Field Recordings and Common Places
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It is not down on any map; true places never are.
— Hermann Melville, *Moby Dick*

The terms *field recording* and *phonography* cover a wide variety of approaches to sound recording and sound creation: constructions of soundscapes, ecological documents, documentation of situations, events and environments. While the terminologies seem to fail at defining one specific discipline, the democratisation of recording tools has contributed to the emergence of new practices at the crossroads of sound anthropology, radio art, audio-naturalism and experimental music. The most obvious common denominators are the microphone and the fixation of sound, but the technical aspects are not enough to establish a fixed term. One may even prefer other terms rather than "field recording" and "phonography"; the present article has no ambition of encompassing such a vast field under any specific banner. These two terms, among the most debatable and most used, nevertheless allow us to elicit certain problematics shared by numerous manners of recording the sonic world. *Field recording* juxtaposes the specific, unique and unpredictable situations the sound recordist encounters outdoors to the controlled and reproducible situation it is possible to create in the studio. Phono-*graphy,* bearing witness for its part to a technical lineage that dates back to the phonograph, reveals issues specific to recording onto a physical support.

Beyond terminology, it is essential to note that the different forms of *field* recording share the forging of a relationship with environments, with *place*. Questioning phonographic practice and production thus implies questioning its relation to *places*, whether they correspond to precisely documented topographies and localisations, refer only to typologies of generic spaces, or are transfigured into symbolic or Imaginary evocations. This article, first reviewing how phonographic practice constructs its reception in function of documentary and/or musical values, hopes to bring to light some of the trajectories comprising these geographies. Whether these territories are near or distant, it is a question of demonstrating the way in which creating phonographies produces a relationship with an "elsewhere". The goal here is not to define world recording practices in terms of a list of favourite destinations, portraits of practitioners, or profiles of listeners, but rather to assess the extent to which production and reception of phonographies can be culturally "situated". What is the "here" that defines reception of an "elsewhere"? In order to question relationships to strangeness and *exoticism* that may be cultivated by practices with origins that are most often occidental, certain examples of colonial usages of the phonograph by anthropologists may prove illuminating. They in fact invite us to consider the identification and production of forms of *alterity* in function of *common* determinations, and allow us to perceive the reflection of our own technological and physical-media-defined fascination in our staging of the world of sound. And finally with these "elsewheres" that come forth in the experience of media-defined listening, we will address the dimension of the Imaginary and the idealized. This dimension constitutes them into *utopian* forms, through which it is possible to find the trace of mechanisms for sharing and defining an aural culture, as well as the production of the characteristics of a *listener body*.

Documentary Phonographies

To reflect about the relationship field recording has to *place*, it is important to first consider the forms and discourses by which it reveals itself within a larger context, that of contemporary sound and musical cultures. Pierre-Yves Macé devoted a lengthy study to the question of the "sound document" and the way it has transformed music (Macé, 2012). In the context of the phonogram being imposed both as the infinite possibility of documenting the sound world and as the dominant mode of reception of music, music itself has evolved in response to the new materiality of the recording medium. Pursuing the fluid demarcation lines between documentary and musical aesthetics, Macé analyses the different ways the problematic of documentation in music arise. The extra-musical value of the document, which can become material or motif in a composition, is understood by Macé by way of his own particular concept of materiality (as evidenced by his specific scheme of indices, constructions and alterations) and a specific concept of temporality: the phonographic document constitutes a trace, evidence of an "*avoir-lieu*" [a "taking place"] (*Ibid*: pg. 78) of the event and of its phonographic investigation. Among the musical examples Macé considered, certain composers used sound documents to create "quotations of the real world" or "document-effects". But faced with other works, the possibility of distinguishing between musical and documentary value can become more uncertain. While the recording procedure for Luc Ferrari's *Presque Rien* (which opens with the atmosphere of a harbour village, *Ibid*: pg. 81) resembles a "documentary operation", describing the piece requires resorting at times to vocabulary specific to composition (for example when a motorboat becomes a "musical motif"). Macé, whose analysis adopts the perspective of the composers, may well leave unanswered some questions from the listener: is the descriptive literality of Ferrari's piece enough to exclude the sensation of composition? Do not Knud Viktor's "perceptual enlargements" – recordings of animal movement that is usually imperceptible, (cited below: *Ibid*: pg. 88) – engage an instrumental relationship with the microphone rather than the "surgical" gesture of biopsy?

For Macé, creators blurring the line between music and document may even render their intentions suspect. His analyse of *Brokenhearted Dragonflies* reproaches its creator, Tucker Martine, of deceiving listeners about the nature of the recorded phenomena ("certified as authentic"[1]) for having "musicalized" the recording by adding distortion (*Ibid*: pg. 126). In order to maintain the homogeneity of his musicological analysis, Macé was driven to place the phonographic gesture in a relationship of tension with "truth" as evidenced by the *avoir-lieu* of the document. In the case of Martine, the possibility of according fictional status to the absurdities of the liner notes, or musical value to the gesture of over-amplification which introduces distortion is forgotten in favour of the identification of a "fake" documentary: what "took place" is falsification. According to Macé, the phonography is what gives music access to "the infinitely open field of 'objective' sound" (*Ibid*: pg. 240), and so it is in accordance with its documentary "transparency" (*Ibid*: pg. 129) that he evaluates it.

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[1] The booklet accompanying *Brokenhearted Dragonflies* delivers a rather caricatural version of the claims of authenticity sometimes cultivated by field recording in the period 1990-2000.

The jungle is not the jungle

The largest bodies of phonography works do seem to correspond to Macé's definitions: the fields of bioacoustics, sound anthropology or radio documentary indeed produce documents where the relationship to the terrain is determined by scientific objectivity or by a process of investigation. However, for some artists utilizing field recording the question of the sound document raised by phonography elicits other positions. Francisco López, field-recording figure in experimental music, insists on refuting the assimilation of his work to documentary status, considering his piece *La Selva* (composed of recordings of a tropical environment), for example, as a work of music (López, 1998). Even though his title refers to a natural reserve in Costa Rica, and even though a list of animal species (established based on compositional structure rather than following scientific classification) accompanies the recording, he relegates documentary "realism" to the rank of "side-effects" and scientific "objectivism" to "illusion" (*Ibid*: pg. I.14, I.4). To these, he prefers to claim the heritage of musique concrète, from which he coins the term "environmental acousmatics", defining his gesture of sound recordist in the framework of work as a composer. Nature becomes an opportunity for "expansion and transformation of our concept of music" (*Ibid*: pg. I.13).

While with his concept of *avoir-lieu* – "taking-place" – Macé identified a link of continuity (more or less perceptible, more or less solid, but nevertheless unwavering) between the recorded source and listening to the sound document, López prefers for his part to affirm the acousmatic rupture: the objective of his work is not to portray the jungle, but to capture electroacoustic "matter" there. Through very different positions and means of expression, but neighbouring assessments, both nevertheless agree to dismiss the possibility of obtaining a *truth* of the *place*. This truth fades for Macé behind the *avoir-lieu* of the document, the sound of the *place* is no more than "the trace of what happened there, of what accidentally "filled" time *t* of the sound capture"; consequently the phonographies of Dublin streets in John Cage's *Roaratorio* form but a "generic effect of reality" (Macé, 2012: pg. 248). For his part, López reminds us that "*La Selva* is not La Selva", the listener's experience should not be confused with the experience of the place, the "intensity" or "proximity" of which are transmitted only as acousmatic values (López, 1998: pg. I.11).

And yet phonography calls upon a multitude of places, singularized or generic, real or fictional, vaguely evoked or precisely located. This is the case with *La Selva* as with numerous works by López[2]; it is the case of the examples raised by Macé as representing the vast majority of work issued from field recording. If these works do not mention the place or places of recording in their titles, they inevitably supply a description or at least a hint by way of the photos, images, notes or speech accompanying the documents or listening situations. So what experience of place does phonography invite us to? The hypothesis I would like to formulate is that the recording engages us in another form of spatial relationship, by materialising an "elsewhere" that brings into play both the *avoir-lieu* of the document and the *acousmatic* relationship with place. While the sound recording transmits neither documentary truth nor experience of place, nevertheless it seems that all recordings implicitly confront us with what the composer of "*I am sitting in a room",* Alvin Lucier, has his recorded text say explicitly, *"I am sitting in a room*, *different from the one you are in now…",* in other words, the experience of *separation* between the "here" of

[2] Even if his series "*Untitled"* seems to insist upon the autonomy of the listening experience vis-à-vis *place*, the pieces always evoke these places in the notes.

the recorded listening and the "elsewhere" of which the phonogram is the trace. And so, examining the *places* of phonography must examine the manner this elsewhere is created, as destination, but also as the Imaginary: what sort of externalities, what sort of strangeness is at work? The question relates to that of the *here*: in regards to what social and geographic position, what cultural community, is the here the point of reference? Often phonographic practice openly encourages its relationship with movement and voyage: by attempting to renew our perception of the world or inform the listener of its *unheard* aspects, it engages and affirms *movement* towards the encounter with sound. Whether the destination is distant lands (López, Martine), a shift in everyday perception (Ferrari, Cage) or on a microscopic level (Viktor), the phonography seems to give rise to an *exoticization* of listening, or even to an explicit cultivation of a taste for the *exotic*. This phenomenon, problematic for the least, raises new questions. Do the "sound hunter", the "artist-voyager" or the "strolling listener" appropriate some of the characteristics of the tourist? The explorer? Or even the colonialist and the imperialist?

Explorations

By basing his archaeology of field recording on the tutelary figure of writer-voyager Nicolas Bouvier, Alexandre Galand provides a few elements describing the collector of sounds on voyage (Galand, 2012: pg. 10). Field recording is here defined by its contribution to renewing our perception of the world, by radically differentiating the macroscopic concept of colonial economies from sensory experience, the scale of the body, and apprehension of details of everyday life. But the collection of albums analysed by Galand plainly demonstrates that *the here* and *the elsewhere* have not changed places; the 100 discs presented in the work visit a quite large number of countries on every continent, but the vast majority of authors, audio-naturalists, ethnomusicologists and composers remain Western White men, for the most part European and North American. Such a finding imposes consideration of phonographic geography through the frame of reference of access to the world being limited, experiencing the world being based on the direction of travel and movement. This also invites us to ask to what extent field recording practice can be culturally "situated" in terms of race, genre and class[3]. In the absence of statistical data, one can doubtlessly argue that while phonography attempts to renew our perception of the world, it also inherits predetermined manners of grasping it.

In this regard, the work of the Australian anthropologist Michael Taussig – in particular his analysis of the cultural interactions arising from the discovery of the Cuna indigenous people of Panama by Western ethnologists in the early twentieth century – contributes a critical historiography of phonographic practices. Focusing in particular on the fashioning of fetishes by the Cuna and on the utilisation of photography and phonography by explorers, Taussig describes a complex schema of construction of cultural assimilation and differentiation. Expressing the two inseparable themes of the book, he demonstrates how *mimesis* and *alterity* go hand in hand: how seeking out *the other* also involves construction of *the same*, and how inversely the possibility of similarities between Westerners and indigenes bears the trace, from the colonialist perspective, of confirmation of radical alterity. Notably, the history of the exploration of the Cuna territory was lastingly driven by the quest for hypothetical "White Indians", leading Taussig to envisage that resemblance and strangeness do not form two separate realities but rather two "moments" of a

[3] In Galand's collection, White, Western and male overrepresentation is clear. Without refuting the possibility of relative diversity in social class, we shouldn't forget that the access to recording technology may be a sign of a certain level of educational and cultural capital.

single phenomenon "energizing each other, so that the more you see [the other] as 'like us', the greater you make the alterity and vice versa" (Taussig, 1993: pg. 174). In the same vein, the study of colonialist usage of phonography cannot consist exclusively of the analysis of the effect it produces on the indigenes alone. For Taussig, "the more important question lies with the white man's fascination with [the indigene's] fascination with these mimetically capacious machines" (*Ibid*: pg. 198). While photography in the context of these expeditions is essentially a tool for legitimation of scientific objectivity, the usage of phonography – which time and again results in staged filming of the astonishment of indigenes – evokes magic. In the image of Nanook, the Eskimo in Robert Flaherty's film who is shown in one scene trying to eat the phonograph record upon hearing the sound of the gramophone, the fascination of the Cuna is exploited in order to redirect the primitive wonderment of the White Man towards the magic of his own machines of sound reproduction. Even if in the twentieth century the modern Western man no longer allows himself to marvel like Edison hearing a wax cylinder for the first time reproduce the song *"Mary had a little lamb"*, the indigenes become a figure of alterity upon which to transpose this primordial sensory shock, in the same vein as little girls in advertisements for the phonograph and the dog listening to "His Master's Voice" (*Ibid*: pg. 205).

Does contemporary practice escape this aspect of the history of recording media? Has it been liberated from this fascination for the mimetic magic of sound reproduction? Can we not, in the shift in perception that field recording invites us to engage, explore manners to replay the perceptual shock of listening to sound recorded in a physical medium? By severing the visible and immediate link between sound and its source, the invention of the phonograph rendered sound *acousmatic,* inaugurating a schema of listening radically different from what had until then been everyday perception. Our listening cultures have largely accustomed us to this way of hearing, but perhaps we should go farther still in seeking ways to renew our sense of wonder. Because fascination persists, even faced with the ubiquity of recording which confronts us with both *the elsewhere* and *the here*, to alterity and mimesis, to on-the-spot listening *taking place* now and to what has already *taken place*. And so the voyage of the sound recordist and phonographic exoticism will have as destination the search for the alterity necessary to renew acousmatic wonder; and as effect to articulate for a *second time* the decontextualisation/re-contextualisation of sound: materialized by its phonographic recording, it finds itself once again identified with *place,* or staged as voyage[4].

Mimetic body, utopian body

At this stage of reflection, the concept of *utopia* allows us to situate, or at least to characterize more precisely, the mechanisms of construction of this phonographic "elsewhere". Articulated between two physical places, those of recording and mediated listening, phonographic listening leads us to postulate the first while experiencing the second. Inserted between the two is a third form of relationship with space, which resembles more the emergence of an Imaginary, of an idea or a narration of *the place*, but for which we can shift the experience to the comfort of home listening: remote jungles, undersea descents, unfeasible points of hearing [*points d'ouïe*] in the

[4] We find a similar idea in Macé. Cage's phonographies evoke " 'two realities': one, absent but structural, the object of verbal description […] and the other, present in the piece, phonographic" (Macé, 2012 : 248).

heart of the animal kingdom, lost anthropophony. Phonographic production evokes *places* as much as they constitute "non-places": the acousmatic facet of sound reproduction, giving us the object while depriving us of it, expressing *the place* while negating it, endows it with the dimension of a *utopia*. This may be an idealized version of the sound environment (a naturalistic recording "cleaned" of manmade sound) or a point of hearing inaccessible to human perception (because of the type of mikes used and their placement). In every case, the phonographic *non-place* borrows from the common meaning of the term utopia, "the constitutive character of a place that does not have its place in our system of space and is nourished by its negation" (Cauquelin, 1999: pg. 161). In this sense, utopia is a way of holding up a mirror to what composes "our system of space", in the same way that phonographic documentation of *an elsewhere* is also the reflection of *the here* of our listening cultures.

For Michel Foucault, the question of utopia is the question of the body. All utopias, including those that seem "turned against the body and destined to erase it" (Foucault, 2009: pg. 14), find their origin inside the body. With the concept of a "utopic body", *the place* of the body – "the irremediable *here*" – proves in fact to be "always elsewhere", since it is around the body that the world is given form, it is from the body "that all possible places, real or utopian, emerge and radiate". (*Ibid*: pg. 18). Foucault's thought may prompt us to seek out, in our recordings of the world, traces of the construction of a particular corporeality. While there is no doubt that our perceptual cultures contribute to shaping the body, field recording seems to draw virtue from the *medium* for the possibility of linking not only *the here* and *the elsewhere*, but of also linking *bodies* – in this case those of the sound recordist and the listener.

Although López has revealed the limits in the equivalence between experience of place and the experience of listening to recorded sound, he nevertheless ends his commentary on *La Selva* by affirming that listening to the disc can become a reflection of the "profound listening" he himself undertook (López, 1998: pg. I.13). While if in his case the actualization of the link between author and listener depends on the listening "effort" the later must make, certain approaches do not embrace as much prudence. In this regard, "binaural" recording, quite fashionable in field recording, eloquently demonstrates this utopia of communication between bodies. This technique consisting of placing microphones at ear-level so that the space of the cranium reproduces three-dimensional perception; it quite literally lends a body to the listener. Thus as we address the manner one can be "affected" by the listening experience, the phonographic piece seems to go beyond its material form. Beyond music and the document, it becomes the support for transmission of perceptions and affects; it is an idealized body responding to the materiality of the phonogram: an incorporeal body, and as noted in the text accompanying Martine's disc, able "to be transported to the exact experience one would encounter in these mysterious lowlands" (Macé, 2012: pg. 128) – a utopic body, able to borrow the body of another to share perceptions.

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As we have seen, reflection on the materiality of the phonographic recording leads us to question our relationships with place and space, but also to reflect on the ways we have *embodied* a listening culture. Counting myself among the sound artists who record the world and strive to reflect about these practices, it appeared indispensable to me to question the "we" that forms our community. Peter Szendy established the possibility of saying "I listen" based on a "we listen", since listening "only happens to itself" [*n'advient à elle-même*] from the moment when it is

addressed and shared with someone who confirms its presence (Szendy, 2009: pg. 18). And we – authors and listeners of phonographies who share our listening – what are we then? What do we express about the world by way of our sound work? And what does it express about us? We must fully admit that we also share cultural habits, corporal determinism and tendencies vis-à-vis the material world. From such a conclusion, undoubtedly we must find new ways of evaluating phonographic works, in order to understand in what measure they contribute to updating these shared characteristics or – conversely – formulate new relationships. Such attention to the conditions (cultural, geographic) and privileges (social, technological) through which we perceive the world, construct representations of it, or extract a recorded resource from it, can contribute to making phonographic practice into a reflexive experience. It is from just such reflexive positions that David Dunn develops a critique of sound anthropocentrism (Dunn, 1997), that López renders the "environmental acousmatic" into a tool to challenge the contemplative relationship with nature, or that Yannick Dauby is led to renouncing his status as author in order to accompany Taiwanese villagers in making their own sound documentation (meursault, 2015). These positions prove uncomfortable, since they involve renouncing the utopia of a world constructed around ourselves, and also renouncing that our own listening constitutes the centre and the measure. But perhaps it is only from these positions that we can actually transform our points of view and our points of hearing.

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