

# Chapter 7. Recording Nonverbal Sounds: Cultivating Rhetorical Ambivalence in Digital Methods

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In this collection I am lucky enough to be participating in conversations with new and established scholars whose work is positioned throughout several different areas within digital methods. While some of that positioning comes from personal identity, the work we do is also positioned in place. Therefore, I offer the following land acknowledgment with the understanding that a statement alone is never enough, and we must all actively work to dismantle colonial practices. The work of this chapter has been made possible by my inhabitation at SUNY Cortland, therefore I'd like to acknowledge the land I occupy at Cortland as the traditional, ancestral home of the Haudenosaunee, the People of the Longhouse, and of the Onondaga Nation, whose 2005 Land Rights Action includes the land on which our institution now resides. I take this opportunity to thank the original occupants of this place for their historical and continued stewardship.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to the place from which this chapter comes, it has been influenced by my own positionality. As an able-bodied, white, middle-class, heterosexual, and cisgender woman, I have benefitted from a tremendous amount of privilege. I first became interested in methods and methodologies in an undergraduate college course in 2004 that students had affectionately nicknamed “ERMs” (for Empirical Research Methods.) However, it was not until more recently that I began to think about what sonic methods may mean for the intersection of sound studies, rhetoric, and writing—and in particular, nonverbal soundscapes with attunement to different embodied experiences of such nonverbal sounds and different consequences for soundscape participants. In 2018, I gave a presentation at the Symposium for Sound, Rhetoric, and Writing called “Listening to this Soundscape Six Ways,” where I attempted to show different values in comparative methods coming from different disciplines such as material rhetoric, social semiotics, and learning spaces design.

Here I will first review a little bit of that thinking on comparative listening methods. However, my main goal in this chapter is to explore rhetorical ambivalence related to sonic methods. Specifically, I will deal with the ambivalence involved in a particular component of many sonic methods—field recordings.

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1. Thank you to my colleague, Dan Radus, for his help in sharing this land acknowledgment.

Rhetorical ambivalence comes from Hillery Glasby's chapter on queer methodologies, which I will discuss in greater detail shortly. While ambivalence is often treated as a negative quality of confusion or contradictory feelings, Glasby (and I by extension) believe that ambivalence can be productive and even necessary to shake us out of a too-neat, post-positivist relationship to method. One of the generous reviewer comments I received for this chapter was the reminder that ambivalence may also be intertwined with power and privilege. While I will be arguing for the messiness of productive "unknowing," vulnerable people do not always have that luxury of unease, contradiction, or unknowing, which might cause their research project to be questioned or misinterpreted. I will return to this complexity and the role of my own privilege in cultivating rhetorical ambivalence in the concluding recommendations in this piece. First, it may be necessary to understand field recordings as a sonic method as opposed to an uncontested research practice.

Using an often-cited argument on methodology by Sullivan and Porter, Jeff Grabill emphasizes the importance of a distinction between method and methodology, where a methodology may involve a component of ideology or values, a component of practices, and finally a set of methods, or tools, for accomplishing the study (211). Using this distinction field recordings could be considered merely the tool or means by which a sonic methodology is carried out—how the data is collected. (This would be similar to the distinction between titration as a methodology versus measuring a liquid from the center of the meniscus as a conventional lab practice.) Here I argue that field recordings are often treated simply as the tool or convention for sonic methodologies, but we may move field recording closer to the methodological by suggesting that there are ideologies, as well as practices involved in field recording sounds.

Field recordings are often used in one of two of the following ways: 1) as a set of audio assets for "making as method" sonic research or 2) as data for qualitative methods involving applying code categories or listening frameworks that may isolate specific categories of sound or consequences of sound. While recordings of participant interviews or conversations present some clear requirements in terms of IRB and ethics, the recording of nonverbal soundscapes, which might include the combination of weather sounds, machine sounds and/or animal sounds with human-made nonverbal sounds (such as sighs, coughs, or footsteps) present a greater sense of uncertainty. I argue that field recordings for nonverbal sounds are fraught with questions of ethics, ownership, IRB-related issues (consent and nonparticipation), and consequence.

In order to address these complications and how to cultivate ambivalence related to recording human-made nonverbal sounds, first, I will briefly explore some of the available methods or listening frameworks that may require or at least make field recording data desirable. Next, I will use two examples of sonic methods projects (one "making as method" and one qualitative coding project) to discuss where ambivalence may fit into choices of whether to record sound-

scapes. Finally, I will present a rough heuristic based on Indigenous digital composing and Indigenous sound studies to help researchers think about what it means to truly cultivate ambivalence when using field recordings.

## Field Recording in Sonic Methods of Making and Coding

“Sound studies” is an interdisciplinary research area that exists within communication, media studies, critical cultural studies, history, archeology, and so forth, with relatively recent intersections with rhetoric and writing. Jonathan Sterne defines sound studies as reflexive, critical, and conscious of its own objects and methods, such that not all study of sound is “sound studies” (4-5). Joshua Gun et al. have made a similar point that not all studies of sound are sonic rhetoric (486). Therefore, studies in sound, rhetoric, and writing have been conscious of methodologies, even as these have evolved to consider more and more the embodied listening and recording of sounds.

In early research on sound and rhetoric, Greg Goodale made the argument throughout his 2011 book, *Sonic Persuasion*, that to “read” sound or sonic texts was not much different for those engaged in close reading as a method than it was to read other complex texts. To the question of specific approaches, Goodale writes “The viability of a specific method for reading sound is not as important as the greater argument that sound can be read” (12). With her concept of “multimodal listening,” and Jennifer Lynn Stoever’s “embodied ear,” Steph Ceraso has more recently questioned the role of embodiment and materiality in working with sound. (I will return to this embodiment in the subsequent section on listening.) What this means is that 1) sonic methodologies for rhetoric and writing are still in the very early stages of development; 2) not all study of sound is based in rhetoric and writing; and 3) unlike early studies, many recent research projects in rhetoric, writing, and sound are incorporating files of actual sound, often made possible through field recordings.

Field recordings are frequently treated as a transparent or agreed-upon aspect in a variety of sonic methods. Deciding to take a field recording of a place, space, or event might be as “clear-cut” to a researcher as deciding to use a pencil while making a sketch of a learning space or a transcription program for an interview with a participant. By which case, I mean that these are choices still conditioned by disciplinary and personal training, but may not seem to be particularly ethically complicated, and are choices that are in widespread use. However, as I noted above, it is my goal in this chapter to consider what makes field recording nonverbal sounds more of a methodological or epistemological choice—what are the various ways in which concepts such as ownership, consent, or affect impact a researcher’s decision to field record nonverbal sounds?

By field recordings, I simply mean a researcher taking a recording device or multiple devices and recording different tracks (or a single track) of a given soundscape for future analysis, coding, or soundwriting/remixing. The act of

choosing what to record is another aspect of method—does one leave a recording device literally in the field for hours or days and capture a longitudinal study of the given soundscape, or is the field recording more focused on an a priori, desired sonic phenomenon? What hardware or recording device, microphone type, or windscreen would best be used to capture sounds? How are sounds archived, stored, and possibly transcribed after being recorded? These are all important questions. However, as I mentioned above, I'm focusing even more simply on the question of whether one chooses to field record at all.

It may seem obvious at first why a researcher would want to make field recordings, particularly from novel sonic events or soundscapes to make, remix, or design a project as a method of inquiry. Perhaps misplaced ideals of “authenticity” or a kind of positivist “truth” seem to cling to having audio assets from a particular place, moment, or time. It doesn't seem as rigorous or “sound” (if you pardon the pun), to simply recreate the soundscape of a busy street corner, or protest, or school yard from sounds already recorded in a Creative Commons archive. In essence, “making” or soundwriting as a methodology depends on having the sound of that school yard, that protest, that street corner to mix among other sound sources or moments in field recordings to explore analysis and argument about how the nonverbal sounds are working in that context or in order to answer the research questions we might ask about how sounds function. Support for field recording within sonic methods can be found in several studies and institutes. For instance, the 2018 Digital Field Methods Institute at UT Austin included practice, training, and considerations of field recording to work with sonic data and sonic research practices. Making as method is also discussed from the standpoint of practitioners, such as Victor Del Hierro's study of DJs as technical communicators. Furthermore, many scholars involved in video also focus on audio assets within their video recordings (VanKooten; Halbritter and Lindquist).

Besides making as method of inquiry, field recording can also be used in empirically driven sonic inquiry. In fact, although not often cited in this way, R. Murray Schafer's 1977 book, *Tuning of the World*, includes numerous depictions and discussions of decibel levels, frequency, decay and attack of sounds, as well as a spectrograph of the different bird notes (31). In these ways and others, field recordings allow for sounds to be categorized, even quantified by machine listening and principles of acoustics. This in turn makes possible different quantitative and qualitative methods. In discussing the difficulties of collaborative, feminist methods, Kris Blair and Christine Tulley identify issues in perceptions of rigor and tradition when completing their project within the expectations of a “typical” dissertation process (312). While not the same in terms of purpose or conventions as a dissertation, sonic methods as newly evolving within rhetoric and writing are also subject to objections about rigor, subjective listening, and disciplinary “fit.” Field recordings that lend themselves to “traditional” quantitative and qualitative methods can sometimes effectively counter those objections.

In addition to perceptions of rigor or traditions of empirical inquiry, taking field recordings can also be used as a means of invention, to develop new sonic methods through either qualitative coding or listening frameworks. There are many potential ways to analyze the “raw” sonic data of field recordings. Although a discussion of comparative and inventive sonic frameworks is beyond the scope of this chapter, the following are just a set of possibilities for using field recordings to develop new sonic methods:

1. Coding sounds or sonic interactions between two or more sounds based on Theo van Leeuwen’s six parameters of sound (outlined in his 1999 book, *Speech, Music, Sound*) from a tradition of social semiotics
2. Coding aspects of materiality involved in a soundscape (by modifying Carole Blair’s five questions of materiality)
3. Using Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin’s grounded theory model for discourse analysis or qualitative coding to develop codes “emerging” from the data
4. Charting multimodal interactions of the kind Sigrid Norris describes based on attention, interpersonal interaction, and placement of the body
5. Mapping or taking counts on the instances of sounds in particular zones of usage, (adapting Adam Bunnell et al.’s “hot spot” model from learning spaces research)
6. Developing a framework for interpreting sonic data that cites cultural rhetoric research, such as Afrofuturism within Black sound studies (Steinskog) or sound studies of the Global South (Steingo and Sykes), or Ecofeminism and technology (Romberger) or Indigenous sound studies (Robinson)

This is by no means an exhaustive list of sonic methods, but merely offered to show the range of possibilities for interpretive or qualitative frameworks when working with field recordings.

Field recordings don’t just nebulously heighten the sense of possibility for sonic methods, but also address the idea of listening itself. As I wrote about in “Tuning the Sonic Playing Field,” listening presents a position that is complicated by the embodied experience of the listener, as Greg Downey notes in his study of capoeira (Ahern 80-82). More recently Jennifer Lynn Stoever also addresses the fusion of listening with the self in her development of the concept of the “embodied ear.” She writes: “I use the ‘embodied ear’ to represent how individuals’ listening practices are shaped by the totality of their experiences, historical context, and physicality, as well as intersecting subject positions and particular interactions with power (the listening ear)” (Stoever 15). In other words, it isn’t possible (or perhaps even desirable?) to listen outside of oneself or from an “objective” stance devoid of culture and subject position. However, what does this mean for a researcher interested in “intercoder reliability” (where at least two different people demonstrate statistically that they are able to code data with “enough”

similarity?) Even taking seriously Dylan Robinson's point about listening from different subject positions, which I will explore in the subsequent sections, it may be true that access to the sonic, and/or visualized, metadata of field recordings offers different avenues for multiple individuals to reach "close enough" agreement or similarity. This is akin to the principle of tuning where there need not be "perfect" alignment with a particular acoustic measure of pitch, but the possibility of reaching close enough agreement in order to "play together."

## Complicating Field Recording with Two Examples

However, just because field recording (whether for making or for coding/frame-works of interpretive listening) offers theoretical richness and possibilities, does not make this an uncomplicated practice within sonic methods. The opportunity to field record may often be presented and framed only in those terms—as an opportunity available for the taking or not. It isn't often that researchers in sound studies have presented instead a complicated decision-making process based on ambivalence and when/if to make field recordings. In this section I will outline two projects that differ in several ways (participants, perception of public/private space, purpose, and method) and that potentially involved the use of field recordings. I am using these examples to highlight some of the choices that may be made about whether or not to record nonverbal sounds, and then will move into further complicating factors that could be involved in other sonic projects.

The first project to be discussed is one that involved making as method and where the field recordings that were collected took place in a public, observational context with no intention of human interaction. The second project is one that involved the IRB-approval process and took place within several discipline-specific writing intensive college classrooms but did *not* ultimately result in field recordings being made.

### To Record

In May 2012, following the defense of my dissertation, and in connection to my interest in materiality and memorial construction, I made several field recordings of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the World War II Memorial in Washington, D.C. It was a hot day in the beginning of the height of tourist season in D.C., and these field recordings were made by visibly extending my arm, holding up the recorder, and capturing the soundscape for approximately five 2-3-minute increments. These field recordings would then be used several years later to mix into an argument about erasure and sonic participation operating differently within each memorial space. (This piece can be found in the soundscapes section in the ebook *Rhetorics Change/Rhetoric's Change*, edited by Rice, Graham, and Detweiler.) At the time, I decided to complete these field recordings based on my understanding that this was a public space, I was not close enough to capture any

individual conversations, and no identifying information could be traced back to the participants in the space. In other words, if there were approximately 40 people present at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial it would be impossible to isolate identifying information in individual voices, and no opening of a soda can or footstep, or even cellphone ringtone could reasonably be traced to any specific person. This assumption was also related to the fact that these were outdoor memorials with no prior registration or ticketing to enter, so there was no public record (except for perhaps GPS data?) that could be linked back to anyone being present at the memorials on that day. Additionally, as I could see no means for a participant to “opt out” of contributing to the soundscape or be contacted quickly enough in such a large space, it didn’t seem realistic or feasible to try to collect informed consent.

### Not to Record

The second project was an IRB-approved, empirical study conducted at my first teaching appointment in which I wanted to observe writing-intensive classrooms across different disciplines to listen to their soundscapes. The IRB approval was sought in summer of 2014, with data collection taking place within seven different classrooms two times apiece during fall 2014. Some of the same complications were involved (such as the issue of opting out), but this was clearly a private space, and one that involved ethical complications, such as perceived differences of power and affect between students and instructors. Additionally, I was only concerned with collecting data on the nonverbal sounds of the classroom, and not any of the exact conversations or dialogue/exchanges within a lesson or activity. In other words, I was outwardly doing something very similar to a traditional classroom observation, but I was solely interested in the exchange of nonverbal sounds in the soundscape. However, unlike the outdoor memorial spaces, I couldn’t really capture nonverbal sounds without also capturing individual conversations and class dialogues in my field recording.

In this project, the decision to not field record was made at the request of my institution’s IRB. My institution’s IRB was concerned over students’ rights to their nonverbal sounds and would not approve the project if it involved field recordings because there was no clear way for students to “opt out.” It is true that students could be given a consent form, but unlike video recording (which could be directed to specific students or away from others) or the collection of classroom artifacts, the IRB members recognized that students would be unable to prevent themselves from making nonverbal sounds (like coughing or paper flipping) within the classroom soundscape. Furthermore, unlike the memorial visitors, who chose to enter public space, the students would be missing their learning experience if they chose not to enter the classroom space at their private institution on the day of my observations. In other words, opting out would either involve recording students’ sounds without their permission, or would interfere



with their learning if they chose to be absent. Instead, I was given the option to collect only my own written, listening field notes and an informed consent from instructors (similar to a traditional classroom observation.) At the beginning of each observed class instructors introduced me and the goal of my research based on the script that I provided.

At the time I agreed to this modification of my research project, predominantly because I was only entering my third year of my appointment in a tenure track position, and as a very junior scholar I was also aware of being one of the few people in my English department studying writing, with interest in digital environments, and the only faculty member studying sound. So, while my identity afforded me privilege, at the time my research positionality felt more precarious, and further so exacerbated by being pregnant by the time of data collection. Therefore, I was content to collect written field listening notes, reasoning that I could do more research into IRB protocols and expand/replicate my study with actual field recordings later on. In other words, at that time I perceived my lack of field recording as my own lack and certainly not as a productive, intentional, or ethically motivated choice.

This choice to not field record was one that then caused me to create a focused listening template where I first recorded information such as a quick sketch of the visual and material configurations of the classroom spaces, setup of chairs/seating, and any other notable features (such as windows or placement of technology, classroom projectors, and so forth). From there my listening notes were largely temporally based and descriptive, with occasional time stamps and onomatopoeia-like visualizations for nonverbal sounds. Thus, this data collection affected what I listened for and what I learned, such as ideas about learning space design (in my article “Understanding Learning Spaces Sonically, Soundscaping Evaluations of Place”) and the focus on temporal unfolding of genre performances (with Ashley Mehlenbacher in “Listening for Genre Multiplicity in Classroom Soundscapes”). It also affected methodology in that because I had essentially written a moment-by-moment transcript in my field notes, Ashley and I used Nvivo, rather than complicating our coding method based on coding segmented audio files themselves. So, the single choice to abandon the possibility of field recordings in turn influenced and reverberated throughout the research project in unpredictable (at the time, to me) ways.

What both of these examples show is a few of the ideas that I will now unpack further in relation to ambivalence to field recording nonverbal sounds, particularly when those soundscapes involve the “sounding” of human participants. Many of the concepts that will be introduced are ones that scholars have grappled with in a variety of contexts such as WPA work, community-based research, and feminist and queer methods. What I am attempting to do is “listen to the ambivalence” or the questions that arise from taking these concepts seriously when applied to field recordings of nonverbal soundscapes specifically, or nonverbal sonic methods more generally.



## Listening for Ambivalence

The importance of the term “ambivalence,” is one that Glasby traces in a chapter of *Re/Orienting Writing Studies: Queer Methodologies, Queer Projects*, titled “Making it Queer, Not Clear: Embracing Ambivalence and Failure in Queer Methodologies.” Glasby uses both Seigworth’s notion of ambivalence as “unresolved, enmeshed, disoriented” and Yagelski’s definition of ambivalence as “a troubling space between doubt and committed action . . . a space of both possibility and paralysis” to argue for ambivalence as generative, serving to “diminish authority,” and open to “author-ize” an expanded sense of lived experiences (28). It is for these reasons that I similarly believe that field recordings (and perhaps all sonic methodologies as newly developing) might be subject to ambivalence as a kind of messy proving ground for ethical and ideological practices of method. Rather than simply accept the conventions or traditions of making field recordings as a practice that has been used and legitimized within many different sonic methods, it is important to first reinvent this conversation about methods and methodologies with the sense of productive not-knowing.

One of the ways in which ambivalence may enter the conversation of field recording nonverbal sounds is through Grabill’s discussion of research stance. In his chapter on community-based research in *Writing Studies Research in Practice: Methods and Methodologies*, Grabill presents research stance as “a set of beliefs and obligations that shape how one acts as a researcher” (211). Further he notes that in community-based research this also has to do with two issues—the place of community in inquiry and the importance of relationships (Grabill 213). Although presently I will be discussing purpose as well, research stance seems to encompass a firmer, a priori set of priorities to govern choices within a research project. Another way that research stance could be considered is through the lens of feminist methods and reciprocity. Lauren Rosenberg and Emma Howes offer “lingering on relationships with participants, listening, and co-creating knowledge” as essential principles in a feminist ethos of representation (89). Regardless of framework, however, the field recordings I took from the U.S. memorials did not consider community, relationships, reciprocity, or participants. In fact, my research stance, (if one could even call it that) did more to call into question Rosenberg and Howes’ distinction between “the ethnography” vs. “an archive.” While they use these terms to literally describe their two projects, conceptually, they raise for me the question of how we treat sounds. Can sounds exist without a community enplacing them? Are sounds more an archive of a place, captured and preserved, (though with other associated ethical concerns and complications—see Stone) or are they always a kind of ethnographic study?

Another key concept to listening for or witnessing ambivalence within the practice of taking field recordings is by interrogating issues of purpose. In relation to WPA work, Douglas Hesse gives us three analytic axes offering different configurations of purpose (identity, instrumentality, advocacy, and integrity); audience

(professional or local); and act [of research] (as basic or applied) (153). While Hesse offers these distinctions in Figure 7.1 to name and explore different types of WPA research, his three axes of purpose, audience, and act could also be subsumed under the larger umbrella of purpose/intent since purpose is related to audience and research design. In this way, larger aspects of purpose could help to locate ambivalence or motivation for field recording, rather than simply designing a soundscape study on the prior basis of needing or wanting to make field recordings based on a notion of convention or method (vs. methodology.) In other words, how might a project's field recording of nonverbal soundscapes address purpose in terms of the desired outcome, audience, or dimension of research (basic or applied?)

Perhaps even more obvious than these two overall concepts of stance and purpose, which are in some ways connected, is the issue of how IRB and human subjects research creates ambivalence for making field recordings. In "Digital Spaces, Online Environments, and Human Participant Research" William Banks and Michelle Eble give an extensive reading of the history and requirements of IRB approval, while also noting the messiness that traditional definitions acquire in humanities research, particularly when conducted online. In addition to noting that what constitutes "research" and "generalizable knowledge," can become tricky, Banks and Eble offer another definition within the Code of Federal Regulations based on human subjects and interaction: "Human subject means a living individual about whom an investigator (whether professional or student) conducting research obtains 1) data through intervention or interaction with the individual, or 2) identifiable private information" (32). Under this definition, the field recordings of the U.S. memorials certainly do not constitute human subjects research in that no human subjects were interacted with and that no identifiable private information was recorded. The only possible "interaction" with human-created data would be the recording of human-made nonverbal sounds such as footsteps, coughs, laughter, the pop of a soda can, and so forth, but which could not be attributed to any individuals or identified in any way. However, even though IRB approval may not have been required in a public, unidentifiable aggregation of nonverbal sounds, it still warrants consideration in how Banks and Eble talk about ethical issues of public vs. private and harm to contributors (in their case of digital, online blogs) and in my case, nonverbal sounds.

When it comes to legality and ethics, there is also not much guidance on nonverbal sounds unless they capture conversation, or identifiable, human-made, verbal sounds. Particularly in the current time of protests against police violence and a citizen-led desire to police violent behavior, there are numerous resources on rights related to video recording with audio. However, most of these guidelines are not only state-specific in some cases but focus nearly exclusively on videotaping and the capture of possible, private conversations in public (ACLU PA, "Know Your Rights"). The question then becomes whether the non-video, field recording of nonverbal sounds is subject to the same ethical or legal considerations. If it isn't a publicly held, "private" conversation, but footsteps, coughs, or

ringtones, is there less expectation of privacy or consent? For the project outlined above I might argue that few people would expect to be asked to consent to the recording of their footsteps, however, probably at the same time, equally few would expect that someone would be recording their footsteps in public.

Another related notion to ethics of recording these nonverbal, non-conversation-based sounds is the idea of ownership. In fact, in the example above of whether people would have the expectation of informed consent to record their footsteps, one could just as easily ask how much *ownership* people attribute to their own human-created, nonverbal sounds. Again, the nonverbal sounds of interest to me are ones that humans are involved in making but do not include verbal components like conversation or identity markers, such as “the voice” more broadly. This category of nonverbal sounds might include human body sounds like yawns or coughs; sounds in motion like footsteps or clapping; or object-assisted sounds like opening a soda can or manipulating a cell phone. I hesitate to say that for the last type of nonverbal sounds we might attribute the sound more to the object (the phone or the can of soda), but logically these sounds are made through human manipulation.

We’ve addressed above the notion of “is this human subject research?” and now I’m asking even if it is technically not, how much ownership should or does one have over the sounds of their own bodies? This question has of course both a theoretical and a practical component. In her chapter “Multimedia Research,” Janice McIntire-Strasburg raises the question of how feasible it is to give or seek informed consent in the context of digital assets (audio and visual) that are being remixed into new works, and then moves on to explore the issue of intellectual property (293-98). In her exploration she covers the idea of citation practices, authorship vs ownership, and differing practices of appropriation (for example “borrowing” code in programming) (298). The problem is that none of these areas seem to apply to ownership over the sound source of one’s own footsteps. I can’t cite them, they might not fall into the categories of intellectual property, and the only practices or conventions of borrowing are that the field of sound studies seems to have already become quite comfortable with recording soundscapes of busy outdoor markets, cafés, and so forth. However, this doesn’t mean that the question of ownership is without ambivalence. In *Hungry Listening*, Robinson discusses at length the Western settler, colonial mentality toward “extractivism” and appropriation (14). Robinson writes:

In other words, the meeting between listener and listened-to is bounded by a Western sense orientation in which we do not feel the need to be responsible to sound as we would another life. Sound’s perceived lack of subjectivity here results in an asymmetrical relationship where the listener’s response can be one where they dismiss, affirm, or appropriate sound as content. (15-16)

Robinson’s point that we as researchers do not feel responsible to the sounds we record or treat sounds as involved in a research relationship is well-taken.

However, my question remains whether a person has any feelings of ownership over footsteps or clapping? And if so, what are the conditions or types of sounds that create feelings of ownership? Again, this is even more troubled by the notion of field recordings being used in projects of “making as method” where sounds may be changed, as well. This is not something I covered extensively above, because the field recordings I made involved juxtaposing two different memorial soundscapes without any further editing or remixing such as pitch modification or volume leveling, but such a project could have been done, and thus could have introduced even more ambivalence.

Also related to ownership is the idea of affect. While affect is itself another complex concept filled with nuance (and scholarly research), my more simplistic suggestion is that ambivalence over recording nonverbal human sounds is tied to an implicit sense of whether a sound is laden with affect (such as cries, groans, sobs, or screams) or feels more affectively “neutral” to us, such as a footstep. Perhaps it is the notion of affect that gets more precisely to feelings of a nonverbal sound being “private” or perceptions of ownership over that sound. In the case of my classroom soundscape project described above it was pragmatically my IRB who raised issues over informed consent from students that caused me to not make any field recordings, but also theoretically a sense that students within a classroom were vulnerable and subject to different affects and power structures than a tourist at the World War II Memorial. However, I can guarantee this reaction might have been very different had I encountered in my field recording of memorials any visitors who were crying.

Another complicating factor is that again, Robinson argues that normative settler listening prioritizes listening “well” for content versus listening for “affective feel, timbre, touch, and texture of sound” (38). In other words, as a white, settler-listener, I could be very bad at listening for affect. And even if it isn’t as much a matter of being “good or bad,” as Janine Butler discusses in her chapter in this collection on transcription of ASL, differences of listening and interpreting present unique complications connected to affect, as well. Queer theory and feminist theory also affirm this. Caroline Dadas and Matthew Cox write about queering professional writing, but making a larger point about normativity, state: “Shifting our frames is essential to reorienting writing studies, to recognize the ways our research methodologies work to reproduce the same knowledge in the same frameworks we’re already comfortable exploring” (192). I would argue that perhaps our field recording of nonverbal sounds does the same and hears what we are already comfortable with—neutral affect within field recording.

Finally, one last concept to listen for in the context of field recordings is consequence. Although more of an umbrella term, consequence brings together some of the issues above of “othering”: harm, surveillance, and affective results. Much of the work already reviewed above examines the valences of consequence whether implicitly or explicitly. So, in this last section I will consider just a few places where consequence could be unexpected, further the marginalization of

communities, or be used for harm. The examples of footsteps, coughing, or the opening of a soda can are ones that I have used somewhat disingenuously above as they seem to offset this dimension of ownership, affect, or identity when considered against some other nonverbal sounds such as laughter, cries, or screams. However, within a recording context, no nonverbal human sound is without potential consequence in being recorded and attributed to a particular location, place, event, or set of practices. First, in the case of footsteps, identifying footsteps and quantifying them could allow for arguments to be made about visitor density, perhaps even directions or pathways of motion, or speed. While this is maybe not the most shocking or harmful use of field recordings of footsteps in the setting of a memorial meant to be visited, a field recording of a street corner or alleyway at night could have an analogous effect to putting down a strip on a road that senses how many cars pass by.

As our field and others become increasingly interested in “big data,” our ability to isolate sounds and harness machine listening to make counts could become weaponized in certain arguments. To this point, the sound of coughing, while more neutral in previous times, has become very much a sound of some consequence during the current global pandemic. Not only could it be used in field recordings to map and make arguments about community health, but it could also be used in surveillance and tracking. Just as social media posts recently warned about posting photographs of protesters, which could allow those protesters to be identified and targeted, field recordings involving any coughing among protesters could allow certain groups to double-down on arguments about the dangers of protesting for public health, even though a cough occurs for many other reasons than infection. Thirdly, the example of the sound of opening a soda can could similarly become associated with metrics of obesity, public and community health, or moralistic claims about funding to events or communities. Finally, nonverbal sounds can mean different things to different listeners (as has been cited above) and can enact psychological harm and violence apart even from any sort of potential sonic data mining. In the 2019 Computers and Writing Conference, keynote speaker Chris Gilliard discussed oppressive systems with a sonic example of the development of the automatic door lock and what that sound meant to a Black man walking down the street hearing the cascading sound of *ca-chunk, ca-chunk, ca-chunk, ca-chunk* of white “fear” inscribing sonic violence in that space, as every driver locked their doors. So, consequence is something that as researchers we must consider for making, archiving, and sharing/remixing field recordings, but also something that is deeply complicated by listener and researcher subject position.

After exploring so many different concepts that make the choice to conduct field recordings feel riddled with ethical complications, messiness, and scholarly ambivalence, it might be questionable why we would *ever* want to use them as method or methodology in the future. So, before moving into my final thoughts, I offer a last caveat about the potential use of field recordings in quantification.

While quantitative studies are not always as popular in our disciplines of writing studies, rhetoric, or sound studies, many theorists of methods and methodologies have argued for their utility. Richard Haswell opens his chapter on the functionality of quantitative methods for writing studies with the reality that in times of crisis we often call on colleagues to share quantitative data on things such as contingent faculty wages, class sizes, and so forth. In other words, one does not need to buy into antiquated and harmful post-positivist notions in order to make quantitative data useful. According to Haswell, quantitative methods can be used for the following purposes: insight (into phenomena that would be hard to observe); transgression (to change the minds and hearts of our audiences and correct misconceptions); challengeability (in regard to method/research design); and persuasion (to intervene, fund, or move stakeholders to change) (188). G Patterson also notes in “Queering and Transing Quantitative Research,” that rather than cleaving to mean, median, and standard deviation or some sense of “objectivity,” quantitative data can be productive in several different ways including “queering data interpretation” and reading for deviation—making more of the margins of data and who is represented or not (66-72). In conclusion, field recordings allow for many positive possibilities as a methodology, or a method embedded within different research studies. In terms of quantitative methods, field recordings could make possible machine listening to identify acoustic dimensions of sound (such as hertz or decibels) that create quantitative data and invite *positive* interventions and arguments, as well as ones of negative consequence and harm. This is why there may be so much ambivalence and not-knowing involved in the choice to make field recordings.

In this section I have attempted to do some listening for and witnessing of ambivalence, messiness, un-knowingness coming from different methods and methodologies in feminism, writing studies, digital writing, queer methods, and Indigenous theory related to field recordings. In attuning to these places some key concepts such as research stance, purpose, informed consent, ownership, affect, and consequence have emerged. In the final section, I will turn to how we might as researchers *cultivate* that ambivalence rather than ignore or avoid it.

## Cultivating Rhetorical Ambivalence

I am calling this final section “cultivating ambivalence” because as Glasby argues, ambivalence is not something we should shy away from or avoid in our methods, and instead is something that can be generative and ethically-guiding (25). Although the choice to complete field recordings might seem like a simple, one-off decision in the life of a research project, I argue that it could instead gain methodological status, by asking us to interrogate the values, practices, and ways of knowing codified within field recording.

In order to dig deeper into what cultivating may be like, as opposed to simply listening to or for ambivalence, I will turn back to Indigenous approaches to both



sound studies (Robinson) and digital composing and the assemblage (Arola and Arola). As I have reviewed above, Robinson's book deals with complicated notions of listening subject positions, appropriation/extractivism, and how a sound must be treated—not as an “asset,” but as a complicated interplay among things. Robinson states that in order to

consider intersubjectivity between listener, music, and space and reach beyond adjectival reliance, [he engages] in what [he calls] apposite methodology. Apposite methodologies are processes for conveying experience alongside subjectivity and alterity; they are forms of what is sometimes referred to as “writing with” a subject in contrast to “writing about.” (81)

As a musicologist, Robinson is perhaps most focused on laying out a taxonomy of four different forms of musical encounter, however, throughout the monograph he makes the point that sound does not just exist as sound, to be taken up at will of an authorial intent, but among relationships, and based in space or land protocols. Similarly, and in the field of composition and rhetoric, Kristin Arola and her brother, Adam Arola, consider what it means to work with assemblages in ethical, responsible ways for digital composing in their chapter, “An Ethics of Assemblage: Creative Repetition and the ‘Electric Pow Wow.’” In drawing on Deleuze, they consider DJs, the refrain, and “creative repetition,” saying “yet we want to avoid an understanding of assemblage where cultural appropriation can enter under the auspices of a remix ethos” (209). They ultimately set out a framework in which a “good assemblage” can be assessed through considering if it is innovative, productive, responsive, opens up new ways of living and thinking, and, perhaps most importantly, if an assemblage is interrogating and answering ethically “whom does this assemblage benefit?” (211). I argue that both of these frameworks—the idea of sound, relations, and place, and assemblages of sound as benefit can be brought together in a way that helps sound scholars more fully consider whether or not to engage in even the first step of composing or assembling—the initial field recording of sounds. In Figure 7.1 I have sketched out a possibility for a visual/verbal heuristic that could help us to cultivate this ambivalence:

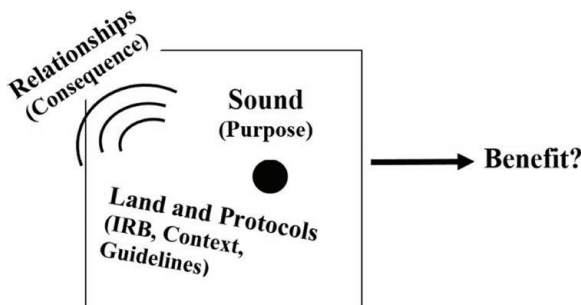


Figure 7.1. Heuristic for Cultivating Ambivalence in Field Recording Nonverbal Sounds



In Figure 7.1, I have chosen an image that uses visual clustering to depict that there are complex considerations among sound, relationships, and land/protocols, and that these complexities must also be weighed against the potential for benefit from making field recordings. In the figure, sounds are aligned with questions of purpose—why is this sound or space being subjected to field recording? Next, the IRB and questions of legal and human ethics of field recording form a kind of connection to the land and the context of place in which sounds are being recorded. Like land protocols may offer guidance, but not in isolation, IRB concerns can be read as the “space” of appropriate recordings and can help sound studies researchers to consider a myriad of complexities that may not immediately seem apparent in the first choices of research design. Finally, relationships are aligned with consequences. Rather than simply plucking sound “out of the air” in a space without context for participants or listeners, consequence asks us to imagine the not yet imagined use of our field recordings. This is also made in the visual metaphor to locate relationships or consequences extending beyond the “box” or boundaries of the research project. Can the field recordings be used for large scale data mining or surveillance? Do the field recordings “other” participants in the soundscape? Do they offer productive or capacious potentials? And finally, my argument is that these questions ultimately are intertwined with Arola and Arola’s questions of benefit. To whom is the greatest benefit being conveyed? If the answer is only the researcher in a way that does not positively intervene in communities or impact the public or listeners in ethically expansive ways, perhaps field recording is just that, seeking to strip away sounds from people and places.

While I attempted to visually inscribe some of the complexity of these interplays between sound, relationships, context/land/protocols and benefit, Figure 7.1 could alternatively be configured as a chart to help researchers actively cultivate rhetorical ambivalence. In this way, a chart version could help researchers to inventively brainstorm some of this balancing or complexities that may not otherwise be considered. Such a chart may look like Table 7.1.

**Table 7.1. Figure 1 Recording Heuristic in Chart Form**

<b>Sounds</b> to be recorded and their purpose	<b>Land/Space and Protocols</b> considering context, place of recording, and IRB	<b>Relationships</b> and consequence for people being recorded and soundscape participants	<b>Benefit</b> – who benefits and how/in what ways?
(Space for notes and categories for brainstorming / invention)			

While it is my recommendation that sonic researchers use either the provided visualization or chart format in order to cultivate rhetorical ambivalence around the decision of whether to make field recordings, I'd like to return once again to privilege and vulnerability before concluding. Much of this chapter has considered the vulnerability of those whose nonverbal sounds are being recorded. I stand by that argument and believe it to be important. However, I would also like to acknowledge the vulnerability of BIPOC researchers in cultivating rhetorical ambivalence. As a white researcher, the most negative feedback I have ever previously received for my research into nonverbal sound within an English department has been in the form of being ignored or a gentle ribbing that "I must think I'm John Cage." However, researchers with other positionality must constantly endure microaggressions, questions of competence and rigor, and an assault on their research agendas. As I mentioned above, a reviewer reminded me that in many cases vulnerable researchers cannot afford the uncertainty or productive un-knowing that cultivating rhetorical ambivalence requires. Some researchers might feel pressured to make field recordings precisely because it feels like a conventional step within sonic methods. That is why I would argue that researchers, like me, who have benefitted from a tremendous amount of privilege need to first assume the risk of cultivating rhetorical ambivalence toward making field recordings so that it becomes a conventional practice, a thoughtful and accepted first step in any sonic research project.

In conclusion, Robinson and other sonic cultural rhetorics scholars have discussed appropriation, listening from subject positions that disregard the complexity of sound, and "extractivism." Feminist scholars have noted the importance of relationships and reciprocity. Queer scholars in *Re/Orienting Writing Studies* and Steinskog in *Afrofuturism and Black Sound Studies*, note who is marginalized in our methods and whose voice is left out. I argue that invigorating our sonic methods and methodologies with more ambivalence, particularly for field recording, also takes into consideration contexts of study such as medical soundscapes, cultural soundscapes, and personal soundscapes. While it may be tempting to assert an object-oriented approach to sound that gives weight to the force and potential of the nonverbal sounds "sounding" on their own, decentered from humans, there are often relationships between the sound, sound source, and humans making the sound. So, why listen for and why cultivate ambivalence for field recordings? It may not be that many people will lay claim to their cough, their footfalls, or their flip of a piece of paper. However, these sounds remain embodied as much as they are also dislocated from identifiable bodies. Even when we rely on ethically guided processes such as IRB approval and disciplinary convention, what is "okay" within the guidelines of human subjects research may not encompass the entire complexity and ambiguity of nonverbal sounds. This might be another necessary aspect of our sonic methods and methodologies moving forward—to give more dignity, humanity, and possibility to nonverbal sounds and the humans who make them.

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