The coyote interrupts the investigation. I question my own modes of attention and awareness. I wonder who or what is the social scientist in this scenario

In using multiple modes of awareness and attention to investigate a space prior and during data collection it changes the nature of the knowledge generated.

Conclusion

My work in a weedy garden affirms that artwork and music using ethnographic practices is a rich way to collect data and publish to multiple audiences. The work of Feld, and Gershon show that Olivero's concepts of *attention and awareness* can well be applied in field observations and field recording alike. Further, Gershon's and Feld's theoretical work to bridge sound studies and anthropology is supported by the materiality of their sound and music practice. My art and research work is influenced by the fields of anthropology and sound studies. With respect to the academic world, I think it is important that qualitative researchers work and publish in multiple media. Robin Patric Clair, states "Postcolonial ethnographers must grapple with the idea that novel forms of expression may be required to portray the past, the present, and the future of culture. From James Joyce to George Lamme, the artists' voice may be the most freeing from the academically based paradoxes." (Clair, 2003). However, I maintain that qualitative research itself should reflect the articles, public arts pieces, Freesound samples, and Soundcloud compositions to make field recording and field observation mutually intertwined disciplines and in order to reach a wider audience beyond the academe.

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Author Note

sam smiley's intersectional identities include media artist and educator, forager, and gardener. She holds an M.F.A. (terminal degree in the arts) in Electronic Arts from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and is an adjunct instructor at Lesley University. She is doing her doctoral studies at Leiden University through the Taos Institute. Her dissertation work explores invasive species, weeds and plant subjectivity. She is using STS (science, technology and society), cultural studies, history of science and arts based research to do a historiography of the development of Japanese Knotweed (*Fallopia Japonica*) as an "invasive species". She lives in Somerville and Provincetown, Massachusetts and is growing basil, tomatoes, peas, collards, and purslane in a garden plot at B-Street Community Gardens in Provincetown. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: sam smiley at, rocketscience@astrodime.org.

This piece below is an example of the work that can be done with ethnographic texts in sound. It was created as a result of interviews with the Weed Science Society of America, at their annual conference in Portland, Oregon in 2011. Sound was collected by Lena Munday and transcribed and edited by sam smiley. The work appeared in an outdoor audio installation called "Folius Electronicus" at AMP Art Market in Provincetown during the summer of 2015.

<https://soundcloud.com/astrodime/newnewweeds-mixdown>

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