

Rubbish, Noise, Experimentations: New Afterlives of Field Recordings.
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“Sound scraps and resources of ethnographic writing.”

Suggested length of proposal paper: between 2000 and 3000 words

“I contend that the ethnographic impulse to render the texture of the ordinary depends upon close attention to detail”
Das, 2020: 2.

“Scraps are things that apparently lack beauty – a form of waste – but then we suddenly realise that this waste and these scraps have as much importance as the finest stone”
Paranthoën, 2009: 121-122.

In this paper, I take a retrospective look at the nature of the body of sound material formed during the anthropological fieldwork on conflict I conducted between 2009 and 2016 in Oaxaca, Mexico. Although the approach I adopted to these conflicts around issues of identity, society and territory was not really linked with the anthropology of sound, during my different field studies I nevertheless constantly produced and collected sound material. I paid little attention to the quality of these sound recordings and productions, which I saw at the time merely as notes to be used in the analysis prior to the writing process. As a result, the recordings vary in sound quality and in subject matter: interviews, soundscapes, situations, recorded lists, musical rehearsals, phone messages, local archives...

I propose to describe them here and to explore, retrospectively, what elements of this material directly contributed to the process of anthropological analysis and writing, and what was left out. I argue not only that careful listening to what was left out might enhance my analysis of the politics in this empirical enquiry, but moreover that rejected acoustic materials could, under certain conditions, be incorporated into anthropological – and sound-based – writing on politics.

This text therefore forms part of a reflexive process of “revisiting” a programme of field research and a corpus of ethnographic material in a personal trajectory of research that has gradually been transmogrified into a sounded and sensory anthropology¹ (Feld 1990,1991, Howes 2005, Pink 2009, Taussig 1993). In considering the sound “scraps” from these investigations, I will question certain “deaf spots” in

¹ This would constitute, on the scale of my personal journey, what Alexandrine Boudreault-Fournier has called, for the anthropological discipline, a “sensory turn” (Boudreault-Fournier 2020 : 40).

my anthropological writing, possibly neglected elements in an extended programme of empirical inquiry into politics in Mexico.

1. A diverse corpus of acoustic materials formed across multiple field studies

Field recordings have long been a common practice in anthropology and have contributed to the emergence of significant bodies of materials.² These recordings are often collected for archivist purposes, or with a view to transmission, for example, in order to document performances or maintain a trace of linguistic practices. My research is somewhat different, although sound plays a big part in my ethnographic practice, whether in the form of interviews and ambiences recorded hastily on a smartphone, notes and private thoughts dictated on a smartphone recorder as a memory aid, audio CDs of a musical group from the region, or WhatsApp messages addressed to and left by colleagues and contacts...

The aim of this research, carried out in Mexico's Oaxaca region, was to explore claims relating to territory and sovereignty, the political uses of discourses around identity and forms of political mediation. I undertook this study on anthropology of conflict and protest with a focus on two major social spaces in which politics play a big role in this region: schools and local festivals. For my doctoral research, I followed the teachers of Oaxaca in the different social spaces they occupied: in trade unions, in schools, and in the community. Subsequently, for my postdoctoral research, I studied the preparations for local festivals, notably rehearsals, and then the performances and parades associated with them.

I was thus able to build up a very diverse corpus of sound materials during this research, including recordings made at numerous events and meetings held by the teachers' union commemorating political violence inflicted in public spaces or at protest events. At the time, I saw these recordings – made with no real thought about the listening point and recording technique – as surplus material, a sort of sparse form of acoustic sampling which could potentially be useful for my analysis and my ethnographic descriptions. I was nevertheless well aware that this milieu had its own specific soundscape. Indeed, all the events, all the protest episodes that I covered ethnographically, were punctuated with chants, political anthems, music played by community bands, the constant noise of firecrackers, slogans, shouts and various oratorical displays.

² Some of which are now stored in sound archives such as the one at the Maison méditerranéenne des sciences de l'Homme or in important national institutions (British Library National Sound Archive, Fonds sonores Gallica in the Bibliothèque nationale de France, Fonoteca Nacional in Mexico), or else online archive platforms such as Didomena EHESS, which places great emphasis on sound.

In addition, in these different field studies, I always made day-to-day recordings, first on my voice recorder, then on my smartphone, and sometimes a hand-held audio recorder, preserving the sounds of market scenes, bus journeys, street sellers, bar musicians, radio announcements and other aspects of everyday life in Oaxaca and in the different places where I travelled for my research in this federal state. At the time, I thought of these recordings as a playful “aside”, unconnected with my research into politics and conflict. Whatever happened to these recordings – whether I have only filed, named, even deleted, or used them for writing – they reflect my immersive and relational connection with my fieldwork, congruent with the ethnographic practice of embeddedness in the everyday life of society, especially in a “sonic environment” (Guillebaud 2017) of which I was always aware.

2. The wheat of discourse and the chaff of noise? What makes a corpus of ethnographic material

Certain categories of sound necessarily contributed directly to my anthropological work of analysis and writing about politics, using qualitative methods proven in the course of my research experience.

To begin with, I drew on an essentially discursive analysis of the interviews I recorded during the study. Although most of the conversations and discussions in the field were not recorded, they were reconstructed retrospectively via written notes.

Another important contribution of my acoustic material was to the narrative and descriptive writing about ethnographic situations for analysis: for example recordings of union meetings or events in support of territorial claims. In these cases, the writing covered much more than the discursive content, encompassing ambiances, intonations, dissonances.

A final way in which I made direct use of this varied sound material, and in my view not the least important, was to play it back as I was writing in order to “re-immense” myself, sensorially, through sound, in the specific space-time of the situations. For example, listening to extracts of union meetings in which fatigue, hunger, weariness can be heard, but also the language or the echoes characteristic of the gymnasiums in which these meetings were often held. In this sense, as Jean Copans (1998) argues, ethnography is not just a corpus to be shaped, the corpus also “shapes” the ethnologist, sometimes without his or her knowledge. These “reactivated listenings” (Augoyard 2001) were a necessary stimulus to my writing, all the more important in that a significant part of that writing was done away from the field, cut off from the social and sensory context of the inquiry.

On the other hand, much of the corpus of sound materials built up over the different phases of fieldwork was not used in the analysis and the writing. This consisted of

everyday sound recording done in the street, in cafés and in markets, multiple voice messages sent and received on WhatsApp (interchanges with my contacts in the field), or else “to-do lists” and “impromptu” ideas dictated into my phone.

There are several reasons why they were left out. First, this material did not seem *directly* linked with my research topic – with local politics and with conflicts – but more connected with both the logistics and the personal and intimate aspects of my life as an anthropologist (food supplies, “time off” from the research, poetic or contemplative diversions). Stored in the “everyday life” subfolder of the research folder on my computer, it was hardly used except to share with people familiar with Mexican life and the characteristic sounds of its markets and street bands. Moreover, the lack of care taken in these “casual” recordings is very apparent, and many of the files in this overlooked material are of mediocre quality. Other files, dismissed in principle, had been stored in a general folder without being named. Some of them, although automatically dated thanks to the metadata, refer to situations that, ten years later, I cannot characterise precisely enough to use them.

As for the messages received and sent on WhatsApp (or other messaging platforms) in interchanges with my interviewees and contacts in the field, I did not really see them as useful to the writing or the analysis. Nonetheless, they do, for example, have the capacity to convey, in dialogic form, heuristic aspects of the ethnographic relationship, of its clarifications and misunderstandings. The messages sent to friends and colleagues, for their part, reveal the progress of my analyses, and the emotions experienced in the effort of fieldwork. These messages would evoke the way the research was discussed over time by my peers (and therefore the undeniable collaborative dimension typical of social science research). In any case, I saved none of these messages, and in that respect they are truly lost documents.

3. Another way to write about politics? Narrative and sensory resources of ethnographic sound “scraps”

The remarks above raise the crucial question of what constitutes a corpus of materials in ethnographic research. I would argue that the outlines of what can be “incorporated” shift over time. This means that elements left out in early investigations can be “recovered” for new research questions or in the light of new theoretical influences. The way in which questions develop is itself strongly marked, inductively, by the empirical work in the field. It is this that guides the interests and conceptual tools needed to analyse situations and configurations that are embedded in social and political reality.

As regards acoustic data, anthropologists often need to start out by acquiring sensory interpretive frameworks of a situated and historical nature in order to be able to understand certain aural dimensions of social life. In order to handle the sounds of the

research milieu for purposes of analysis and writing, anthropologists must first forge and train their “ethnographic ear” in order to grasp the subtle or even imperceptible aural dimensions of politics in the making. As Vincent Battesti argues, ethnography is akin to an “embodied apprenticeship of the sensitivities at work, to the practice of decentring their sensory universe to learn that of others” (2017: 766),

This long apprenticeship in my Mexican fieldwork enabled me gradually to grasp, for example, acoustic and ritualised forms of political sociabilities, musical, vocal and linguistic expressions attached to specific agendas of decolonisation and dissent. These consist, for example, in the different repertoires of the community marching bands, the deployment of firecrackers and whistles during a political meeting, or else the strategic uses of the local indigenous languages of Oaxaca in their relation to Castilian during performances in public arenas.

In this way, I gradually began to recognise the ethnographic value of a wider palette of sound recordings made in the field, and also began to think about new acoustic details in my recordings, such as intonations or silences. Ethnographic work, as a cognitive and practical experience, goes well beyond the collection of material; it is a matter of listening, of intersubjectivity. Therefore, in the field, a useful heuristic method is to pay attention to the non-discursive dimensions of the political such as silences, hesitations, and alterations in the voice, which can signify important aspects of power and domination relationships and conflicts. Regarding this aspect, I draw on the pioneering work of Keith Basso (1970) who showed how, among the Apache of Arizona, whether or not a person decides to talk provides a clue to the status of the people present and the nature of the relationship between them. G r me Truc (2016) has analysed, in the United States and Europe, how 'minutes of silence' can be an effective form of resistance and protest. On another non-discursive level, Lila Abu-Lughod (1986) has explored, in the Egyptian context, the way in which women's embodied vocal performances can carry a resistance to norms, a sharp critique of colonial and gender power relations. In the context of Oaxaca, discursive ellipses and almost inaudible voices tell us much about the links between private experiences, power relations and conflicts.

An example of this is an exchange I had with a Zapotec bilingual Indian teacher from Oaxaca. As we discussed power relations within the teachers' union and the communities in which she worked, she was evasive about some aspects of her experience as a woman in these contexts. She concluded the exchange by saying: 'Calladita se ve mas bonita' [We are much prettier when we keep quiet]. This interaction gave me the opportunity to question the nature of these ellipses, of these parts of experience that were kept silent in the context of the fieldwork. Looking at politics through sound is thus a way to acquire knowledge that is embedded in bodies, in sensibilities and in local history, an epistemology with the capacity to reveal a “corpo-politics of knowing/feeling/understanding”³ (Mignolo 2013: 183).

³ Walter Mignolo critically analyses how what he calls the theo- and ego-politics of knowledge rely on the suppression of sensibility, of the body and of its geo-historical rootedness, in order to claim universal status.

In the future, I would like to look in greater depth at the value of *sound-based* ethnographic writing about politics that would *also* use the sound scraps described in the previous section. I would argue that these kinds of aural documents can answer to a preoccupation – both reflexive and ethical – of anthropological writing.

One example is the phone messages left and received by the ethnographer in the field, material previously perceived as irrelevant to research. From a reflexive point of view, these messages would – among other voices and registers of a sound-based ethnographic account – give a voice to the “making” of the research: clarifications, arrangements, missed appointments, differences in presentations of the theme... In fact, they inform the complex processes that precede most ethnographic situations reported in ethnographic writing (Crapanzano 1980, Kilani 1994), what we might call an “ethnography of ethnography” (Sanjek 1990: 385). As for the day-to-day recordings made in the street, in cafés, in markets, they can contribute to the narrative dimension of the ethnographic story by immersing the listener’s senses in a local context or a soundscape.

And finally, I am also interested in “technical” scraps. In an interview, Yann Paranthoën, a craftsman of radiophonic writing, described and analysed an occurrence of defective sound recording: “There was a loose cable. And when I initially listened to the tape, I thought: ‘It’s bad, there’s a technical fault’; but the more I listened, the more I thought: ‘But that’s what is interesting about this sequence, because our problem will be apparent, because our tape recorder is gradually breaking down’” (Paranthoën 2009: 122). The advantage of a sound captured live on a mobile phone, the tinniness of a telephone voice, a sound crackling through a loudspeaker, is that – during editing (during writing) – they can situate the ethnographic analysis and narrative in the precise conditions of investigation and capture. For example, when an anthropologist is in the field, recording a scene and someone breaks into the recording with a question about the methodology, or when the sound recording of a conversation is constantly interrupted by shouts and whistles. These kinds of recordings have the virtue of showing the contingencies of the inquiry, together with the presence of the anthropologist in relation to and negotiation with the subject of exploration.

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