

Center City Southeast

by

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Abstract

Center City Southeast is a multi-media performance comprised of sound, video, and short stories. The performance tracks a series of incidental encounters in places—places in which I just happened to be. In the piece, I blend text, video, and sound into a cohesive whole and illuminate surprising relationships between disparate elements. The stories—written accounts of both real and fictionalized encounters—act as guideposts. They articulate uncanny feelings and highlight strange occurrences with memory, nature, and doppelgangers that I experienced while recording the sounds and sights of my environment. Moreover, the sound, video and text trace moments when the banal slips into the bizarre, capturing a broad collection of moments that range from the utterly familiar to the deeply uncanny.

Keywords: Place; Non-Place; Short Stories; Field Recording; Sonic Geographies; Multi-Media; Memory; Dream of the Stag

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Defence Statement

Introduction

“Has he no power? Can the other gods carry time and its love upside down like a doll in their blundering arms? As though we the people were playing house - when we are serious and do love - and not the gods? No, that day’s god has no power. No gods have power to save. There are only days. The one great god abandoned us to days, to time’s tumult of occasions, abandoned us to the gods of days each brute and amok in his hugeness and idiocy.”¹
- Annie Dillard

Traveling during the pandemic unexpectedly brought up old feelings, including memories and emotions surrounding an experience traveling to Los Angeles as a teenager. On my trip, I drove through so many repeat towns—seemingly nondescript places like Julesburg, Colorado and Cassopolis, Michigan. But after some reflection, I realized that there is a peculiarity that exists in these places that is not entirely visible to those who do not belong to the community. And so, in the last year, my migration from Rochester, New York to Granger, Indiana to Grand Rapids, Michigan and every place in between made me consider my relationship to my environment with an acute attention to particular details. I did not enter this project looking for the bizarre or for the uncanny, but this is what I found. I also did not enter this project with the intention of fixating on parking lots and cemeteries, but that was where I was. In my project, I look closer at these ostensibly generic places, but in their absolute particularity. The utterly familiar is, as I discovered, wholly – and sometimes – unsettlingly distinct. Time and time again, I return to Annie Dillard’s question: “What is going on here?”²

French anthropologist Marc Augé writes about the “non-place”: a generic place that holds no special significance to an individual—a transient place only encountered in passing.³ Though my project is not an explicit investigation of the non-place, this

¹ Annie Dillard, *Holy the Firm* (New York: Harper Collins, 2003), 43.

² Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Harper Collins, 1988), 11.

³ Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* trans. John Howe (London and New York: Verso, 1995), 78. Augé writes that “Supermodernity produces non-

framework resonates with my experiences. From the spring of 2020 to the summer of 2021, I felt as though I was on a trip that lasted a year and a half. This prolonged experience of travelling kept me in a state of mind in which every place that I stayed felt like a throughway. Yet, despite my feelings, the throughways became resting spots that I fully inhabited. Every town, every restaurant, every patch of dirt, could have, in another circumstance, been a place I simply passed through, but instead I lingered. And I imagined my work like a subway trip—like the station that Augé describes in *In the Metro*.⁴ I may take the subway to get somewhere else, but I cannot avoid briefly inhabiting the subway train during the ride.

The title *Center City Southeast* refers to a chunk of Rochester that I lived in periodically for the past year and a half. People lived there, in Center City Southeast: I was not the only one that idled in the area. Yet this was a temporary home for many people. Especially with the presence of a large university, many students come and go. There are also many parks that people stroll through then promptly leave. There are bus routes that cut through Center City, completely bypassing it: roads that transport commuters from downtown to the suburbs. Regardless, I was here, waiting to get back to Vancouver. And it was a long time.

My Artistic Background

At one level, the concept for *Center City Southeast* came from questions I had about my own practice of field recording and electro-acoustic composition. I began this work at the end of my undergraduate degree, about five years ago now. I started by building hydrophones and recording lakes, rivers, and streams around my home at the time, Lansing, Michigan. I then would write electro-acoustic pieces with these recordings, often performing with just a laptop and speakers. I began to wonder why I was drawn to making field recordings. I also wondered how I could make my electro-acoustic performances more dynamic and move away from working entirely on my laptop.

places, meaning spaces which are not themselves anthropological places and which, unlike Baudelairean modernity, do not integrate the earlier places: instead these are listed, classified, promoted to the status of 'places of memory', and assigned to a circumscribed and specific position."

⁴ Marc Augé, *In the Metro* trans. Tom Conley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002)

With these questions in mind, I decided to pursue an MFA to challenge my practice: to push it, to stretch it, to see where my impulses as an artist truly lay. Contemplating these ideas helped me to realize that my practice is not about the process of making recordings – the meditative of experience of listening for long periods of time. Nor is it about gathering information about an environment through sound, or encouraging environmental awareness through listening. I began to realize that sound in and of itself was not the impetus behind my work.

The Neighborhood, a short album that I composed last summer and fall for the SCA first year MFA show, was my first experience directly addressing these questions in my work. It was also my first project using field recordings made primarily in the municipally-designated neighborhood quadrant of Center City Southeast, Rochester, New York. To capture much of the material, I built a VLF (Very Low Frequency) radio that picks up electromagnetic impulses in the atmosphere. Additionally, in the album, I tried to track the passage of days in parallel with my passage through places. And it was this project that gave me the first glimpse into my impulse to make recordings: not the sounds themselves but the places where I recorded them. With this realization, I began to think more broadly about place. In the months following the completion of this project, I started to shoot video and to compose field notes. Eventually, I began to write short stories. Indeed, it was the combination of sound, video and stories that made me feel like I was getting closer to evoking the *feeling* of being in the places I am drawn to. *The Neighborhood* ultimately bled into *Center City Southeast*. Building a homemade radio led to building homemade guitar pedals, sound recorders and other sound devices. I continued to make field recordings, I continued to travel around, I continued to have strange encounters, and material kept coming.

Additionally, my collaborations with MFA cohort members Mansi Patel and Giselle Liu during the program encouraged me to think about music as it relates to space and movement. To some extent, my work always reflected this interest. For example, I have long been attracted to works of soundscape composition in which artists forefront the spatial elements in field recordings. Additionally, as an instrumentalist—a drummer especially—the physicality of learning and performing music fulfilled my interest in movement in a way that most of my early electro-acoustic compositions did not.

Working on spatializing sound in collaborative projects like *EnCircle*, *Perspectivals*, and *Our Eyes Will Adjust* made me consciously aware of my interest. In *EnCircle*, for example, Giselle, Mansi, and I built a structure in the middle of a sound rig meant to guide the audience's movement through the space. We tried to coordinate the physical materials in the space (the sculpture) and the way that the sound was spatialized so that they would cohere. In *Perspectivals*, Mansi and I elaborated upon this idea and worked to coordinate movement and sound—specifically the pace of events in the sound with other moving elements in the work such as the viewers, the lights, and the shifting geometric forms. Finally, In *Our Eyes Will Adjust*, Giselle and I used movement sensors to compose the music. In this way, we were able to articulate strong, physical connection between our bodily movement and sound creation. The movement improvisations formed the basis for the score, informed the speaker placement in the room, and had a tangible effect on other aspects of set design and choreography in the work.

In our collaborations Giselle and Mansi taught me new ways of thinking, working and seeing, and our projects expanded my understanding of how sound behaves in space and how it connects to movement and design. Indeed, had I not worked with them, I would not have considered the design of the room as integral to the work, nor would I have consciously incorporated movement into my performance: both my movement as a performer, and the way I moved sound in the room.

Inspirations for Center City Southeast

Annie Dillard's writing inspired my work—especially her ability to capture a sense of place that moves beyond pure evocation of an environment. Readers can feel the otherness—feel the unknown—reverberate throughout her writing. And in my own project, I decided to personify this experience—to imagine these strange feelings in the form of characters. The radio host, the gods of today, and the kid at the diner not only sense the unknown, but the characters demonstrate that the “other” is aware of us, too. One of my stories about the god of today especially exemplifies this idea:

The god of today is a rubbernecker. If you squint hard enough, you can just make him out in the corners of things, hanging off the limb of a tree, wedging himself into the cracks in the sidewalk, that kind of thing. Watching us with a wry smile as we shuffle around. Just watching us.

Characters like this god watch with no particular focus and in no particular order. They do not have a divine presence, but rather, they have access to something that the observer does not have: an awareness of the infinite coordinations—both significant and insignificant—that continually constitute any given place.⁵

In many ways, my project grapples with the experience of inhabiting unfamiliar environments. And my sense of “un-belonging” is put into relief by imagining characters that do, in fact, seem to belong—characters whose behaviors or constant appearance in environments suggests that they understand their environment. I used imaginary situations to consider my relationship with “being” and of “being” alongside others. I consider social belonging and isolation—the dual experience of observing the behaviors and patterns of people and creatures while always feeling the gulf between self and other.

From Marc Augé, I take notion of the unstable vantage point of a moving ship to consider my own experience. More specifically, he describes the challenge of locating land when both the target, and you, yourself, are moving.⁶ Salomé Voegelin describes a musical relationship in similar ways. In her discussion of Arturas Bumsteinas’s electroacoustic piece *Night on the Sailship* (2013), Voegelin describes her impression of “a geography of ephemeral and unseen lands produced on board a blind ship at sea.”⁷ Rather than attempting to craft a stable sense of place or even to recount a fixed experience to audiences, my goal is to evoke the oddity and the flexibility of the everyday—I may draw from particular circumstances, but I hope to engage with audiences at a level that transcends those circumstances and allows them to consider their own relationship to the everyday. To me, the uncanny encompasses more than sights and sounds in and of themselves—it shapes how sensations interact with memory, imagination, and the slippage between the two.

Furthermore, using text allowed me to explore how language can slip subtly from real to surreal. I was especially inspired by a passage from Daniella Cascella’s *F.M.R.L.* In the chapter “Listen,” she writes the following lines: “from notes written on scraps of

⁵ Anna Tsing, “The Buck, the Bull, and the Dream of the Stag: Some Unexpected Weeds of the Anthropocene.” *Suomen Antropologi* 42, no. 1 (2017): 9.

⁶ Augé, *Non-Places*, 89.

⁷ Salomé Voegelin, *The Political Possibility of Sound: Fragments of Listening* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018), 76.

paper and on notes on an iPhone then lost an recalled in a lopsided way/ longing for, attempting at a writing lost at sea/ like Bas Jan Ader in search of the miraculous lost toward the horizon of an ocean/ and again I encounter borders of myself.”⁸ Cascella intentionality creates ambiguity between the direct and the indirect objects: readers wonder, for instance, *which* object is left at sea. The fact that Cascella obscures the meaning inspired me to incorporate similar slippages in my own text: both grammatical slippages and slippages between real and fictional. Like Voegelin’s work, Cascella’s writing informed my approach to presenting experiences and memories in a way that embraces their inherent malleability.

With respect to pieces more specifically, I draw inspiration from artists Graham Lambkin, Ernst Karel, and Áine O’Dwyer. Their work pushed me to think about place differently, to consider different sounds and sound-making processes, and to incorporate other mediums besides sound into my work. Lambkin, for example, records in houses, kitchens, and while walking around. No space is sacred and he treats them accordingly. His use of text also inspired my interest in incorporating narrative into my piece. Additionally, Olivia Block mines for significance in old, found objects, and she uses a wide variety of equipment for her performances and installations—from old voice recorders to Polaroid pictures. Her blend of synthesizers, live sound and field recordings was also an inspiration for my project.⁹ Ernst Karel, the sound designer for the film *Leviathan*, also uses interesting materials. More specifically, he made an extremely compelling score using only the materials that the crew had on hand, not the material that they necessarily wanted: because the weather damaged equipment, Karel used GoPro cameras. My decision to use old amps and my phone to record some sound came partially from Karel’s use of sounds captured by GoPro cameras.¹⁰

I appreciate the way that Áine O’Dwyer sets up situations for listeners. In her album *Music for Church Cleaners*, for instance, her writing directed my attention to the room in a way that I had not experienced before.¹¹ O’Dwyer presents the church as an

⁸ Daniella Cascella, *F.M.R.L.* (Winchester, United Kingdom: Zero Books, 2015), 110.

⁹ I was especially influenced by her piece “Dissolution.”

¹⁰ See Michael A. Unger, “Castaing-Taylor and Paravel’s GoPro Sensorium: *Leviathan* (2012), Experimental Documentary, and Subjective Sounds,” *Journal of Film and Video* 69, o. 3 (2017): 3-18 for more about sound recording in *Leviathan*.

¹¹ Áine O’Dwyer, *Music for Church Cleaners*

acoustically reverberant space, a non-holy place, like a workplace or an office for church cleaners. Space functions on multiple levels here—the artists references and comments on these multiple levels, too. By exploring these pieces, I learned to think about space as a combination of physical structures and the air between them that holds sounds. I also learned that using any text, any space, any object can be a valid artistic choice—phones, old amps, and anything on hand can effectively set up situations for audiences.

Finally, the process of recording made its way into the performances of the piece. I used my phone, iPod, Sony MiniDisc, guitar amp, and other objects in the performance. I did not want to create a perfectly positioned wall of blissfully balanced sound. Additionally, I approached my video recordings with the same attitude. I wanted to mine the potential of a heterogeneous mix of recordings, playback devices, speakers, and other materials. How, for example, does an iPhone's microphone uniquely color the recording of an environment? Furthermore, what types of recordings do objects like iPhones make possible? Drawing from O'Dwyer, I hoped this approach to recording could reveal things about an environment that a recording with a carefully placed pair of DPA 4060's could not capture.

Blending Sound, Story, Film, and Performance

Each of my stories describes, in one form or another, a mundane event or a seemingly normal place that is infused with an eerie quality. In this respect, Graham Lambkin strongly influenced me. His website describes his work as follows: "A similar spirit of collision between the familiar and uncanny informs Lambkin's text-based performances and publications. The prosaic facets of life yield to mordant dream-like reflections that are at once banal and bizarre."¹² In his practice, Lambkin combines field recordings with text, poetry, and sometimes, utterances like cackling. His frequent use of repetition and his haunting combination of nonsense, noise, and otherwise normal stories captures something that I hoped to achieve in my own work.¹³

The way that memory can contribute to the odd quality of the occurrences I describe plays a substantial role in my piece. Each element of the work, at some point,

¹² Lambkin, Graham, "About," [grahamlambkin.com](https://www.grahamlambkin.com), Cargo, accessed: August 11, 2021, <https://www.grahamlambkin.com/About>

¹³ In my stories, I was also interested in projecting the internal onto the external environment.

touches on memory. For example, in the final section of the piece, a recording of a car seems to morph into something else—a sound that strongly resembles the hum of the projector, which is present in much of the piece. My goal in this instance and in other moments was to create resemblances between sounds that are remarkably distinct in some way, whether it is a live sound against a pre-recorded sound, or two sounds with different sources. My attempts to get disparate sounds to converge are themselves a reflection of the way that my memory has played a role in shaping these experiences.

The video, furthermore, builds on these ideas. For instance, the picture of JFK featured in one of my videos is, under normal circumstances, recognizable to many people. But the blurry video quality and the projection surface—which makes use of backlighting and multiple layers of screens—renders the familiar picture practically unrecognizable. Further, the layers both in the image and the projection surface obscure different parts of the image depending on where you are located in the space. A story is told while this video plays that informs audiences of a particular meaning that the image has for me that they do not share. Layers of memory, recognition and resonance are scattered across this image, its projection, and hopefully the audience. My hope, then, is that this video resonates unequally across the performance space, just as original image did for me when I first encountered it.

As a performer, each of my actions seems to be utilitarian: I turn on a light, I start a sound file, I move a speaker. Ostensibly, there is little mystery in the performance. Yet some actions yield a result that is not so straightforward. For example, at one point in the piece, I use an amp like an effects pedal. The sound comes into the amp and a cable runs out to a studio monitor. Even though sound passes through this amp, it does not come out of this amp itself. When I unplug the cable running out of the speaker, it not only disconnects the studio monitor from the sound, but it also activates the amp in the speaker itself. Audiences thus unexpectedly experience a burst of noise contradictory to the expectations raised by my movement. Although moving the mini-amp appears to be functional, the disconnect between my movement and its perceptible result adds an element of surrealism to the piece. Sometimes, an action and its result may be very clear. At other times, however, I appear nonplussed as an action yields an unexpected result.

Ultimately, I wanted the performance space to become like the places described in the stories. The characters that I invented see things that we do not see. My experience of encountering unsettling surprises within banal situations occurred because, unlike the characters, I only pass through the environments that they fully inhabit. And my actions, as a performer, allow audiences to perceive these places with me—to feel comfortable at some points and to perhaps be somewhat disoriented at others. The occasional dissonance between an action and its perceived result hopefully reinforced this negotiation between familiar and unfamiliar throughout the performance.

The organization of elements—particularly sound—over time was dependent on my actions and my location in the room. I could not separate a decision to start a video, a sound recording or move a light from the other elements in the piece. For this reason, I had to change my compositional process. Instead of composing in my studio, I had to experiment with sound in the room alongside the other elements of the work. In making this work, my compositional process changed from organizing sound over time to structurally coordinating materials across time and space, guided by the awareness of how their relative proportions influenced the perception of the work's form. The form emerged from identifying moments that I wanted to keep from this exploration and organizing the situations that allowed me to create those moments over time.

Not only did this new compositional approach require me to attend to the interlocking proportions of sonic, visual, scenographic, and performative elements, but it also allowed me to maintain a dynamic relationship between each element. For example, what I chose to listen to and to view performatively played into how I hoped audiences would perceive the piece. Certainly, there is a pragmatic reason for some of my choices. But I also used my body to guide audiences through the piece. For example, moving to an amp encourages audiences to listen to a certain aspect while watching the video for a time drew the audiences' gaze toward the projector. I wanted to constantly shift the relationship between the music, the video, and the stories so that audiences would not get locked into a hierarchy of watching and listening. In constantly tuning the space, in constantly making little adjustments to knobs and lighting arrangements and object placement, I constantly tune the audiences' attention. Just as many objects in the work take on multiple roles, I, too, take on many roles within the performance.

Conclusion

Over the course of the piece, the stories function as a kind of fractured monologue: the video and the sound pick up where the stories leave off and vice versa. Each element points to the particularity of a place like Center City Southeast. The sound rides the edge of intelligibility because it is, at times, difficult to identify its source with what it sounds like, text slips quickly from real to surreal, and the video's reflections and refractions distort otherwise clear images. All slips from general to particular. The experience of living in and drifting through a place like Center City Southeast is at once completely distinct and wholly generalizable. And this simultaneity is disorienting at times, but we all have our way of reconciling these oppositions. Like Annie Dillard writes of the vantage point from Puget Sound, off the coast of northern Washington state, everything past Mt. Baker "is called, and profoundly felt to be, simply, 'East of the Mountains.'"¹⁴

¹⁴ Dillard, *Holy the Firm*, 19.

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Appendix A.

Soundscape Composition as Autoethnography: Stalking a Drifting Subject

“My god what a world. There is no accounting for one second of it.”

- Annie Dillard

I use ethnographic approaches to sound as a way to weave self-narratives into my soundscape compositions. More specifically, the autoethnographic approach involves recognizing the social and sonorous qualities of a field recording and recognizing that this recording is both real and imaginary—that it depicts *me* in addition to the context in which I made it. And using sound as a way to understand myself in place inspires new compositional approaches. Autoethnography requires more than recognition of the context of the field recordings. Rather, by including instruments, synthesized sounds, and voice, I engage with sounds as materials instead of as spectromorphological objects.¹⁵ This presence contextualizes sound in a way that evokes place, exemplifying the power that sound has to carve its own geography within the composition. I can thus use composition to investigate my own relationship to place. Further, though, the self-narrative that results from this process encourages listeners to explore, in the artist Alexandra Spence’s words, the “connections between sound, place, body, being and space.”¹⁶

The Ethnographic Impulse

Ethnographic research has roots in anthropology. Traditionally, anthropologists attempt to describe the lives of groups of people through detailed observation and

¹⁵ Manuella Blackburn, “The Visual Sound-Shapes of Spectromorphology: An Illustrative Guide to Composition,” *Organised Sound: An International Journal of Music Technology* 16, no. 1 (2011): 6.

¹⁶ See Alexandra Spence’s liner notes for her album *Waking, She Heard the Fluttering* <https://alexandraspence.bandcamp.com/album/waking-she-heard-the-fluttering>.

prolonged first-hand experience (participant observation).¹⁷ This mode of inquiry is not restricted to anthropology. Indeed, literary scholar Kimberly J. Lau proposes a working definition of autoethnography in her article *This Text Which Is Not One*. She writes that “autoethnography combines the ‘ethnographic impulse’ that looks outward at worlds beyond their own, as a means of marking the social coordinates of the self, with the autobiographical impulse that gazes inward for a story of self, but ultimately retrieves a vantage point for interpreting culture.”¹⁸ Sentence about how this is applicable to your own work, reiterating that ethnography does not have to be done only by anthropologists or only “to” groups of people.

After reading Lau’s work, I now understand Annie Dillard’s penchant for exploring her surroundings in unique and introspective ways as a type of “ethnographic impulse.” In *Stalking*, for example, Dillard explains her approach to noticing. “You have to stalk everything,” she writes. “Everything scatters and gathers; everything comes and goes like fish under a bridge.” Instead of deliberately seeking specific events, Dillard attempts to achieve a certain type of awareness—an awareness that has a purpose, but does not impose this purpose upon the place. What is more, Dillard claims that consciousness does not hinder our experience of the present moment—but self-consciousness *does*. In other words, being aware of ourselves distracts us from what happens around us. When field recording, or even when I am simply walking outside, I try to practice this intentionality, to model her ability to be acutely conscious without self-consciousness. For instance, she describes an experience stalking muskrats in Tinker Creek. In the moment that she finds one she writes “and then occasionally the mountains part. The tree with the lights in it appears, the mockingbird falls, and time unfurls across space like an oriflamme. Now we rejoice. The news, after all is not that muskrats are wary, but that they can be seen.”¹⁹ Her consciousness allows her to see without demanding that the place reveal. For Dillard—and for myself as well—the ethnographic impulse is curiosity: of exploring surroundings.

¹⁷ Tim Ingold, “Anthropology is Not Ethnography” in *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description*, (New York: Routledge, 2011): 229-243.

¹⁸ Kimberly J. Lau, “This Text Which Is Not One: Dialectics of Self and Culture in Experimental Autoethnography,” *Journal of Folklore Research* 39, no. 2 (2002): 244.

¹⁹ Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Harper’s Magazine Press, 1974), 20.

Contemporary Approaches to Ethnographic Inquiry in Art

Contemporary approaches to ethnography in art emphasize the author's role in constructing an interpretation of an encounter with a subject. For example, the creators of *Leviathan*—a film that documents a few nights aboard a commercial fishing vessel operating off of the coast of Massachusetts—make the elements of production central to the viewing experience. In his analysis of *Leviathan*, Michael Unger notes that the filming style and sound design forefront sensorial, emotional, and affective qualities of the filmmakers' and crew members' experience aboard the ship. Further, the film constitutes a form of sensorial knowledge that is derived from the filmmakers' encounter with the vessel as an ethnographic site.²⁰ Notably, the video is shot exclusively with GoPro cameras strapped to various crewmembers, filmmakers and parts of the ship. Additionally, the sound design is based primarily on the sounds captured by the GoPro cameras. In this way, the film takes its form from the contingencies of the encounter—the placement of cameras and the sounds and images they happened to capture. The process of capturing, of acquiring ethnographic knowledge, is a central component of the film.

An ethnographic approach that highlights the creator's role in capturing knowledge can also be applied to sound art. For instance, anthropologist and sound artist Hadi Bastani's recent album *Emergence* narrates the composer's rediscovery of the Iranian experimental music scene that he left behind to pursue a PhD in Belfast. Comprised of field recordings, found objects, synthesis, live improvisation, and voices, Bastani describes the album as a diary, an aphasic narration, a collection, and “an escapist soundscape that is meant to mark a period, stain it with sounds, and materialize it through composition.”²¹ *Emergence* weaves together multiple perspectives that span various times, spaces, and places: a nonlinear self-narrative that engages with memories, imagination, and dreams. All the while, the composer documents an account—however incomplete—of his anthropological research. Ultimately, according to Bastani, the album exists as a way to reconcile the tension he feels between “two times,

²⁰ Michael A. Unger. “Castaing-Taylor and Paravel's GoPro Sensorium: *Leviathan* (2012), Experimental Documentary, and Subjective Sounds,” *Journal of Film and Video* 69, no. 3 (2017): 3-18.

²¹ See the liner notes for Bastani's album *Emergence*.
<https://flamingpines.bandcamp.com/album/emergence-2>

places, cultures, modes of doing, thinking and sociality.”²² Through composition, the subject of Bastani’s ethnographic inquiry emerges as both the Iranian experimental music scene and himself.

Works like *Leviathan* and *Emergence* demonstrate that accentuating aesthetic, sensorial, and emotional techniques in work about “real subjects” does not obscure the subject. Instead, according to Unger, these techniques productively engage with the subject.²³ Place impresses a sensorial and emotional affect on those inhabiting it. Artists that engage with ethnography derive form and content from the power that place has on people. *Leviathan*, as an ethnographic work, clearly engages with a subject: the boat. While the filmmakers certainly emphasize their role in the art, their singular focus on the object itself does not constitute autoethnography. However, Bastani integrates his site of study—the Iranian experimental music scene—as much as he interrogates himself. Bastani uses composition as means to understand himself through the research of his subject of study. In this way, *Emergence* may better be described as autoethnography. Actively constructing interpretations of our experiences is not just a form of knowledge: it is a fundamental way in which we can make sense of our experiences and, by extension, ourselves.²⁴

Soundscape Composition as Autoethnography

Soundscape composition resonates with autoethnography in many compelling ways. Traditionally, though, many artists employed this mode of music making in an attempt to represent the “real” for documentary and communicative purposes. Others rooted in the acousmatic tradition, like Pierre Schaeffer and his followers, treat sounds as objects, stripping them from their source and erasing any reference to the context in which they were made. Many soundscape compositions approach sound in a similar way: as a blank canvas that can be manipulated. They privilege “pure” sonorous quality over the reason why these sounds came to be. However, John Levack Drever believes that soundscape composition can have “significantly distinct concerns and consequently may be appreciated and explored more fully if approached from different perspectives to

²² Ibid.

²³ Unger, “Castaing-Taylor and Paravel’s GoPro Sensorium,” 3-18.

²⁴ Kourken Michaelian, “Three Questions about Memory” in *Mental Time Travel: Episodic Memory and our Knowledge of the Personal Past* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016): 3-15.

that normally associated with acousmatic music.”²⁵ One step toward developing a different perspective is to stop treating sounds as sound objects. The acousmatic music tradition has deep aesthetic roots in listening to sounds “in-and-of-themselves,” freed from their source and their larger context. This mode of listening also influences the compositional process, encouraging cause-and-effect forms to emerge from the presentation and manipulation of pitch and rhythmic relationships. Reducing sounds to objects in this way ignores the power sound has to compel, to remind, to incite memories and imaginings, to conjure times and places.

There is a wealth of memories and experiences and interpretations embedded within field recordings. Indeed, Tullis Rennie contends that field recordings should be understood “equally as field notes and materials for composition.”²⁶ They are at once real and imaginary, providing a partial account of what the field recordist experienced in the moment. Field recordings also have the power to incite a remembering of the experience in subsequent listenings. Recognizing the various powers in sound’s sonorous, anecdotal, referential, generative, and contextual properties changes the composition: this recognition engages with the place and how it feels to remember being there. Following this idea, Alexandra Spence notes that in her work she is not “simply examining the potential musicality of everyday sound.” Rather, she is “interested in the social signals and possible narratives that inevitably co-habituate these sounds.”²⁷ A compositional approach that engages with narratives of, and within, place must recognize sound’s ability to carry possible narratives within it.

The Dream of the Stag

In her essay *The Buck, The Bull, and The Dream of The Stag: Some Unexpected Weeds of the Anthropocene*, anthropologist Anna Tsing argues that examining weeds is an essential way to understand the coordination between human and nonhuman world

²⁵ John Levack Drever, “Soundscape Composition: The Convergence of Ethnography and Acousmatic Music,” *Organised Sound: An International Journal of Music Technology* 7, no. 1 (2002): 21-27.

²⁶ Tullis Rennie, “Socio-Sonic: An Ethnographic Methodology for Electroacoustic Composition,” *Organised Sound: An International Journal of Music Technology* 19, no. 2 (2014): 124.

²⁷ Spence, liner notes.

making projects.²⁸ The title “weed” in this sense is not reserved for the crabgrass and dandelions that we try to mow into oblivion, but rather any organism that flourishes in the wake of human disturbance. At Tsing’s ethnographic site of study, abandoned mines in Jutland, Denmark, red deer are the weeds that have flourished after the mines were abandoned.

In this essay, Tsing notes a common pitfall in our observations that she names “The Dream of the Stag.” The dream is a form of self-absorption that obscures the coordinating agents that make a given situation possible. Hunters are caught up in the dream of the stag, pitting man against stag, in an otherwise “inert” landscape. Identifying this dream opens our eyes to what we exclude when we get caught up in the story of a person or animal, and then ignore all the other beings whose world-making activities influence the situation at hand. We can even get caught up in the dream of the human, seeing ourselves as the sole actors in an otherwise complete and coherent landscape

Take, for instance, my recent encounter with a deer in a cemetery near my apartment. As I rounded a corner on my usual path, I was stopped in my tracks by a mature buck. Standing not more than fifteen feet away we locked eyes for what felt like an eternity. The hair on my neck stood up, my body went cold, frozen but alert. For a few moments we held each other in that gaze, entranced maybe, perhaps sizing each other up, I can’t say what he was thinking. We took slow steps away from each other in perfect sync, never breaking our gaze. I sidestepped up a hill and pitched it to the road. It was the first of three encounters that day with the deer. He has haunted me ever since.

When I think back on that day, the experience turns into a dream. The landscape goes black and it’s just this buck and me on a stage, and we endlessly circle around each other, and our gazes meet and break. When I sit down to write, my memory of the encounter transforms into a cohesive narrative. It is from the dream that I compose, not from the encounter. I disregard all the coordinations that made that encounter possible - the motivation for the deer being in that spot, the humans, animals and terrain that shaped our path, and so on – as if I could even account for them to begin with.²⁹ When I

²⁸ Anna Tsing, “The Buck, the Bull, and the Dream of the Stag: Some Unexpected Weeds of the Anthropocene.” *Suomen Antropologi* 42, no. 1 (2017): 4.

²⁹ Anna Tsing, “The Buck, the Bull, and the Dream of the Stag: Some Unexpected Weeds of the Anthropocene.” *Suomen Antropologi* 42, no. 1 (2017): 9.

go back to the cemetery to trace my path – as I often do – the buck doesn't show. The landscape returns, and the dream fades.

What should I make of this? Even something as rattling as a close animal encounter cannot keep me out of the dream. In that moment, a glimpse of another world opened up to me, a world where my life that I understand as embarking on a meaningful, coherent, and purposeful path is not regarded as such. This glimpse rattled me just as much as the presence of the deer did. It is, as feminist philosopher Val Plumwood notes, very difficult for us to accept a world in which we are not valued as individuals, that our life has no special meaning above and beyond that of other forms of life.³⁰ We can, in moments, get flashes of that world, but our brains reject it, and we can't see it for more than that flash. But the knowledge that it exists is haunting – it's the knowledge that we simultaneously walk in the light and in the dark. Every footstep is a step in two worlds. There are hidden depths here; strange and dark and largely unavailable to us.

This encounter, along with others, has sparked doubt for me as to whether we can achieve some type of "presence" with the world as it unfolds. Scholar John Wylie notes that a lot of writing about landscape speaks in one form or another to the experience of being with a place as a "bringing-to-presence," of uncovering things, of making the invisible visible through our sensory capacities. While I, along with Wylie, reject this implicit ideal of achieving the much sought after feeling of "presence" with the landscape, I also reject Wylie's notion that acknowledging absence is the key to truly understanding the landscape instead.³¹ My composition, field recording, and being in the world is not a vast undertaking in which I will ultimately achieve unity with the present moment, tallying up how close I get to that goal at any point in time. No - I go outside to see what I can see, to bear witness to whatever chunk of the world happens to be in front of me. I'll take what I can get.

I see moments like the buck encounter as revealing something about my standing in Plumwood's "exterior world." In these moments, something of my true proximity with the place is shown to me. Spending time in a place, recording, taking field notes, learning about this history of it is then an effort to negotiate this proximity, not to ultimately achieve "presence" with it through a pure state of mind and heightened

³⁰ Val Plumwood, *The Eye of the Crocodile*, (Canberra: ANU Press, 2012).

³¹ Wylie "Landscape, Absence, and the Geographies of Love," 276.

sensory awareness, but to get a sense of my place within the world, in *this* world, in where I - so incontrovertibly - am.

Marking the Social Coordinates of the Self

The chaos of the past year, including the COVID-19 pandemic, set me adrift in a number of ways. The most significant change, however, was geographical. Homes are now temporary landing places, plans are provisional, and moving is based on circumstances outside of my control. All the while, I have sought refuge outdoors and in recording. The places I choose to go - cemeteries, rivers, local parks, hunting grounds, backyards - are incidental, they are just where I *happen* to be. I have always taken the strong connections I develop to particular places for granted: never has that been more apparent than now. I find myself scrambling to gain an understanding with a place, any place at all, whatever happens to be right outside. As my recordings and I drift, I wonder what to make of a drifting autoethnographic subject that just happens to pass through these - or any - incidental places.

Autoethnography relies on the process of discovering the ways in which the ethnographer relates to or experiences an environment. Lau's definition of autoethnography describes this relationship in spatial terms. Particularly, I am struck by the practice of "marking the social coordinates of the self."³² I understand 'social' in this context in relation to Ingold's discussion of sensory relationships to one's environment. More specifically, Ingold describes the social as "the understanding of the commingling of mind and world."³³ Our bodies and minds, themselves, are social in that they are enmeshed in a world, continuously engaging with it: both you and the world are endlessly emerging. My social coordinates, then, are the objects and the beings and the places that my body and mind are entangled with. As I drift through these incidental places, I am marking new coordinates—not in an attempt to map the boundaries of the sociality of myself, but rather as an exploration of what I'm enmeshed with. And as I drift through these incidental sites, my coordinates shift and re-triangulate, each new significant marker inflected by the last.

³² Lau, "This Text Which Is Not One," 244.

³³ Ingold, "Anthropology is Not Ethnography," 236.

Although I will never complete a map of myself and my entanglements, the impulse toward inquiry is what interests me most. As Ingold writes, our minds “commingle with the outside world,” and the commingling extends to memories of previous places as well.³⁴ Each place imparts something on me, not just a memory or an emotion, but also a marker of one of my social coordinates and this lingers with me as I drift to the next place. What hopefully emerges from this ethnographic mapping is an interwoven self-narrative, at once personal and placed-based, a self-narrative that taps into the field recording’s ability to be, simultaneously, real and imaginary.

Innovative approaches to assemblage theory in anthropology also resonate with autoethnography in field recording. Anna Tsing, for example, writes about assemblages. Not everything is causally related, nor do things necessarily interact in a way that we can perceive. Nevertheless, Tsing argues, they exist together.³⁵ I am accumulating assemblages in the drift. The compositional approach mirrors the incidental place explorations because they are both a kind of drifting. You move things, some elements linger, others disappear quickly, and things react, especially across time and place. And remarkable things pop up through the reactions.

A Compositional Approach to Place

My research into ethnographies of sound, geographies of sound, as well as my general inquiries into place has drastically altered my compositional approach. I have begun to shift my process to more closely resemble what seems to be going on when I’m outside. Using audio software, I set up a performance situation in which sounds that I have recorded, performed or synthesized are placed in an assemblage that feels like an abstracted place that I want to create. I then record an improvised performance with this assemblage of sounds. I take the recording and set up a new performance situation, including previous sounds, newly modified sounds and maybe some fresh sounds as well, and record another improvised performance. This process repeats over many days as I continually make new field recordings that I incorporate into subsequent recording sessions. Through repetition, an emergent form begins to take shape—one that is devised through intuition, improvisation and the sounds’ reactive potentials to each other

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibilities of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015).

and the performance situation. I will sift through all the iterations of the recording session to craft a finished composition. In this way, the sound plays a crucial role in carving out its own territory. I hope that to some degree the resulting compositions realize their potential to create a “dark geography that mobilizes space, generates environments, and reveals their depths.”³⁶

By repeating this pattern with combinations of old and new recordings, processed and original sounds, a reflexive space opens up within and between compositions. This space engages with each place that I’ve recorded, and the compositions are the result of my active interpretation of these places and myself within them. Sounds recur across compositions, subtly changing. The pacing is coherent but a little unpredictable, as the geography that the sounds carve out is endlessly emerging, always changing, evolving naturally, at times slowly and at other times in bursts.

This process resonates with how I experience a place. The vanishing social coordinates, the endless emerging, paying attention to the assemblages of what is in front of me, taking note of what I find to be salient or to rise to the top among the assemblages. At the end of the piece, you have not “transformed” the “real” recordings into an interpretation, as you might think you step into a place, and after spending time with it, come to understand it. Rather, every moment is an interpretation, and what is hopefully impressed on you is the affect of the place, the power a place has to compel us to feel, remember and imagine, just as sounds do. The sounds carve out a dark geography, a partial, incomplete, but nonetheless honest understanding of its place, just as we do when we explore the neighborhood.

When we are outside, an encounter may momentarily reveal to us the hidden depth and strangeness of our surroundings, only to slip away just as soon as it came. Sounds emerge from the assemblage of the composition, our noticing of them the product of the coordination between other sounds, both present and absent in the composition, the whim of the composer’s choices, the product of intuited happenstance, a circumstance upon circumstance, an endless chain of coordinations that vanish from our perception. And just as quickly as it emerged, the sound vanishes, consumed by the endless reactions of other sounds, their entanglements of place, space, time, pitch,

³⁶ Salomé Voegelin, *The Political Possibilities of Sound: Fragments of Listening* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic & Professional, 2018).

memories and imaginings roiling up and creating new circumstances. You may remember that sound or you may not, and it's all the same. You noticed it – that's the whole point.

“Everything scatters and gathers. Everything comes and goes, like fish under a bridge.”³⁷

Let's go fishing.

³⁷ Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Harper's Magazine Press, 1974), 167.

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Appendix B.

Video Documentation

Creator/Director: Charlie Cooper

Description:

A filmic adaptation of Center City Southeast, using documentation materials from the original performance.

File Name:

Center City Southeast.mp4