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## **Thoughts In The Field: 'Self-reflexive narrative' in field recording**

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### **0. ABSTRACT**

This article considers the presence of 'self-reflexive narrative' in field recording. The authors interrogate a common presumption within sonic arts practice and sound studies discourse that field recordings represent authentic, impartial and neutral documents. Historically, field recording practice has not clearly represented narratives of how, when, why and by whom a field recording is made. In contrast, the social sciences have already experienced a narrative 'turn' since the 1970's, which highlighted the importance of recognising the presence and role of the researcher in the field, and also in representations of fieldwork. This provides an alternative framework for understanding field recording, in considering the importance of the recordist and their relationship with their recordings. Many sonic arts practitioners have already acknowledged that the subjective, personal qualities of field recording

should be embraced, highlighted and even orated in their work. The authors' own collaborative project *Thoughts In The Field* further explores these ideas, by vocalising 'self-reflexive narratives' in real time, within field recordings. The authors' collaborative composition, *Getting Lost* (2015), demonstrates the compositional potentials this approach offers.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Field recordings have traditionally been perceived as authentic, impartial and neutral documents of both humanly populated and non-humanly populated soundscapes. The humans involved in these recordings, and their relationships to these recordings, have generally been silent and un-voiced. This article interrogates the presumptions that have led to this approach, arguing that a narrative between recordist and recording is present in all field recording, and to identify such a presence is both unavoidable and beneficial. This article will discuss how many sonic arts practitioners have already employed a more self-reflexive approach to field recording within their work. However, this story of field recording is still poorly told in sound studies discourses. This, the authors argue, follows a historical pattern of favouring scientific knowledge over other creative, narrative forms of understanding. Furthermore, the continued and widespread negating of the personal narrative inherent within field recording becomes, in the authors' opinion, a failure to acknowledge a fundamental

and useful part of the practice itself.

Sonic arts practices and sound studies discourses have long embraced narrative as an underpinning structural element. This is present, for example, in composed acousmatic and soundscape works that convey narrative ideas or themes through abstracted sound.<sup>1</sup> This notion has recently become theorised in James Andean's discussion of narratology in acousmatic music (Andean 2014). Even so, within sonic arts practice, field recording has predominantly remained a process of sound collection for compositional departure points, rather than heard as a material that contains narrative content and overt human presence.

The approach outlined in this paper is distinct from the above, and instead draws from the 'narrative turn' in the social sciences, which emerged during the late twentieth century and introduced a 'self-reflexive', narrative approach to fieldwork (Czarniawska, 2004). Within disciplines such as anthropology and human geography, this 'turn' has been applied to field notes and field recording, to become an integral element of their research and practice (Barz, 2008). In comparison, sound studies discourse has historically overlooked the complex narrative between recordist, recording and environment in field recordings. The authors therefore argue that the insights gained through the narrative turn in the social sciences can be of great

benefit to sonic arts practice and sound studies research.

Field recordings can be subjective, expressive, meaningful and personal to the recordist, rather than purely objective documents of sound environments. The decisions a recordist makes, such as choice of location, position of microphone, duration of recording and equipment used, all have a story behind them. The meaning of the sounds within these recordings may have a personal significance to their recordist, which may bring greater meaning to the overall soundscape for the listener, if divulged. These narrative details should certainly not automatically be silenced, repressed, or redacted, which are common conventions within the practice. Instead, these insights can become some of the most interesting and creative elements of field recordings, both strengthening the field recording artist's understanding of their practice and providing greater potential engagement for listeners.

In this article, the authors term this proposed method of field recording as a 'self-reflexive narrative' approach, arguing that field recordings of this kind are 'autotopographic' (Heddon 2007) in nature: narrating both self through site and site through self, within the medium of sound. For Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capps, narrative and self are inextricably linked; they state that 'narrative is simultaneously born out

of experience and gives shape to experience' (Ochs & Capps 1996: 19). While the notion of self may be a complex issue, and one constantly in flux, Ochs and Capps define 'self' as a reflexive understanding of one's existence in the world. Self is always in relation to others, as the presence or knowledge of others defines the separation between the two. This understanding of the difference between the self and others is defined through narrative, where '[w]e come to know ourselves as we use narrative to apprehend experiences and navigate relationships with others' (Ochs & Capps 1996: 21). The act of narrating the self can illuminate how thought, association and meaning affect individuals, society, culture and discourse.

The authors discuss the development of a 'self-reflexive narrative' style of field recording, from Luc Ferrari in the 1970s through to present day examples, such as Justin Bennett. Finally, the authors discuss their own project *Thoughts In The Field*<sup>2</sup>, which further expands the 'self-reflexive narrative' approach to field recording by including in-the-moment orated thoughts and associations while recording in the field.

## **2. NARRATIVE**

### **2.1 Narrative vs. Science**

Roland Barthes writes that 'narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society [...] it is simply there, like life itself' (Barthes 1977: 76). Narrative is an integral

part of our everyday lives. Narratives underline our interactions with one another, our understanding of space and place, and our individual sense of identity. Additionally, narratives are crucial within our understanding of wider society. For example, criminal law depends on narratives to understand the ramifications of impermissible conduct (Toolan 1988: ix). Molly Andrews argues that narratives are inextricably linked to imagination, and that these are combined, 'not only in our most elevated thoughts about the world as it might be, but also the minutiae of our daily lives' (Andrews 2014: 1). Indeed, the imagination – imperative to scientific, philosophical or artistic discovery – is fundamentally reliant on narrative for relevance and implementation.

Yet within many discourses - scientific, philosophical and artistic -, narrative has been at best overlooked, and at worst, actively denied. Instead, the qualities of accuracy, validity and objectivity have, in many circumstances, historically been favoured over expression, interpretation and subjectivity. In other words, scientific knowledge has been favoured over narrative, for scientific knowledge is seen as holding within it an unshakable truth. Barbara Czarniawska discusses this in *Narratives in Social Science Research*, stating:



[W]hile science requires narrative for its own litigation (there has to be a story to tell why science knowledge is important at all), it repays the favour in poor coin. Not only does it refuse to perform the same service and to legitimize narrative knowledge [...] but also it fiercely denies narrative its legitimacy as a form of knowledge and, above all, demands that the question of knowledge status and legitimation remains taken for granted, unexamined. (Czarniawska 2004: 7)

That science is superior to other forms of knowledge is itself a narrative. Through narrative, science has gained its preferential position in society. Michael Toolan's *Narrative: A Critical Linguistic Introduction* (Toolan 1988) argues that this perception of science 'turns out to be mistaken in both theory and in practice'. In theoretic discourse, it is now commonly accepted that 'scientific enquiry [is] an ongoing revisable narrative', and in more practical terms, even the way we teach science in schools reveals the 'centrality of narrative to understanding' (Toolan 1988: ix). Czarniawska adds that '[p]aradoxically, however, as the grand narratives of legitimation lost their privileged status, narrative and science both came back into

the light of scrutiny' (Czarniawska 2004: 7). For the social sciences, this was to become a reflexive scrutiny of the self.

## **2.2 The 'Narrative Turn' - Narrative as Knowledge**

During the late twentieth century, within the social sciences, narrative emerged as an alternative understanding from that of the more logio-scientific method discussed above. For example, in Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, the author states that '[n]arration is the quintessential form of customary knowledge, in more ways than one' (Lyotard 1979/1984: 19). Lyotard argues that narrative knowledge deals with the complex intertwining of time, space, communication and language, and therefore is a vital part of understanding the world and society. From the 1970s onwards, this view has been echoed in many different disciplines and areas of life, and within the social sciences became known as the 'narrative turn' (Czarniawska 2004).

Lyotard highlights the rise of the 'little narrative' from the postmodern thinking outlined above. This was an alternative form of knowledge that moved away from achieving 'an explanation' for an event through the 'instance of a general law', and instead related events to 'a human project' (Czarniawska 2004: 8). In postmodernism, meta-narratives of truth, certainty and general law were treated with suspicion,

whereas the 'little narrative' became a vital form of 'imaginative invention, most particularly in science' (Lyotard 1979/1984: 60).

For disciplines that rely on fieldwork for their research, such as oral history, cultural anthropology and human geography, 'the narrative turn was only a novelty in so far as it applied to their own writing' (Czarniawska 2004: 33). Prior to the turn, researchers were already engaged with narrative through fieldwork, in which individual autobiographical narratives were recognised as echoing wider societal narratives. The emergence of the 'narrative turn' simply highlighted the narratives within the fieldworker's own authorship, through writing. As stated above, it is the authors' belief here that, until recently, field recording had not undergone a similar 'turn', neither for practitioners nor within sound studies discourse, both often lacking clear acknowledgement of the recordist as author, and recording as narrative. What, then, is the common story told of field recording, thus far?

Prior to the 'turn' in social sciences, any emergent narrative from fieldwork was one that was *observed* by the researcher as an external manifestation, rather than understood as an internal process and dialogue over which the researcher had contribution and control. Meanwhile, fFor disciplines that rely on fieldwork for their research, such as oral history, cultural anthropology and human geography, 'the narrative turn was only a novelty in so far as it applied to their own writing'

(Czarniawska 2004: 33). The audio recordings collected for use as qualitative data in these disciplines continue to revolve around stories that are autobiographical in nature, but also touch on larger societal narratives.

### **3. FIELD RECORDING**

While the outcomes from audio recordings made during fieldwork may differ greatly between the social sciences and sonic arts. From ornithology, to anthropology, to art, the uses of field recording vary in background, discipline, form and intended use. Although their origins are perhaps not so dissimilar, the application and understanding of field recording varies considerably between different disciplines.

From the invention of the gramophone in 1888, the potentials of recording technology have been utilised beyond the recording studio. In 'Nostophonics: approaches to grasping everyday sounds from a UK perspective', John Levack Drever (2007) summarises the history of field recording within sonic arts practice. Drever considers field recording as originating not only from the work of pioneers of the 1960's (R. Murray Schafer and the World Soundscape Project, Luc Ferrari, Wendy Carlos and Bernie Krause) but from much earlier precedents. Phonographers and sound archivists such as Ludwig Koch, Humphrey Jennings and The GPO Film Unit, Drever argues, are examples of practitioners using field recording from as early as

the 1930's (Drever 2007: 3-6).

Disciplines such as anthropology and human geography have used field recording to document their reflexive experiences in the field for decades (Shelemay 1991). For example, the ethnomusicologist and folklorist John Lomax made field recordings across America in order to preserve American folk songs in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. During the 1930's, Lomax installed a 143 kg phonograph uncoated aluminum disk recorder in the back of his Ford Sedan, enabling him to travel to record people, many of whom were black prisoners, singing folk songs, which Lomax felt compelled to preserve (Porterfield 1996).

On a fundamental level, what one defines as the 'field' is complex and plural, meaning different things to the many different disciplines that explore it. Angus Carlyle and Cathy Lane outline this point throughout *In The Field* (2013), which surveys the opinions of various field recordists. The editors summarise that:

There are many fields, from the relatively stable notion of a field announced by, for example, the ornithologist's field guide; through to the more porous and ambiguous field accounted for in anthropology's

idea of fieldwork; and then to the idea of a field nourished by artists who have learned an appreciation of place, locality and their representation from the legacy of land art and the site-specific. (Lane and Carlyle 2013:

9)

The relationship between the recordist and the recording differs considerably between the social sciences and sonic arts. As outlined above, the former has embraced what has been described as a 'narrative turn'; however, sound studies discourse has, until recently, repeatedly overlooked this facet of field recording. We will now discuss the effect of the 'narrative turn' on three disciplines within the social sciences: human geography, critical cartography and anthropology. In doing so, we may better understand the insights they have to offer field recording practice within the sonic arts.

## **4. THE NARRATIVE TURN IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES**

### **4.1 Human Geography**

The emergence of human geography could be said to mark the narrative turn in the broader discipline of Geography. Emerging during the 1970's, human geography emphasised ideas of 'place' and its connection with self. This differed from the over-

arching meta-narrative of traditional Western geography as being simply concerned with space rather than place. One of the first human geographers to define and highlight place was Yi Fu Tuan (Tuan 1974; 1977). Later, in the 1990's, in his article *Language and the Making of Place: A Narrative-Descriptive Approach*, Tuan argued that the invisible processes of speech and dialogue shape place as much as physical transformations in the landscape:

It is simply not possible to understand or explain the physical motions that produce place without overhearing, as it were, the speech-exchange of words that lie behind them. (Tuan 1991: 684–5)

These speech exchanges construct narratives about, and in, specific locations, which in turn influence how we physically and psychologically inhabit them. Places are built, regenerated, and abandoned in part because of the narratives we ascribe to them with language. With regard to sound studies, this concept of speech and dialogue as reflecting and manifesting change in our surrounding environments is equally true of listening. It is not only sound that informs and shapes our listening, but also the language and narratives surrounding sound. Some of the most significant and intriguing sounds we ever hear are the ones recounted to us by

another. Likewise, the language, and narratives, that surround field recordings affect how we interpret them, and subsequently interact with them.

## **4.2 Geography as Speech Act**

If we understand a map as embodying a web of narratives and conversations, Tuan's theory of language and place-making can also be applied to cartography. Rob Sullivan's *Geography Speaks* (Sullivan 2011) argues that the speech that ignites and surrounds maps and the forming of place is a performative act. Sullivan argues that it 'is not to say that they [maps] cannot be used to navigate from Place A to Place B, but is simply to point out that they are neither Place A nor Place B' (Sullivan 2011: 1). Even though speech is not a material map, it similarly navigates – and, therefore, performs – place. With regard to field recording, even though speech is not a soundscape, it can navigate our imagining and re-tracing of, and relationship to, sound; speech can perform sound – an approach which finds resonance with *Thoughts in the Field*, discussed later.

## **4.3 Narrative and Critical Cartography**

The story traditionally told of Western cartography is much like Czarniawska's argument (above) regarding science: that cartography is devised comprised of logio-



scientific fact and accuracy, rather than narrative. Artist and critical cartographer Denis Wood argues that this divide has been enforced for centuries as a method of power and control, motivated by a creator's author's the vested interests of the given cartographer or author in question (Wood 2010). In the last few decades however, critical cartographers such as Wood and Sébastien Caquard have criticised the separation of narrative from cartography, arguing that narrative and artistic interpretation should instead be embraced within the medium.

In his article *Cartography I: Mapping Narrative Cartography*, Caquard argues that 'mapping both vernacular knowledge and fiction is central [to] understanding places in depth' (Caquard 2013: 135). Caquard further argues that the exchange of benefits between maps and narratives is beneficial not only to cartography, but that 'painters, writers, and filmmakers have used maps extensively [...] in order to locate narratives [and] ground them in tangible and credible places' (Caquard 2013: 136). This also offers profound potential for field recording. If field recordings were perceived to be narratives themselves (as Wood and Caquard argue of maps), we will argue that they then become as much documents of their makers (the recordist) as of their associated location's environmental sound.

#### **4.4 Anthropology and Ethnography: Narrating the Field, Narrating the Self**

The 'narrative turn' in the social sciences meant that some anthropologists and ethnographers took a similar approach to fieldwork as Wood and Caquard argue is necessary of cartography above. In their chapter 'Autoethnography, personal narrative, reflexivity: Researcher as Subject', Carolyn Ellis and Arthur P. Bochner reflect on the emergence of autoethnography, in which the researcher observes themselves as much as external people and events, in order to understand a particular research question. Where before, researchers were seen as objective, passive observers, in autoethnography they become one of the primary focuses of their own research. This is due to a perceived value in approaching autobiographical narratives in a self-reflexive manner (Ellis & Bochner 2000). In their chapter, Bochner asks Ellis why traditionally, autobiographical narratives have been met with disparaging criticism within academic discourse:

Why should we take it for granted that an author's personal feelings and thoughts be omitted in a handbook chapter? After all, who is the person collecting the evidence, drawing the inferences, and reaching the conclusions? By not insisting on some sort of personal accountability, our academic publications reinforce the third-person, passive voice as the standard, which gives more weight to abstract and categorical knowledge

than to the direct testimony of personal narrative and the third person voice. It doesn't even occur to them that writing in the first person is an option. They've been shaped by the prevailing norms of scholarly discourse within which they operate. Once the anonymous essay became the norm, then the personal, autobiographical story became a delinquent form of expression. (Ellis and Bochner 2000: 734)

The same could be said of field recording. Against the backdrop of recordings that have been painstakingly captured to omit any presence of the recordist (in order to privilege its status as an objective document), recordings that carry subjective autobiographical narratives may at best be perceived as 'delinquent forms of expression', and at worst as simple mistakes. Autoethnography, however, embraces the idea that knowledge can be gained through self-narration and what the authors term as a 'self-reflexive narrative' approach to research.

## **5. AUTOTOPOGRAPHY**

While it may be difficult to find examples in sound studies where autobiographical narratives are explored and interrogated, performance studies offers insights into the

application of 'self-reflexive narratives' within the creative arts. Of particular relevance to this discussion of field recording is Dee Heddon's *Autobiography and Performance* (Heddon 2008), which examines performance work that incorporates site, self, geography, body, and identity. Heddon considers these works to be 'autobiography as cartography of the self' (Heddon 2008: 88), arguing, like Wood and Sullivan above, that cartography is performative and personal. Heddon terms these works as 'autotopographic':

In thinking about performances that fold or unfold autobiography and place, particularly outside places, I have conceptualised them as being *autotopographic*, a neologism used for more than its fleeting illusion to autobiographic [...] *Autotopography* [...] intends to foreground the subjectivity involved in plotting place; *autotopography* is writing place through self (and simultaneously writing self through place). *Autotopography*, like autobiography, is a creative act of seeing, interpretation and invention, all of which depend on where you are standing, when and for what purpose. (Heddon 2008: 90–1)

Much like Heddon's description of performance as place-based and autobiographical, field recording is a site-specific art form, and potentially, 'autotopographic'. Field recordings might narrate the connection between site and self and between recordist and the recorded. As in Heddon's description of 'autotopographic' performance above, field recordings vary depending on where the recordist is 'standing, when and for what purpose' (p. 91). Therefore, they are inherently 'autotopographic'. If sound studies and the sonic arts were to embrace this characteristic of field recordings, then a useful 'self-reflexive narrative' approach would emerge within the discipline. We will now discuss how this is already taking place, including within the work of current sonic arts practitioners, after first discussing ethnographic and radiophonic approaches to 'self-reflexive narrative' in sound..

## **6. SELF-REFLEXIVITY IN SOUND**

### **6.1 Ethnography in Field Recording**

Ethnography in sound is an experimental and, subjective and improvised undertaking that has much in common with the artistic practice of field recording. Field recording shares many aspects in common with traditional ethnographic fieldwork, in particular its tendency for long-form contemplation, the slow unfolding

of events and inclination towards a position of passive observer. One of the pioneers of anthropology as through sound and ethnographic study through listening and sound recording is Steven Feld, whose term 'acoustemology' (Feld 1996) was coined to describe a sonic way of knowing and being in the world. Meanwhile, in John Levack Drever's article 'Soundscape Composition: The Convergence of Ethnography and Acousmatic Music' (Drever 2002), Drever highlights the commonality between ethnography and soundscape composition, arguing that 'both are interdisciplinary contextual enquiries' and that both stem from 'fieldwork primarily through sensuous experience' (2002: 24).

While approaches to ethnography and field recording may share many similarities, studies within anthropology typically have distinct disciplinary objectives, ethical codes and ways of representing outcomes compared to the sonic arts. Anthropological work has often been bound by the notion of the written text as the dominant form of presenting findings. In 'Rethinking Ethnography: Towards a Critical Cultural Politics', Dwight Conquergood (1991) notes the trepidation most anthropologists feel when straying from the written word:

What are the rhetorical problematics of performance as a complementary or alternative form of 'publishing' research? It is one thing to talk about

performance as a model for cultural process, as a heuristic for understanding social life, as long as that performance-sensitive talk eventually gets 'written-up'. (Conquergood 1991: 190)

This view, seen from the perspective of a practice-based researcher in the sonic arts, begins to highlight both the limitations of text and the benefits of creative sound practices as a primary medium of communication and dissemination.

Schneider and Wright have written extensively on the conceptual boundaries, overlaps and 'border zones' between art and anthropology, focusing on how supposed divisions between the two practices actually mask much common ground. They argue for greater acceptance within anthropology of more artistic, non-textual and experimental fieldwork, stating that the 'tension between maintaining the standards of the discipline and developing new forms of anthropological knowledge has for too long been overly weighted in favour of the former' (Schneider and Wright 2010: 3). Feld also recognises these blurred border zones between art and anthropology, noting that field recording might act as a crucial bridge:

[F]or me art-making is something that could be central to anthropological thinking. But it has never happened. Field recording could be an important piece of making the connection. (Feld in Lane and Carlyle 2013: 211)

## **6.2 Radiophonic 'Self-Reflexive Narratives'**

Some radiophonic approaches, such as oral history radio documentaries, live running commentaries, and journalism 'in the field', do bridge the gap Feld describes above, using 'self-reflexive narrative' techniques. For example, in *Between the Ears: White Rabbits in Sussex* (2014),<sup>3</sup> a radio documentary for BBC Radio 3, David Bramwell interviews Isobel Anderson about her sound piece *Going Under* (2014). The piece was recorded in, and written about, the River Ouse in East Sussex, and the interview therefore takes place while Bramwell and Anderson walk along the Ouse's riverbank. Throughout, Bramwell makes in-the-moment observations about the surrounding environment, including its soundscape. Bramwell also asks Anderson what the sounds of the riverside and riverbed mean to her, how they were recorded, and what her process of composing with them was. This conversation takes place simultaneously with the natural soundscape of the Ouse, both captured together on the same recording.



This is an example of a radiophonic work that uses a 'self-reflexive' approach to location recording. From the perspective of this radio programme, the soundscape of the Ouse is firmly present within the interview between Bramwell and Anderson. From the perspective of a field recordist, however, both Bramwell and Anderson are firmly present within the soundscape. Either way this recording might be interpreted, the soundscape is narrated through a 'self-reflexive' conversation.

Perhaps one of the defining distinctions between radio and the sonic arts is radio's strong association with human-centered narrative. This may have led sonic arts practice and sound studies discourse to underplay their own exploration of narrative as an artistic device. Nevertheless, there are sonic arts practitioners who have employed 'self-reflexive narratives' within their work. We will now discuss a range of works that allow us to trace this approach back to the early 1970's.

## **7. 'SELF-REFLEXIVE NARRATIVE' WITHIN SONIC ART**

### **7.1 Luc Ferrari**

The use of 'self-reflexive narrative' within sonic arts composition can be traced back to Luc Ferrari. Much of his work uses field recording as a basis, and also relates to place in much the same way as many subsequent soundscape composers, but

framed within the acousmatic music tradition of the GRM. His series *Presque Rien* (1967 onwards) presents different narrative approaches within sound composition. For example, *Presque Rien No. 4 - la remontée du village* (1990–98) takes the listener on a walk through an Italian mountain town with Ferrari and his wife, documenting what they encounter along the way. In *Presque Rien No. 2 – ainsi continue la nuit dans ma tête multiple* (1977), a nighttime field recording is combined with Ferrari's voice orating a 'self-reflective narrative', which guides the listener into abstract imaginary composed spaces. This opened up new ways of relating to field recordings for composers: narratives of self within field recordings; how these relate to ideas of place and time within recordings; and a process of reflection post-recording as an integral orated presence.

## **7.2 Hildegard Westerkamp**

The now-classic soundscape repertoire work *Kits Beach Soundwalk* (1989) by Hildegard Westerkamp builds on the themes that *Presque Rien* opened up. Westerkamp's piece is consistently used as a teaching tool and reference point for both soundscape composition and acoustic ecology. Rennie has previously written about this work, describing it as existing 'in suspension between narrative tendencies and modernist abstraction' (Rennie 2014: 121). Similarly to Ferrari's *Presque Rien*, the piece combines soundscape composition with orated 'self-reflective narrative' to

create an 'autotopographic' sound work about Westerkamp's relationship with Vancouver's Kits Beach.

Westerkamp's narrative is overdubbed in the studio, and as such it has the benefit of hindsight. She uses this to her advantage by revising her active agency in regard to the soundscape, advising the listener of this in both contexts: in her recording of the field and her manipulation in the studio. Crucially for this discussion, her active role in capturing and representing the soundscape is clearly demonstrated to the listener in 'real time', through 'self-reflexive narration'. For example, Westerkamp reflects on her listening of the soundscape's volume, explaining that, '[t]he view is beautiful. In fact, it is spectacular. So, the sound level seems more like this'. Here, she diminishes the sound of the road in the studio, so that 'it doesn't seem that loud'. Westerkamp teases out the layers of narrative between recordist, recording and environment, and additionally studio, discussing how they impact upon one another, within sound composition.

### **7.3 Janet Cardiff**

Janet Cardiff has long established herself within multidisciplinary arts practice. Perhaps her most substantial contribution within this discussion of 'self-reflexive narrative' is her body of soundwalk compositions, which have developed since the early 1990s. These include works such as *Her Long Black Hair* (2011), *A Large Slow*

*River* (2000), and *The Missing Voice* (1999), which, like Westerkamp's *Kits Beach Soundwalk* and Ferrari's *Presque Rien*, all combine voice with composed soundscapes. However, Cardiff's soundwalks interact with a specific site and route, and form hidden layers of place in which the listener is centrally aligned. Although the narratives in Cardiff's soundwalks appear to be fictional, they do explore some of the themes previously discussed.

For example, in *A Large Slow River*, Cardiff's voice pieces together a disjointed patchwork of memories, which interact with her composed soundscape. As in her other soundwalks, Cardiff plays with time and place. For instance, alongside a recording of sea waves crashing onto a beach, Cardiff says to the listener:

*I'm at a beach on Lake Huron, my toes squishing into the mud, feeling  
them disappear deeper as each wave washes over them, jumping off  
my father's wet shoulders into the water. Now I'm at another beach,  
it's night, the sound of the waves coming in through the screen  
windows.*

Cardiff's overt use of narrative firmly places her 'self' within her field recordings, while her playful layering of narratives makes the placing and timing of them unstable. As such, her soundwalk practice revolves around the reflexive relationship between recordist, recording and environment, as discussed above.

#### **7.4 Justin Bennett**

A more recent example of 'self-reflexive narrative' sonic art composition is Justin Bennett's *Raw Materials* (2011). This video piece combines a collection of unrelated field recordings chosen at random from the composer's archive with text on a black screen. The recordings are played back, seemingly in 'real time' to both the composer and listener, while a letter addressed to 'J' appears to be typed on screen. This text – written by the composer – reflects on his personal associations with the recordings he has made. Bennett's letter tells us that 'with the sounds come smells, stories, feelings'. As the audience listens to each sound, the text continues:

*I ask myself: where was it? When was it? What is happening? Who was  
with me? How did I feel? Why did I record this? What does it make me  
feel now?*

Throughout the piece Bennett answers each question in an informal and personal way. Much like Westerkamp, he makes short practical descriptions while simultaneously considering the retrospective memory and current personal impact of the same sound on himself as composer. However, unlike the other artists mentioned above, *Raw Materials* uses text instead of an orated voice.

### **7.5 Jenifer Heuson's *Soundscapes of The Black Hills***

Similarly to Bennett's *Raw Materials*, artist Jenifer Heuson's soundmap *Soundscapes of The Black Hills* (2011)<sup>4</sup> uses text as a 'self-reflexive narrative' tool within her field recordings. Heuson maps field recordings at various locations in the Black Hills, an area nestled on the western border of South Dakota. With each recording, Heuson includes her 'self-reflexive narrative' as accompanying text, firmly identifying her presence within her recordings and their associated locations. For instance, she divulges that, when making her recording *Electric Museum*<sup>5</sup> at the Pioneer Museum in Hot Springs, 'the ubiquitous sound of fluorescent lighting was particularly memorable' (Heuson 2011). Similarly, in her recording *Buffalo Growl*<sup>6</sup> made at Wind Cave National Park, she tells us that 'two bison herds met near a scenic outlook on this morning. You can hear the two top bulls growling at each other and the snaps of tourists' cameras' (Heuson 2011). This accompanying information provides a context for these recordings, which deepens the listener's experience of them.

Additionally, in the map's introductory text, she communicates directly with potential users, urging us to:

[L]isten [...] to hear the Hills, to hear the Hills as I have heard them [...] as I hear them even now [...] It is an encounter that relies heavily upon fieldwork, upon listening and looking and sensing in the field, and upon mediation, the mediation of microphone, of recorder, of film, of computer.

(Heuson 2011)

Heuson firmly positions herself as the maker of the recordings, and approaches her fieldwork creatively, as 'sensing in the field' (Heuson 2011). This demonstrates that field recording does not need to be solely a process of sound collection,<sup>7</sup> but can also be a personal and individual form of artistic expression. She asks us to engage with her field recordings as 'experience, as tale, as hearing' (Heuson 2011). Therefore, her mapped recordings are an unfolding 'self-reflexive narrative'.

## **8. 'SELF-REFLEXIVE NARRATIVE' IN SOUND STUDIES DISCOURSE**

Although the above list of works clearly demonstrates the presence of 'self-reflexive narrative' within field recording and the sonic arts, until recently, sound studies

discourse had not identified this technique. However, in the last few years texts have appeared that call for scholars and practitioners to better acknowledge the presence of the recordist as an active agent in the field (Voegelin 2014, Lane & Carlyle 2013, Demers 2009).

For example, in a polemic magazine article for *Wire* magazine, Salome Voegelin discusses the failings of more traditional approaches to field recording with regards to their limited interpretations of 'the field':

Some field recording is thus incredibly boring and irrelevant for all but the recordist: the exotica of the source replacing the idiosyncrasy of the material recorded, the pleasures and complexities of which are hidden and inaccessible to an audience standing by and listening in [...]

Exciting field recording does not record the field but produces a plurality of fields. It neither abandons the reality of the recorded nor does it take it for granted, but works with it, responds to it, understands it as one imprint in the landscape made by the body of the recordist and tentatively retraced by the listener. This listener in



turn generates a new imprint between the heard and the recorded,  
listening to the authenticity of a particular rendition rather than its  
source, and embracing interpretation as part of the actuality of the real.

(Voegelin 2014)

Here, Voegelin outlines how, when a body is implicated in a field recording, this automatically opens up narratives of how, when, and why a field recording has been made and, importantly, by whom.

Others have questioned the ritual of field recording. In an article titled 'Field Recording as a Performative Act', Anderson (2015) discusses the performance that lies behind field recordings, and the potential audience of bystanders to the recording process. She states that, '[f]rom the time I start to attentively listen, to when I'm packing up my equipment, I provide a spectacle to be observed by others (both human and non-human)' (Anderson 2015). The article discusses this idea framed within Anderson's recounting of a recording trip to the remote island of Skellig Michael, off the southwest coast of Ireland. She records this experience and notes that although the island's sounds and Anderson's fellow passengers have been 'caught in my audio [...] they catch me too in their peripheral vision, indirect

conversations and our direct verbal encounters'. Anderson concludes that 'my body is not hidden in these recordings – it has made these recordings' (Anderson 2015).

Rennie's compositional practice as research contends with the questions, difficulties and tensions arising in the practice of field recording, in composing with field recordings, and in the representation of the self and of others in sound. He has previously suggested a 'socio-sonic' method for composition (Rennie 2014), which combines ethnography, field recording and electroacoustic composition. Regarding this self-reflexive approach to field recordings, he later argues that 'a field recording is often unacknowledged as an equally strong product of the recordist's personality, experience and technique. Considering the inherent subjectivity of any recording, it seems a small and natural step that composed sound materials could also be added to this process' (Rennie 2015).

The above examples in sound studies discourse clearly demonstrate how self-reflexivity and narrative are becoming more widely recognised within field recording and the sonic arts in general. This recognition carries with it a heightened sense of awareness and responsibility on behalf of the recordist to be increasingly reflexive regarding what, where, when, how and crucially, why, field recordings are made. This will inevitably influence future creative practice, which brings us to the final section of this discussion, the authors' own collaborative project *Thoughts in the Field*.

## **9. *THOUGHTS IN THE FIELD***

The creative works discussed above all use 'self-reflexive narrative' as text or orated voice integrated into a composition after field recordings have been made. *Thoughts in the Field*, however, integrates 'self-reflexive narrative' into the act of the field recording itself. Both the authors are sonic artists who incorporate field recordings and compose orated 'self-reflexive narrative' within our solo work. We both also became interested in finding ways to verbally externalise our interior reactions and associations while field recording in order to capture some of our decision processes in the field. This inspired a series of *Sound Diaries*<sup>8</sup> that we began sending to one another during 2012, and have continued to exchange since.

Our *Sound Diaries* are field recordings that also contain in-the-moment thoughts and associations, documented through real-time speech. On these recordings we freely externalise our internal thinking while recording, forming 'autotopographic', 'self-reflexive narratives'. This is both an attempt to share with the listener our personal connections to the sounds we are recording and to better understanding our own creative process in the field. We intend to question whether like, for example, *Kits Beach Soundwalk*, our improvised words would alter our understanding of the character of the places we recorded, and so, in turn, the understanding of the

listener. This might then highlight in an overt way the levels of authorship, framing and personal narrative we believe to be inherent in all field recordings. This can be heard in Sound Example 1, where Rennie shares and questions his expectations of a forest soundscape, inviting the listener to be similarly reflexive.

As this project was developing, we were both individually researching into ways of documenting and sharing 'in the field' experiences. The 'narrative turn' of the social sciences became significant in both our individual practices and also in *Thoughts in the Field*, especially with regard to the role of field notes.

## **9.1 Field Notes**

In ethnography, field notes are commonly thought of as private documents, a set of *aides-mémoire* to refer to when 'writing-up' the completed fieldwork. Much as Sullivan argues of cartography above, Gregory Barz describes field research as 'performed' and this to be 'one of the most meaningful processes engaged by ethnomusicologists to define themselves' (Barz 2008: 206). Brendan C. Browne posits the merits of 'making visible the invisible processes of fieldwork' by keeping detailed field diaries to record and critically reflect upon the emotional effects that undertaking fieldwork has on the fieldworker (Browne 2013). He later argues that notes should not exclude personal uncertainties over methodology or even the

chosen field or research topic. He suggests that personal fieldwork diaries 'become useful repositories for critical reflection on the research process as it is unfolding [...] fieldwork diaries act as the place where personal stories of rapport building and strange encounters are recorded. They afford researchers the space to record these important interactions and how they affected them personally' (432-433).

This is a sentiment echoed by Tuan, who argues for the importance of documented thoughts and experiences when exploring the field in order to communicate a more complex and accurate depiction of it:

An explorer might have named features and envisaged routes and prospects without telling anyone or putting anything down on paper.

That would have made his conversion of space into place private and fleeting [...] With the keeping of journals and field notes, and especially with their subsequent rewriting and publication, his private experiences — his temporary places of habitation — could gain access to and take hold on public consciousness and achieve thereby a high degree of stability and permanence even though no physical manipulation of

nature had occurred. (Tuan 1991: 687-8)

Here, Tuan describes how, through documenting the private 'little narrative' of the explorer in the field, important insights of place and space are found. This 'narrative knowledge' approach to geography can take account of time, interaction, the senses and emotion, to create a complex understanding of our surrounding environments. Substitute Tuan's 'keeping of journals and field notes' with the process of making field recordings, and it is easy to see how including fleeting thoughts and associations while out in the field might widen our understanding of the craft and art of field recording. Through *Thoughts in the Field*, the authors naturally began to do this, and found that documenting the narrative between recorder, recording and environment gave us as much insight into our practice as the sound environments we had recorded.

Barz presents his own field notes 'in tandem with other voices' - a total of three distinct voices reading the same notes. The original written note is his unedited, emotional voice in the field. This then combines with a 'headnote' - a more reflective voice when he reads his original text back. Both of these are read later with a third, more distanced voice of experience, often after the fieldwork is complete (Barz 2008). This layering of multiple narratives can be found in our work *Getting Lost*

(Anderson and Rennie 2014, see Sound Example 2): the first 'original voice' is heard in the original field recording, the headnote represented by reflexive listening to the recording at another place and time (in this case together in the studio), and the third distanced, experienced, objective voice is the completed compositional narrative.

## **9.2 *Getting Lost***

*Getting Lost* emerged after the authors began to notice similarities in the spontaneous narration within our *Sound Diaries*. The piece is a fixed stereo work made simply from edited, but otherwise non-manipulated, field recordings. *Getting Lost* consistently makes jump-cuts between two different *Sound Diaries*: a recording Rennie made while walking near his hometown of Wirksworth in Derbyshire (Sound Example 3), and a recording Anderson made while walking on the Isle of Harris in the Scottish Hebrides (Sound Example 4). The recordings document both the authors losing our way, in two separate locations. Although it is apparent from the soundscapes and surroundings we describe that we are in two very different places, similar themes begin to emerge.

While Anderson is walking amongst abandoned coastal houses, Rennie is lost on a country lane, attempting to find the path back to his small hometown. Rennie

reflects on his disassociation from this location, questioning therefore, whether, he can therefore call it home. Anderson, on the other hand, is standing within the remnants of a house that, like Rennie's sense of home, has gradually deteriorated. *Getting Lost* is split between two different geographical locations that find a unity within themes of homelessness, loss, and confused identity. As with *Kits Beach Soundwalk*, listening to the thoughts and associations embedded throughout *Getting Lost's* orated 'self-reflexive narrative' profoundly affects a listener's reception of its soundscapes.

*Getting Lost* mediates narratives of self and place, listener and recorder, and body and sound through the act of field recording. For example, Rennie's sense of homelessness is encapsulated in Anderson's description of collapsed walls, exposed beams, and the quiet that permeates after the wind has dropped on Harris. Rennie's frantic, and comedic, searching for a path, reflects Anderson's sense of disorientation when standing in a house that has been abandoned and forgotten. The geographical location of the piece is further blurred when, at certain points, Rennie and Anderson are in dialogue with one another: Rennie trying to locate his path back to Wirksworth, and Anderson's decision about which path to take in Harris. The thoughts and associations verbalised by both recordists in the field bring Harris and Wirksworth together into some form of an internal whole.



The compositions discussed earlier, such as Ferrari's *Presque Rien*, Westerkamp's *Kits Beach Soundwalk* and Cardiff's soundwalking practice, have influenced the authors' use of orated narrative within our *Sound Diaries* and creative practices in general. Sonic artists using text, such as Justin Bennett and Jenifer Heuson, have influenced the 'self-reflexive' nature of the narratives developed within our work. However, where *Getting Lost* differs from the compositions listed above is that the piece centers around in-the-moment 'self-reflexive narratives' orated by Anderson and Rennie in the field.

The *Sound Diaries* created through *Thoughts In The Field* are not only utilised as artistic materials within *Getting Lost*, they have also contributed to the theoretical discourses within this paper, considering the connection between thought, association, and creative decisions while field recording. In verbalising our unscripted 'self-reflexive narratives', we have at times found surprising and enlightening realisations with regards to our own field recording practice.

For example, in Sound Example 1, Rennie admits to being fearful of venturing too far into the forest, and therefore decides to only record on its periphery. This decision will have affected the sounds Rennie records. By capturing this thought in

audio, Rennie can later understand how his discomfort with certain contexts might alter the sound content of his field recordings. Similarly, in Sound Example 4, Anderson shares her deliberation about which path to choose, a decision that may significantly affect the sounds she captures while out recording. Through verbally externalising what are often fleeting thoughts, both the authors capture decision processes that influence the content of their field recordings. We are made aware of fundamental implications of spontaneous 'in the field' decisions, and the narratives that connect these decisions together. Therefore, through *Thoughts in the Field*, the authors have gained a practical understanding of 'self-reflexive narrative' within field recording.

## **10. CONCLUSION**

This paper aims to recognise the narratives of site and self inherent in any sonic investigations of an identified field, by applying critical theory from disciplines within the social sciences to field recording practice. Through examining the 'narrative turn' of the social sciences, the authors have identified where discourses have until recently been lacking in sound studies research, possibly due to a historical Western favouring of logio-scientific knowledge. In contrast, a clear timeline can be traced in sonic arts practice of artists using 'self-reflexive narrative' within their work, dating back to the 1970's. Indeed, perhaps one reason Westerkamp's *Kits Beach Soundwalk*

is so widely referred to within educational sonic arts contexts is due to its use of orated 'self-reflective narrative'. Westerkamp skillfully provides the listener with a master class in soundscape composition, and the thought processes that lie behind her field recording practice.

Together, the works discussed here and the 'narrative turn' of the social sciences have the potential to widen the understanding of 'self-reflexive narrative' within sound studies discourse. This would certainly have an effect on future sonic art practice, as the authors found in their collaborative project *Thoughts In The Field*. The practice in ethnography of keeping field notes, and the value of autobiographical narrative in autoethnography, in particular, could develop the 'self-reflexive narrative' voice of field recordists.

This research might also aid other disciplines employing sensory studies in furthering non-standard and sound-focused forms of representing fieldwork and knowledge gained in the field - for example anthropology in sound, and cartography through field recording. Crucially, *Thoughts In The Field* represents the emotional responses of the field recordist, and makes clear the active agency of anyone interacting with or documenting an identified field.

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<sup>1</sup> Many classic works from the electroacoustic music canon could be heard to demonstrate such an approach. Trevor Wishart's *Red Bird* (1978), for example,



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narrates the story of humans turning into birds. Denis Smalley's *Valley Flow* (1991-92) simulates an environmental soundscape through abstracted sound materials.

<sup>2</sup> For more information, see <http://www.thoughtsinthefield.tumblr.com>.

<sup>3</sup> To listen to this programme, please visit

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b06p4jvz>.

<sup>4</sup> For more information, see:

<http://www.smallgauge.org/soundscapesoftheblackhills.html>.

<sup>5</sup> To listen, visit: <http://www.smallgauge.org/blackhills/html/electricmuseum.html>.

<sup>6</sup> To listen, visit: <http://www.smallgauge.org/blackhills/html/buffalogrowl.html>.

<sup>7</sup> In the last few years there have been critiques of soundmaps in sound studies discourse for their lack of contextualising content surrounding the field recordings they map (Anderson 2016; Ouzounian 2014; Waldock 2011).

<sup>8</sup> For an example of a *Sound Diary*, go to: <https://soundcloud.com/if-walls-had-ears/sounddiaries-plazabolivar-bogata>.

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