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Acoustethics: Careful Approaches to Recorded Sounds and Their Second Life*

Abstract: This article attempts to rethink some problematic ways and motivations for engaging in (field) recording and working with recorded sounds. Interweaving reflections from my long-term soundscape archiving initiative undertaken in Stockholm, with projects of others aiming at preserving cultures through sound, I reflect upon ethical challenges that emerge against the prospect of second and following lives and deaths of recordings. Does the second life of a recorded event risk replicating power relationships that the original recording was enmeshed in? What can be gained and, more importantly, lost while conceiving a second life of a recorded sound? This article intends to open up an array of such questions which, as I suggest, need to be taken into consideration already before and during the recording process. As a discursive tool that does not resolve those concerns but instead creates space for critical reflection, I propose a concept of *acoustethics*. In a nutshell, acoustethics, as this portmanteau of acoustics and ethics suggests, is an ethically informed approach to the world's soundscapes. I argue that any kind of engagement with the auditory world through recording technologies requires careful consideration of multiple agencies contributing to the recorded sound. As a reflective attitude to the sonic realm, acoustethics acknowledges that any recording takes place within already existing fields of relations and simultaneously generates new links between subjects, histories, worldviews, technologies, and other forces. In other words, any recording is intrinsically field recording.

Keywords: field recording, ethics, practice of care, sound heritage

Introduction

In this article, I go through my own and others' projects. At times, these examples might seem not very closely related, or even inconsistent, especially in terms of the geographies they pertain to: Sweden, Canada, and Japan. Nevertheless, the qualitative criteria for this selection are, I believe, much clearer and include ethical considerations, moral dilemmas, practices of care and responsibility in

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field recording and work with recorded sounds. Despite the underlying commonalities, by discussing these diverse projects, I seek to demonstrate that ethical considerations are different for every case and site, and often, if not always, emerge through practical engagement with cases, subjects, events, and fields, either directly or through recorded media.

I want to underline that the ethics of interest adopted in this article is far from a normative framework that one would statically apply to every case in the same way. Instead, I view (or hear) ethics and the ethical as closely related to the notions of pluralism,[1] *phronesis*,[2] and care.[3] All of these concepts, to some extent, rely upon situatedness, reflexivity, and relationality. As an ethical perspective, pluralism, or interpretative pluralism, believes that different cultures, histories and traditions have their own ways of understanding certain notions and experiences, such as the concept of privacy.[4] It is a view that rejects any generalization and instead acknowledges frictions that can emerge when different views meet in an attempt to resolve an ethical dilemma. *Phronesis* is a kind of practical wisdom achieved through one's ethically situated experience.[5] It is a form of decision-making based on lessons learned from that experience. It does not draw solely upon these lessons, but situates them in relation to other experiences of similar character, also those of others, as to arrive at a better decision (or, I would add, to withdraw from making it, as inaction and deactivation might sometimes be less harmful, or even more productive than action). The ethics of care argues for caring as a central value in everyday interpersonal relations.[6] As Maria Puig de la Bellacasa has argued, the practice of care implicates and recognizes "different relationalities, issues, and practices in different settings" beyond the centrality of the human species.[7] Even though, as she claims, today we observe an unprecedented interest in the notion of care as an onto-epistemological and ethical framework for dealing with complex relations that people form on a planetary scale (with each other and with other species), the ways care is actualized and practised are always plural and diverse in terms of their sites, timespans, paces, and rhythms. Thus, it should also be noted that the ethics of care, as emphasized by Puig de la Bellacasa, goes beyond present

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[1] C. Ess, "Ethical Pluralism and Global Information Ethics," *Ethics and Information Technology* 8, 2006, pp. 215–226.

[2] J. Moss, "Virtue Makes the Goal Right: Virtue and 'Phronesis,'" *Phronesis* 56, 2011, no. 3, pp. 204–261.

[3] J. Tronto, "An Ethics of Care," *Generations: Journal of the American Society on Aging* 22, 1998, no. 3, pp. 15–20; M. Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in the More Than Human Worlds*, Minneapolis 2017; B. Groys, *Philosophy of Care*, London 2022.

[4] C. Ess, "Ethical Pluralism," p. 224.

[5] C. Ess, *Digital Media Ethics*, Cambridge 2019.

[6] S. Laugier, "The Ethics of Care as a Politics of the Ordinary," *New Literary History* 46, 2015, no. 2, pp. 217–240.

[7] M. Puig de la Bellacasa, op. cit., p. 3.

concerns and immediate situations. It also draws attention to the temporal dimension of care, such as fostering endurance of objects through various maintenance practices.[8] This focus on temporal aspects of care, I believe, is of high importance when talking about sound, especially recorded sound, but also about relationships between sound(scape)s and the site- and subject-specific memory.[9] In short, I believe that to work ethically with sound — understood as both an emanation and a trace of events, energies, and agents acting (or having acted) in specific fields and times — is, primarily and essentially, to care for it. More specifically, it is about paying attention to its relationality, situatedness, and context. It is also about envisaging one's "response-ability," which is to say an ability to be mindful about possible relations that sounds and recordings one works with might shape in the future.[10]

Drawing upon this short introduction of perspectives that inform my understanding of acoustethics, I would like to highlight that I do not intend to lay out any easy solutions for how to "correctly" engage with sound recording issues. It is not about establishing some form of an "ethical correctness." Rather, it is about inducing a state of a certain preparedness and readiness to acknowledge that sounds of the surrounding world — not only in their immediacy, but also through recorded artefacts — often form unsolved tensions, relations, and fields.

Slussen Project: The Unknown Weight of Recorded Soundscapes

Let me start with a brief account of a field recording and soundscape archiving project I have been pursuing in Stockholm since 2012.

The Slussen project is an ongoing exploration of soundscapes of Slussen, an important area in Stockholm connecting southern and northern parts of the city (Fig. 1). The project focuses on how the transformations this place has undergone are reflected in its acoustic sphere. More specifically, the project traces the disappearance of soundscapes alongside the destruction of the old setting, and the construction of new gentrified infrastructure.

Erected in 1935 and considered a landmark of modern Sweden, Slussen functions primarily as a transportation hub. It consists of a bus terminal and an under-

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[8] Ibid., p. 170.

[9] J. Smolicki, C. Campo, "Soundscapes as Archives: Traces and Absences of the Aural Past in Vancouver," *Seismograf Peer*, https://seismograf.org/fokus/sounds-science (accessed 16.02.2022).

[10] K. Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, Durham–London 2007.

ground station which are used by approximately 400,000 people daily.[11] However, as is the case with many modernist settings originally designed with a clear over-view of all the purposes they should serve, over the years Slussen has acquired some auxiliary and non-intended functions. Consequently, it has become a site rich in various unique enterprises, services, and practices. Those include a second-hand store, Kolingsborg, one of the oldest gay clubs in town, a laid-back vintage hair salon, and Debaser, a world-famous rock club regularly hosting international indie rock bands.
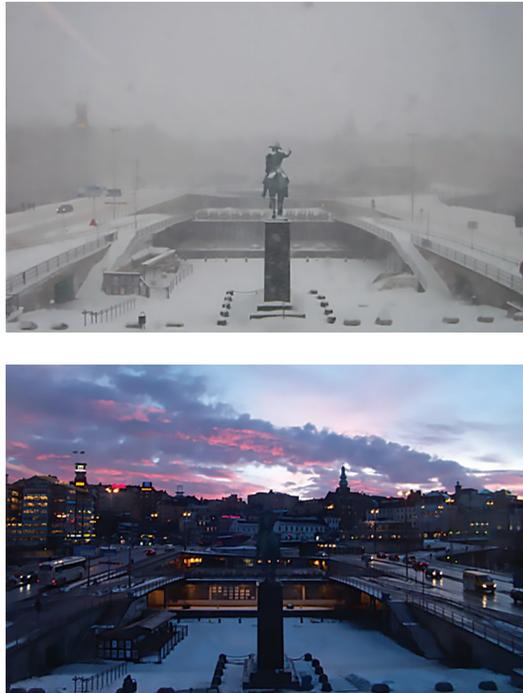

Figure 1. Slussen area during different seasons

Source: Author.

To this already multi-layered and socio-culturally eclectic architecture of Slus-sen, we can also add other informal uses that the place has lent itself to over the years. For example, in the 1970s, the place was transformed into a temporary shelter for the so-called Slussen Guerilla, a group of Finnish migrants escaping harsh economic conditions to find a better life in Sweden. Located in close vicinity to a ferry terminal where the migrants were arriving, Slussen became their natural first stop. The place has also become a shelter for homeless people taking advan-

[11] "Därför byggs Slussen om," Stockholm växer, https://vaxer.stockholm/nyheter/2019/03/dar for-byggs-slussen-om/ (accessed 16.06.2021).

tage of its numerous concrete pockets, cavities, and alcoves emerging over time. Johan Palmgren's documentary about Slussen depicts a community of homeless people who developed and maintained special relationships with the place, including other species, such as rats, for whom Slussen has also turned into a home.[12]

During my work on the project, I interacted with many people in various ways connected to the site: vendors, janitors, workers, architects, and activists, some of them directly engaged in protecting the old site. When I was talking to one activist and explaining my intention to record and archive the human and other-than-human soundscapes of this vanishing environment, she looked at me with a grim expression on her face. "So you assume that the place will be completely torn down, don't you?" she said. Her words made me realize that in order to be accomplished, my project required the complete erasure of the place, something she was strongly and actively opposing. In a sense, the site's death was an essential prerequisite for the future life of my project. From the activist's perspective, my audio equipment became a tool contributing to the end of the place as she knew it and hoped to preserve. The recorder and microphones became agents of discontinuity and disappearance, while my work appeared to be a kind of "audio-safari," or worse: "an audio-hunt."[13]

At the same time, I was aware that the archival, cultural, and, perhaps, material value of my soundscape recordings would only increase over time. Needless to say that such a prospect of an increase in value technically applies to any documentary media involved in preserving history, something that Paula Amad described in terms of an inherently "unknown weight" of a document.[14] After my encounter with the activist, I realized that I might have been considered as someone primarily, if not solely, interested in securing the prospect of the afterlife of the site — its mediated communication — rather than protecting the evaporating life and spirit of the place by means more immediate and responsive than field recording.

While carrying out my sonic ethnographic project at Slussen, even though I sympathized with local activists, I have never intended to engage in protecting the site in any active way. Despite the sentiments and profoundly personal and collective significance for some people (including myself), the place was certainly in need of redevelopment. The main controversial issues (and subsequently reasons for regular protests against the new architecture) included: the exclusion of the local community from discussing the new plan by the authorities, insufficient attention paid to pedestrian traffic for the benefit of cars, and an expansion of physical architecture along with its commercialization jeopardizing the unique panoramic

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[12] "Tales of Slussen (2012)," Johan Palmgren, http://johanpalmgren.com/tales-of-slussen/ (accessed 16.06.2021).

[13] C. DeLaurenti, "Imperfect Sound Forever: A Letter to a Young Phonographer," *Resonance: The Journal of Sound and Culture* 2, 2021, no. 2, p. 149.

[14] P. Amad, *Counter-Archive, Film, Everyday, and Albert Kahn's Archives de la Planète*, New York 2010.

view from the site. One important argument in favour of the reconstruction, often overlooked in the public debate, was a long-term environmental perspective expressed in concerns over the water level that will rise significantly in the coming decades. Because Slussen hosts a lock that for centuries has been controlling the water balance between lake Mälaren and the Baltic Sea, the site's adaptation to climate change required significant reconfigurations of its architectural elements.[15]

Nevertheless, by committing to this documentation, I hoped to protect some memories and sonic heritage of the site, which was doomed to entirely disappear alongside the site's unavoidable material collapse and demolishment. Encouraged by the work of John Hedlund, a city archaeologist whom I met at the site and who helped me with access to several hidden and publicly inaccessible layers of Slussen, I engaged in what we jointly referred to as the sonic archaeology of the site. By committing myself to this long-term, inconspicuous work on the archive of sound recordings, apart from getting to know the place from a significantly under-explored (and under-heard) perspective and nurturing my passion for listening to such contested sites from idiosyncratic perspectives, I have hoped to pro-actively and to some extent imperceptibly secure material for future researchers and urban planners. At the same time, I have hoped to actively raise awareness about the importance of acoustic dimensions in our lived environments by regularly turning to and animating the recorded material, talking about the project, as well as performing and presenting it through art installations, lectures, and soundwalks. While respecting the activism of those who kept regularly showing up and mobilizing at the site, over time I got to perceive my work as another way of taking a stance and response-ability in relation to a place.

In their writing about listening in the Anthropocene, AM Kanngieser discusses a need for slower, more gradual and less visible types of activism that do not feed on blindly driven mobilization and action.[16] Drawing upon Frederic Neyrat's concepts of "strategic deactivation" and "negative capacity" addressed to those concerned with burning issues of contemporaneity, Kanngieser hopes to open up space for becoming in tune with realms that exceed human perception.[17] It is certainly hard to directly apply this perspective to a cause such as the protection of Slussen's old architecture. In the beginning of my project, the perspective of vulnerable communities directly connected to the place was the dominant one. But over the course of the project, I began to recognize the impact of this mas-

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[15] "The Real Reason for Stockholm's Massive Slussen Redevelopment," *The Local*, 2.02.2018, https://www.thelocal.se/20180202/the-real-reason-for-stockholms-massive-slussen-redevelopment-cityofstockholm-tlccu/ (accessed 16.06.2021).

[16] A. Kanngieser, "Geopolitics and the Anthropocene: Five Propositions for Sound," *GeoHumanities* 1, 2015, p. 3.

[17] E. Johnson, F. Neyrat, "On the Political Unconscious of the Anthropocene," *Society and Space*, 20.03.2014, https://www.societyandspace.org/articles/on-the-political-unconscious-of-the-anthropocene (accessed 27.05.2022).

sive reconstruction on other species, including the acknowledgement of positive changes that the newly designed infrastructure promised to bring about by facilitating migration of fish. Slowing down, or deactivating one's efforts to deal with an emergent cause that unites groups of people, raises an array of ethical considerations and often discomfort. While such a position eventually enables a more balanced and nuanced overview of the situation and brings one closer to certain dimensions that could otherwise be overlooked, it might also introduce distance to other realms, groups, and individuals. It might lead to a situation in which one is perceived as being ignorant and drifting mindlessly without taking a stance. In the context of the current planetary crises, deactivation and strategic slowness might seem like inappropriate ways of being and relating to the world.

What generative role could slowness and deactivation play in the context of recording and recorded sounds? I would suggest that one way of addressing this question could be through taking a stance that is at once active and slow, while primarily focused on a temporal dimension of the pursued project. It's like being both involved in and withdrawn from the immediate action, being actively concerned with the immediate while maintaining a mindful distance that enables care for what is to come. This approach, I believe, has to some extent been reflected in the *two-fold architecture* of the Slussen project, concerned with both the future — the archive in the making — and the present, by constantly working, moulding, interacting, and caring for the material. This precise tension inspired my interest in the notion of anticipatory ethics (and consequently acoustethics), a concept I directly and indirectly address in this chapter while weaving an associative thread through different and yet highly resonant projects.

Anticipatory Ethics

Anticipatory ethics is a framework already adopted in design, tech industry, and engineering to explore and reflect on potential impacts and consequences of a given product before it is launched and used. Some scholars who operate within this strand of research suggest that more effort needs to be put into future studies and forecasting models.[18] However, it can be argued that assessment of a product against future and speculative scenarios of its (mis-)uses is determined to large extent by the need to maintain the chain of production and consumption at the present moment. To put it simply, in the context of the market, anticipatory ethics can risk to be employed as merely an instrumental technique of "ethics washing" that does not change but rather maintains the status quo.[19]

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[18] P.A.E. Brey, "Anticipatory Ethics for Emerging Technologies," *Nanoethics* 6, 2012, pp. 1–13.

[19] K. Yeung, A. Howes, G. Pogrebna, "AI Governance by Human Rights-Centred Design, Deliberation and Oversight: An End to Ethics Washing," [in:] *The Oxford Handbook of AI Ethics*, eds.

When discussing anticipatory (acoust-)ethics, I am interested in staying with rather than overcoming the uncertainties characteristic of anticipation. At the same time, I am interested in a more humanist or even post-humanist reading of this concept. In their jointly edited book, Caitlin DeSilvey, Simon Naylor, and Colin Sackett proposed the term *anticipatory history*.[20] The authors defined it as a "'conceptual tool' for shifting expectations and curating different — perhaps more open — forms of engagement between people and places, past and future."[21] To ethically orient oneself towards the future, one should be able to look and hear back. Anticipating the future cannot simply start with the present moment; it needs to attentively and critically explore all the elements that participated in the formation of the present, namely past events, places, subjects, and technologies. Similarly, to engage in acoustethics could mean to open one's sonic sensitivity to a state of anticipation, in which one already hears some potential reverberations generated by their interventions into the acoustic tissue of the world today. At the same time, it is an ethical position of awareness towards the potential yet uncertain lives and deaths of recorded sounds one (re-)generates today, through a turn towards the past. An ethical re-attunement with what is resounding. This is why, besides autoethnographic accounts of my work, this article pays close attention to the past examples of audio-documentary work that raise questions of acoustethical nature.

After this seemingly trivial encounter with the Slussen activist and her words, I felt a strange sense of dissonance. It has remained unresolved throughout the project and other field recording and para-archiving initiatives in which I have been involved.[22] The in-between of the finality of what is being recorded and determination to preserve it is where the friction emerges. It is a tension between the witnessed discontinuity of the actual event and the anticipated continuity of its trace. It is a dissonance that arises from working with and against presence and absence, life and death.

If a record is a frozen, hibernated life — a temporarily suspended promise of its second instance that is yet to come — whose second life (and, by implication, death) is implied here? Is it a second life of something (or someone) this recorded material was meant to remember or a second life of the subject who conceived of the record? Is it a second life of forces and circumstances that surrounded and determined the recorded event? Or is it an entirely new form of life that carries only a faint, distorted trace of the place, event, and subject(s) from which it originated? Who is to care for that new, hybrid life, and how to care for it?

M. Dubber, F. Pasquale, Oxford 2020, pp. 77–106.

[20] *Anticipatory History*, eds. C. DeSilvey, N.S. Naylor, C. Sackett, Axminster 2014.

[21] C. DeSilvey, N.S. Naylor, "Anticipatory History," [in:] *Anticipatory History*, eds. C. DeSilvey, N.S. Naylor, C. Sackett, Axminster 2014, p. 16.

[22] J. Smolicki, *Para-Archives: Rethinking Personal Archiving Practices in the Times of Capture Culture*, doctoral dissertation, Malmö 2017.

These questions, although not easy to answer, nevertheless call for an ethical stance. I believe that this stance should accompany any act of (field) recording and engagement with a recorded sound, especially today, in times of ubiquitous media, information overflow, and what I call a condition of capture culture.[23] This is a situation where the boundary between voluntary and involuntary recording and archiving is ever thinner, if not fully dissolved.

Let this first-hand, detailed account of the Slussen project be a modest starting point for exploring other modes, concepts, and practices that might aid us in re-coding the dominant ways of engaging in (field) recording.

Collaborative Rematriation

With some pauses, it has been about 10 years since I began my aural relation with Slussen. One break was in 2020, when some major changes and reconstructions took place. They included the golden bridge Guldbron, a 140-metre-long element of new Slussen infrastructure, constructed in and shipped all the way from China, which was met with criticism due to its high environmental costs. In 2020, I moved to Canada. While there, I kept thinking about my missing of that event and all those transitory, disruptive, and conflicting soundscapes that must have emerged in that moment. But it was also in Canada that while following discussions about rights to heritage, complexities of repatriation processes, and dispossession of cultural artefacts stolen by colonizers from indigenous communities, I thought more deeply about the notion of ownership in relation to field recordings. I asked, who, in the future, should be entitled to work with my field recordings, including those of Slussen? Already imbued with complexity that might be hard to account for, how probable is it that these recorded soundscapes become greatly misread in the inevitable process of their further journey into the future? Should I already designate someone to take care of them?

That year, when visiting Vancouver, the stronghold of soundscape studies, I came across the music of Jeremy Dutcher, an artist, composer, and a musicologist. As a member of Tobique First Nation in New Brunswick, Dutcher restores indigenous culture through new compositions based on archival recordings. In his recent project, Dutcher worked at the Canadian Museum of History, painstakingly transcribing Wolastoq First Nation songs from wax cylinders made in 1907. His work resulted in a debut LP featuring what he calls "collaborative" compositions that enter into dialogue with the recorded voices of his ancestors. Elaborating on his motivations, Dutcher says that "there are only about a hundred Wolastoqey speakers left […] It is crucial for us to make sure that we are using our language

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[23] J. Smolicki, "You Press the Button, We Do the Rest: Personal Archiving in Capture Culture," [in:] *Towards a Philosophy of the Digital*, eds. A. Romele, E. Terrone, Cham 2018, pp. 77–100.

and passing it on to the next generation. If you lose the language, you are not just losing words; you are losing an entire way of seeing and experiencing the world from a distinctly indigenous perspective." But besides giving justice to his ancestors, the artist perceives his work as indicative of how cultural repatriation, or, as he prefers to call it, "rematriation" should look like in practice.[24] As opposed to repatriation, a term carrying strong connotations with patriarchal organization of societal life, rematriation is an indigenous concept that seeks to foreground inclusivity, decentralized distribution, and allocation of power and resources. The term has been put forth by the ReMatriate Collective, "an Indigenous women's group connecting Indigenous peoples, particularly women, through art interventions."[25]

Dutcher contests the centralized, patriarchal power and the supposed objectivity of the archive by actively taking stewardship over the recorded voices of his community. As someone with a deep, ancestral connection to the material in question, Dutcher recognizes and then practically responds to the need of rescuing those voices and brings them back to the onto-epistemological context out of which they were taken in the past (Figs. 2–3). Profound attunement with the cultural, historical, and judicial significance of Indigenous musical and performative practices gave these voices a second life. This could never happen in the museum's collection. On the contrary, the institution kept these voices muted. While technically sonorous (or equipped with a prospect of sonority), these voices remained culturally incarcerated.[26] Only bringing the recordings back to the proper context and following established community protocols, could make these voices truly audible, that is culturally and symbolically resonant with the place and subjects of their origin. Dutcher achieved this through his critical, creative, and careful interaction with the recordings. Had these voices been left incarcerated on wax cylinders, they would have maintained their status as mere specimens of culture that colonizers had programmatically relegated to the past.[27]

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[24] "Jeremy Dutcher — *Wolastoqiyik Lintuwakonawa*," Killbeat Music, http://www.killbeat music.com/jeremydutcher (accessed 26.10.2020).

[25] See "WE ARE: The ReMatriate Collective," New Journeys, 12.10.2016, https://newjour neys.ca/en/articles/we-are-the-rematriate-collective (accessed 20.07.2021). See also "Purpose and Vision," Sogorea Te' Land Trust, https://sogoreate-landtrust.org/purpose-and-vision/ (accessed 20.07.2021): "an urban Indigenous women-led land trust based in the San Francisco Bay Area that facilitates the return of Indigenous land to Indigenous people."

[26] Incarceration is precisely how Dylan Robinson, a Stó:lō scholar and author of *Hungry Listening* described the status of First Nations artefacts that are in possession of memory institutions in Canada. He made that comparison during a seminar with a network of sound scholars affiliated with Simon Fraser University in June 2021.

[27] In contrast to numerous initiatives undertaken by museums and archives that attempt to decolonize their collections by returning cultural artefacts to their legitimate owners, Dutcher's case is different. He single-handedly crosses the boundaries of the institution demanding the right to work with the stolen material. Power dynamics at play are much different from when the decisions

Dutcher symbolically discontinues the structural and technical detachment of voices from their subjects and contexts through his collaborative and dialogical engagement with the recordings. What Dutcher's intervention generates is a careful (re-)establishment of resonance between the listener and the listened to. Dylan Robinson has recently recognized this dialogical relationship as a significant difference between the Indigenous and Western European orientation towards the audible.[28] He writes that often a "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 to another life."[29] He suggests that in the Western tradition of philosophy, sound is typically deprived of subjectivity and is often treated as content. This, in turn, introduces and perpetuates problematic asymmetries between the listener and the listened to. These asymmetries find their expression in the discriminatory and exploitative appropriation of sound(s). To oppose this, one could adopt a way of listening to sound (or voice) in which the audible is recognized as always inherently related to the subject and context from and for which it originated. Consequently, the audible (or rather heard) requires similar respect and a non-discriminatory approach as an encounter between two sentient entities. In this sense, the recorded sound is never entirely dead. It is never alive either. To become alive, it requires special conditions that might be provided only if the right attitude, sensitivity, and knowledge are applied. Moreover, as Nina Sun Eidsheim argues, to give justice to and become fully in tune with music or recorded sound, it is not enough to appeal to the sense of hearing alone. Composing and perceiving sound is an inherently multi-sensorial experience: "sound does not exist in a vacuum but rather is always already in transmission; its character therefore arises from the material particularities of each transmission."[30] The more power asymmetry and violence underlies the recording process (even if this violence is latent and unrecognized at the time of commencing the record), the more care and attention is needed to revisit, awake and transmit previously recorded sounds and voices.

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to return artefacts are directly made by a museum whose motives are often determined by a will to maintain an image of a tolerant and democratic institution.

[28] D. Robinson, *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies*, Minneapolis 2020.

[29] Ibid., p. 15.

[30] N.S. Eidsheim, *Sensing Sound: Singing & Listening as Vibrational Practice*, Durham 2015, p. 79.

Figure 2. A photograph of ethnographer Frances Densmore collecting songs
from Blackfoot chief Ninna-Stako in 1916

Source: Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2016844693/ (accessed 7.06.2022).

Figure 3. Cover of Jeremy Dutcher's album *Wolastoqiyik Lintuwakonawa*
featuring a photograph of the artist by Matt Barns

Source: Killbeat Music.

Arguably, Dutcher's project, alongside other initiatives concerned with invoking the past from archival recordings, is built upon a certain paradox. Without the wax cylinders, Dutcher would not have been able to regenerate the oral tradition inscribed in them. Consequently, he would not have been able to mediate his own and his ancestors' culture in the way he did.[31] In other words, without this presently obsolete medium, the whole oral culture of Dutcher's community would have risked disappearing. However, the case is more complex than that. Had it not been for the arrival of settler colonizers, these recordings would not have needed to be made in the first place. Arguably, the long-sustained oral traditions would have continued as embodied, situated practices, undisrupted and hence would not have needed to be secured and stored in a culturally distant and incompatible medium.

In the context of the colonial expansion, recording tools, such as the phonograph, should be seen as paradoxical devices which go far beyond their original function to secure and preserve cultural content. They also need to be inspected as silencing tools. Their life-preserving function — one of the intentions with which the phonograph was developed given Thomas Edison's vision of connecting with the dead through recorded sound — has its dark, poisonous side: a life-threatening force.[32] In other words, getting into possession of the voice of the Other by exteriorizing it into a record is inseparably connected with dispossessing, disembodying, and erasing operations representative of colonial undertakings. Moreover, participation of the one who records in the process of extraction may be implicit: one might think that he/she is performing a genuine and constructive deed, but the long-term consequences of this action might be problematic, perhaps even devastating for the recorded subjects, their communities, and environments. In this sense, individual intentions might not be enough to develop an alternative force capable of breaking through exploitative orientations of recording; instead, they might end up fuelling such visions even further.

Personal Motivations and Harm in Preserving Sounds for Posterity

A particularly intriguing case, although difficult to indubitably assess, is the work of Ida Halpern. Born in Vienna, Halpern was an ethnomusicologist who,

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[31] One should also consider the fact that contemporary means of storing and distributing music are descendants of the said wax cylinders and phonographs. In other words, tools used today to revive cultures once violated by, for example, phonographs, are members of the same lineage of recording technologies.

[32] For the discussion of the pharmacological character of technologies, see B. Stiegler, *What Makes Life Worth Living: On Pharmacology*, trans. D. Ross, Cambridge 2013.

in the 1940s, fled Nazism in her native country to become a Canadian citizen. Soon after she arrived in Canada, Halpern found interest in documenting the folk songs of Indigenous people. Over four decades, she recorded about 400 hereditary songs (specially written songs that remain connected with specific people, events, places and are owned by people and related to their particular life stories). Her work was inspired by several factors. She was interested in bridging the gap between folk culture and high art. She firmly believed in the value of preserving vanishing cultures and traditions, a practice that at the time was gaining traction within the field of anthropology.[33]

As Elizabeth Burns Coleman, Rosemary J. Coombe, and Fiona MacArailt suggest in their joint article, Halpern's interest in preserving vulnerable cultures through sound might also be related to her personal life.[34] As a Jew whose culture and music were subject to repression and persecution in Europe, Halpern developed deep empathy towards the repressed communities of First Nations people in British Columbia. It became a natural imperative for her to help them preserve their culture before it was too late. When Halpern asked Billy Assu, chief of the Lekwiltok Kwakwaka'wakw nation and steward of traditional songs, what would happen to them when he died, he responded, "they will die with me."[35] Acknowledging Halpern's intention to preserve his stories and songs, Assu eventually agreed to collaborate: "you come: I give you hundred songs."[36] According to Halpern, chief Assu was deeply concerned about the declining interest of the younger generation in cultivating the traditions of their elders. Assu believed that for future generations, the recorded sounds might become the only gateway to their past.[37] It should be noted that between 1884 and 1951, ceremonies such as potlatch were banned by Canadian authorities and could not be publicly performed.[38] Potlatches, as Robinson explains, were far more than just seasonal rituals allowing members of indigenous communities to congregate. Those events provided an opportunity to exchange knowledge and memory. To be more specific, they were particular recording techniques. Like many other recording techniques and media, they ensured the transmission and continuance of their culture. To paraphrase Robinson's words, the ban imposed on potlatches and other tradi-

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[33] E. Edwards, *The Camera as Historian: Amateur Photographers and Historical Imagination, 1885–1918*, Durham 2012.

[34] E. Burns Coleman, R.J. Coombe, F. MacArailt, "A Broken Record: Subjecting 'Music' to Cultural Rights," [in:] *The Ethics of Cultural Appropriation*, eds. J.O. Young, C.G. Brunk, Chichester 2009, pp. 173–210.

[35] D. Cole, C. Mullins, "The Musical World of Ida Halpern," *BC Studies* 97, 1993, p. 21.

[36] Ibid.

[37] The statement that motivated Assu to collaborate with Halpern is also referenced by the Royal BC Museum that currently hosts the recordings: "Ida Halpern Collection," Royal BC Museum, https://royalbcmuseum.bc.ca/bc-archives/what-we-have/indigenous-material/ida-halpern-collection (accessed 16.06.2021).

[38] D. Robinson, op. cit., p. 50.

tions was, in fact, a prohibition of recording: "it was essentially the equivalent to banning books that document law and history […] it lessened opportunities to exercise a heightened form of perception resulting in richly detailed memory."[39]

In this context, Halpern's project can be seen as a way of addressing the erasure of Indigenous recording techniques by colonial violence through introducing a recording technique "native" to settler colonialism but alien to the cultural conducts of First Nations people. Her response is genuine and yet harmful. On the one hand, Halpern's project attempts to think pro-actively by creating a bridge with the future where people can return to cultivate their ancestral knowledge. As the official website of the Royal Museum states, Halpern's recordings are today invaluable to the families and communities who hold the intellectual property rights to the songs and ceremonies. On the other hand, her project incorporates the colonial politics of dispossession and forced assimilation. Thus, from a certain angle, it can be seen as proof, perhaps even an accelerator, of forces set out not to extend but to discontinue Indigenous culture.[40]

In addition to an array of concerns that these polarized readings cause, one crucial question about Halpern's project is to what extent personal life experience (*phronesis*) — in her case, the exposure to persecution in Europe — can motivate and justify one's commitment to recording and preserving another culture? Transposing this question to field recording practice: to what extent can our (field recordists') personal life stories justify working with subjects, places, and events we find deeply resonant with our own experiences?

While leaving this question deliberately unanswered — as any quick resolution or top-down suggestion would not do any justice here — one reflection might nevertheless be added. While certainly helping one connect with sensitive realms, even most genuinely motivated imperatives might at the same time overshadow the bigger picture and the field of relations one is entangled in. They might prevent

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[39] Ibid., p. 56.

[40] As another case and warning, we might also look into the work of American ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax. While recognized for his efforts to preserve American folk culture, Lomax's approach has not been examined enough in terms of whom this preservation was serving foremost and who it was meant for in the first place. In other words, what is problematic about his project is that it is primarily oriented towards the white, privileged class of Americans. Writing about Lomax's interest in preserving blues music made by Black Americans, Bibi suggests that his recordings were "primarily meant for white Americans, for press, for publications, for radio shows. Definitely not for Black Americans." Moreover, to preserve, or rather extract songs from his subjects by means of phonographic inscription, Lomax would apply force, not personally but by perpetuating stereotypes and violent attitudes towards people of colour, for example in prisons where a large number of his recordings were done. In one of his accounts, Lomax recalls: "Presently the guard came out, pushing a Negro man in stripes along at the point of his gun […] the poor fellow, evidently afraid he was to be punished, was trembling and sweating in an extremity of fear. The guard shoved him before our microphone": "Alan Lomax: The Man who Recorded the World… Not Always with the Best Practices," Bibi, https://bibidancestheblues.com/2021/05/13/lomax/ (accessed 16.06.2021); "How Alan Lomax Segregated Music," WNYC, 5.02.2015, https://www.wnyc.org/story/how-alan-lomax-segregated-music/ (accessed 14.02.2022).

one from realizing that despite best intentions, one remains an agent of cultural appropriation and symbolic extraction. As Burns Coleman et al. argue, Halpern's research shows that cultural appropriation may be performed even by the most well-intentioned individuals: it occurs simply "through the imposition of dominant aesthetic categories." What is harmful in Halpern's work is her uncritical use of audio-recording equipment, technology. While compatible with her motivations, this technology is alien to the subjects she is capturing: "perfectly acceptable, indeed laudable activities in one era may cause harms that affect injuries that we must ethically acknowledge in another."[41]

To what extent can we anticipate such harms and thus limit chances of their occurrence? Realizing this inherent uncertainty of (field) recording resulting from its possible afterlives, should one entirely give up engaging in it? How should one approach the prospect of responsibility for the fact that their recorded material could potentially cause harm in the future?

Re-Articulating the Field in Field Recording

Throughout this essay, when writing about recording I often precede it with the term field in parenthesis. This is to indicate that any act of recording is inherently related to a field. In other words, every recording relies on a specific field of relations. It never happens in a vacuum. Regardless of whether they are inscribed in the record as distinctly audible features, power relations inform every recording process and, consequently, reside in the recording.

No recording is innocent. Every recording is a frozen life as much as it is a prospect of a wound or even death. In other words, each voluntarily performed act of recording, and hence a recorded result, is entangled in a web of power relations that precede, surround, and follow it, while constantly transforming. If, to some extent, it might be possible to map these relations before engaging (or before deciding to engage) in recording (for example, by examining how one's position and motivations speak to other contemporary cultural and political practices related to documentation), it is more difficult to predict what network of political, economic, technical, and cultural relations the recorded material will enter in the future.[42] Even results of the most modest, underground attempts to preserve a particular culture might eventually end up in collections and institutional frameworks ruled and haunted by onto-epistemologies which are entirely incompatible with and therefore harmful to that culture.

This reflection suggests that both the cultivation of a certain contextual continuity and compatibility are needed in order to responsibly engage in the record-

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41 E. Burns Coleman, R.J. Coombe, F. MacArailt, op. cit., pp. 185–186.
42 See Susan Sontag's discussion about the time needed for a photograph to function as evidence in her book *Regarding the Pain of the Others*, New York 2003.

ing of cultural memory and heritage. If we agree that recordings are permanently imbued with subjectivities that contributed to their sonority (at least for as long as the durability of the medium lasts), then to ensure that these recordings retain and are "willing" to mediate memory further on, requires from us to treat them with respect similar to one characterizing that of a face-to-face encounter. It might be, with no certainty though, that this compatibility is to be achieved by asking ourselves questions about resonant audiences, channels, and grounds, for and through which the recorded subjects are eventually intended to reverberate. It is undoubtedly far more complex to make sure that those conditions are met; this is where uncertainty, ambiguity, and unpredictability come into the picture (or ambiance rather). Acknowledgement thereof should precede any act of (field) recording that seeks to preserve and produce cultural values. The acoustethical approach to field recording as adopted in the present article is therefore not a stance that attempts to pre-empt all the non-intentional uses of the record in the making. This is simply impossible. Instead, the proposed position is one that opens up to the understanding of the multiplicity of lives (and deaths) in which the recorded material might be implicated. It is a perspective that encompasses other positions than that of the recording subject. It is a perspective that acknowledges the possibility of multiple, often uneasy, and fractious ways of relating to the recording process and the recorded result when it is archived, released, open, distributed, and re-listened to.

Acoustethical reflection might lead to a more conscious engagement in the recording process or might even make one suspend their decision to press the record button altogether, a form of the active deactivation I discussed earlier. Depending on this reflection, one might realize that both action and inaction can be generative or destructive; both decisions can give or take life, nourish or impede it. As Hildegard Westerkamp suggested, "How do we avoid the very real danger of simply creating yet another product, a CD with yet more amazing sounds? In the worst case, they have become an imported product, a neat sound without any real meaning beyond the WOW experience. We must ask ourselves when we compose a piece or produce a CD whether we, in fact, bring our listeners closer to a place or situation or whether we are fooling ourselves and are inadvertently assisting in the place's extinction."[43]

Denshosha as an Embodied Recorder

How (and why) to record extinction — the passing of a subject, place, field, or entity — without contributing to its ultimate disappearing? Without taking advantage. Without an extractivist mindset. Without using that moment as an opportun-

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[43] H. Westerkamp, "Speaking from Inside the Soundscape," [in:] *The Book of Music & Nature*, eds. D. Rothenberg, M. Ulvaeus, Middletown 1998, p. 75.

ity to present oneself as the single, ultimate ear-witness to what is disappearing. Without naively and passively immersing oneself in the polished recording, a memory trace of what was forced to extinction?

An example that might bring us closer to the idea of a certain compatibility between the listener and the listened to (or between the recording subject and the recorded), and thus closer to a kind of recording that is oriented towards the mindful cultivation of memory and care, rather than preservation through exploitation and extraction, is a practice of *denshosha*, a type of what I like to call, "conservation through conversation."

The *Denshosha Project* emerged as a collaboration between the City of Hiroshima and the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum. It is an initiative which involves volunteers willing to internalize and keep alive a life story of a *hibakusha*, a survivor of the Hiroshima bombing. "A *denshosha* becomes the official memory keeper for their respective *hibakusha*."[44] In the context of this essay, a *denshosha* might be viewed as a specific type of recording subject. The *denshosha* accompanies the *hibakusha* in their daily life to accurately learn their life stories and everyday conducts. The *denshosha* is additionally supported by a three-year training provided by the museum that gradually prepares her to become a custodian of the recorded memory after the *hibakusha*'s passing. This embodied act of preserving memory, while very distinct and embedded in a specific cultural context and historical events, points to a deeper meaning of the term recording as expressed in its etymology.

The verb "to record" is derived from the Latin "recordari," which in turn derives from two components: "re-," meaning "back, again" and "cor," meaning "heart."[45] In ancient times, people believed that the heart was the seat of memory, while the brain was the corrective device. Aristotle considered the heart to be the centre of intelligence. In turn, the brain was believed to be an organ that controls and rationalizes the processes undertaken by the heart.[46] The phrase "learning by heart" echoes these beliefs.[47] What we encounter in the practice of *denshosha*, is the attendance to heart as not a seat of memory alone, but also of care, compassion, warmth, and ethical consideration, the qualities needed for memory to be sustained, retained and to survive, resonate, and flourish. By rearticulating the way we perceive and do recording, it is no longer a technical procedure of extracting audible signals from the surrounding world, or an extractive gesture defined by the moments of pressing the record and stop buttons. Instead, the recording becomes a long-term process, an open-ended, reciprocally organized ritual in which one's internalization of sonic accounts takes place in a synchronous agree-

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[44] A.P. Kambhampaty, "How a New Generation Is Carrying On the Legacy of Atomic Bomb Survivors," *Time*, 6.08.2020, https://time.com/5875469/atomic-bomb-legacy/ (accessed 12.05.2021).

[45] J. Smolicki, *Para-Archives*.

[46] C. Gross, "Aristotle on the Brain," *The Neuroscientist* 1, 1995, no. 4, pp. 245–250.

[47] J. Smolicki, "You Press the Button," p. 78.

ment with how the other exteriorizes them. It is a slow process of forming and understanding a field of relations. Doing (field) recording is therefore not only about turning inwards but also about taking into consideration — paying attention to, and, to some extent, reconfiguring — the external field of power relations that inform the entire process and which will, to some degree, ripple into the future.

Being aware of the risk of cultural appropriation, my intention here is certainly far from taking the concept of *denshosha* and superimposing it onto other fields. My aim is rather to pluralize perspectives on (field) recording and to point to this form of working with situated and embodied memory as radically different through how emphasis is put on care, durationality, stewardship, dialogue, and patience, as opposed to immediacy and extractivism, which are notions often associated with technologically aided field recording practices. For *denshosha*, the way that the field of relations is being formed and the record of that field generated, seems more symmetrical, balanced, and mutual than in other cases.

Drawing a lesson here, we should ask: what would it mean to become a custodian of environmental memory?

Concluding

Arguably, actions of many early field recordists were based on an ambition to record the not-yet-captured sounds: fresh, exotic, unknown, and different. Today, let me suggest, that ambition has changed: it is about capturing what has been out there for a long time, but has not been given enough attention and justice, and hence may soon disappear. Physically and from our consciousness. Recording and presenting the recorded is no longer about building spectatorship around the unknown patterns of life flourishing out there in some distant lands, but rather building awareness (and spectatorship) about what is disappearing. About death. If we accept that shift of perspective, today, like never before, recording is, as Mark Peter Wright, sound artist and scholar, once suggested, "a metaphorical death at the moment of capture."[48] Perhaps, it is even no longer metaphorical, but real.

Bringing the acoustethical lens (or microphone), this time, however, redirected inwards, into the field recordist's deepest field of ideals, values, and conscience, one could ask: can capturing the death of what is being recorded be justified as a means of sustaining the action and life of the recordist?

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[48] The quote comes from Mark Peter Wright's project entitled *[Auto-]Dialogical Feedback or, the Poetics of Letting Go.* In the project, Wright reflects on what happens when a field recording is taken out of a certain context and then technologically stored and used for composition. In the final stage of his research, he reverses this process by returning to sites where he captured the sounds and rebroadcasting the recordings before ultimately deleting them: M.P. Wright, "(Auto) Dialogical Feedback: Towards an Archive of Loss," *Sensate Journal*, 2015, https://sensatejournal.com/auto-dialogical-feedback-towards-archive-loss/ (accessed 14.02.2022).

In an interview with Julia Yezbick, committed to "recoding" the dominant approaches to field (recording), Wright suggests that "asymmetrical contact is the foundation for any environmental recording activity. I point the microphone. I choose its mode of representation. I capture, remove, and manipulate the sounds of places, people, animals, and phenomena. Recording is built out of this imbalance and uneven distribution of (human to nonhuman) power."[49] Acknowledging this imbalance, as he asserts further, should bring stronger emphasis on ethical questions about agency and rights in recording. Similarly, my point here is not to completely abandon field recording altogether or radically question its sense, but to problematize it through highlighting and reformulating the power relations that intrinsically underlie its dynamics. This is precisely what I have been aiming at while putting forth the idea of acoustethics.

Field recording practices are often based on short-term excursions into some supposedly unexplored territories to extract their sonic qualities, bring them home, and use them as content (or effects) in a sound work. Acoustethics questions these dynamics. It does so not only by advocating slower and deeper ways of engaging with listening to and recording places (or staying with their troublesome sonority) but also by expanding one's imagination, understanding, and awareness of ethical implications of the recording process. Acoustethics is a conceptual tool for making room, acknowledging and listening to uncertainties, some of which are inherent and others produced in recording practice. Acoustethics is definitely not an instrument that helps do away with these uncertainties. It opposes all generalizing norms and standards in making moral decisions. It does not offer ready-made solutions for how to address the ethical aspects of working with sound and recording, but instead aligns with the ethics of care. In addition to the acts of reflection, consideration, worrying, and empathy, the ethics of care involves material practices such as "maintenance or concrete work involved in actualizing care."[50] In the same vein, acoustethics should not be limited to a mere introspection of one's position towards the act of recording and the recorded sound. Instead, it should help one craft, develop, and maintain that position practically, more carefully, and responsibly.

As discussed above in this article, the acoustethical approach to working with sound is about recognizing that any act of sound recording is closely related to the notion of field. In other words, any act of recording is field recording. In this context, field is much more than just a physical space — it encompasses a set of relations between the involved subjects, worldviews, places, histories, and technologies. This field determines how the recording is made, gains its substance, and then ripples into the future. The awareness of the field and how it

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[49] J. Yezbick, "A Conversation with Mark Peter Wright," *Sensate Journal*, 2016, http://sensate journal.com/wp content/uploads/2016/08/MPW_interview_FINAL31.pdf (accessed 16.02.2022).

[50] M. Puig de la Bellacasa, op. cit., p. 4.

works is crucial to the formation and maintenance of the acoustethical attitude to the world. Central to the ethics of care, the notion of maintenance in the context of acoustethics can be seen in terms of a long-term relationship with the recorded subject and the recorded sound this act generates. As in the practice of *denshosha*, the acouestethical approach is driven by a particular inclination (perhaps even a sense of obligation) to maintain a relationship with the recorded subject or place after the recording process is completed. This is true even if that relationship is to be difficult; just like field recording is a difficult legacy. Or even a burden — but never a trophy.

Figure 4. Slussen area under reconstruction in spring 2021

Source: Author.
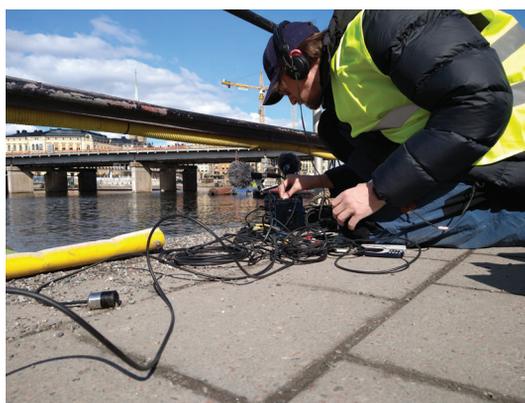
Figure 5. The author performing at Slussen as part of Riversssounds, an artistic project and residency for sound artists working with soundscapes of European rivers, April 2021

Source: Author.

Postscript

As of summer 2021, the Slussen project continues. I try to occasionally return to the place where I do additional recordings, soundwalks (solitarily and collectively), and performatively interact with the site and its history by, for example, building dialogues between the recorded material and its present soundscapes (Figs. 4–5).

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