BUZZING LINES OF FLIGHT: A SURVEY OF MY OWN PRIVATE SOUNDSCAPE

Henry Adam Svec
University of Waterloo, Canada¹

This audio-essay explores the relationship between soundscape recordings and property. Three field recordings of the author's family fruit farm examine the emplacement and territorialization of sound but also the means by which certain signals might dislocate the discourses of ownership; stereo recordings of the acreage have been displaced by a more connective topology, courtesy of the beehives. The accompanying essay deploys an auto-ethnographic approach to reflect upon how sound recording practice can negotiate foundational ideologies within late capitalist culture.

Keywords: soundscape, field recording, bees, capitalism, swarm

When my father decided to take out the cherry, plum, peach, and apple orchards on the farm purchased in the early 1960s by my grandfather—a Czech immigrant who first worked in Canada as a servant for an ambassador in Quebec, then in the fields of a WASP fruit farmer in Southwestern Ontario, later to find a job in a greenhouse of the government, for he was a gardener by training—I was overcome by a surge of sadness. We all knew that it had to be done, because my brothers and I had moved away, unable to return anymore in the summers to help; and the small scale of the operation had been making surplus profits difficult to achieve. (This was shortly before the paradigm of “buy local” had taken off in the region, but after the North American Free Trade Agreement had made it increasingly difficult to compete with the low prices of the big grocery chains.) It was as though all value had been extracted from the trees and none remained. Thusly the fields would simply be rented out to a neighboring farmer for cash crops, alternating corn, wheat, and soybeans.

I had grown up on this farm—had climbed, picked, pruned, and irrigated these orchards. So, when I came home to visit that summer and first saw the massive pile of broken limbs and

1 Department of Communication Arts, Waterloo. Author's Contact: hsvec@uwaterloo.ca

dried roots down the ridge from the road, waiting yet to be burned, set to return to mere dust, I cried. I recognized even individual trees. It occurred to me that we should almost have a funeral.

What was the source of my grief? Of course, first there was simple nostalgia, a mourning of the loss of home. The smell, look, and feel of the orchards had anchored my childhood and young adult existence. In spring, the white sweet clouds of blossom and fresh, gentle winds; in summer the crimson clusters of Bing and Black English cherries weighing down leafy branches, the rich smells of rot and life; then the motley mix of autumnal colors and rains—here the trees receding, with the return to busses and classrooms—and finally the slow, snowy cover of winter. After the bulldozers came, the foundation, the soil, remained; but the core of the environment had been the arborous organisms themselves and the finely cultivated ecosystem surrounding. I would have been less upset if the house I grew up in had been demolished.

But I can hear now, too, that the loss also had to do with the alteration of the sonic environment. For the trees were key players in a multitudinous, ongoing *soundscape* (Schafer 1993). There was the rustling and dynamic, open shelter of the crowded orchard, and the chatter of workers or portable radios (aluminum ladders moving and rearranging) during harvest; the car doors and families by the fruit stand, where we also sold ice cream made with our fruit; and the refuge of the irrigation pond, a leafy and calm oasis amidst the toil. There were the droning crickets, the chirpy bats, and the manic birds drawn to our canopies, as well as the ever-present and annually-evolving noisemakers that we used to repel the latter—simulacra of shotguns and even looped recordings of dying warblers, none of which ever seemed to function as designed. And cutting across it all was the *soundmark* of the bell on my grandmother's porch, which she rang at coffee-break time, and at lunch and supper, and which could be heard from almost any spot on the farm.² A brassy, primordial, vibratory mechanism by which both our labor and rest were coordinated.

Nostalgia, in both visual and sonic forms, was coupled also with a more material sense of loss. These were trees planted by my grandfather, which after his passing were watched over by my father, which one day perhaps would be watched over by me, for I am the eldest son. And I wonder now to what degree my fond sense memories and experiences growing up had and have still something to do, in the back of my mind, with the affective gravity of ownership. To what degree were the sonic pleasures derived from these natural/cultural marvels—we also had raspberry bushes, and strawberries, and asparagus, and bees—products of the modern discourses of land as property, which, as Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2015) has examined, has been a central ideological component of settler-colonialism? Similarly, to what degree did and does property ground the act of *listening* and the desire to capture sound recordings of particular places?

In this short text and in the field recordings that accompany it, I want to use my own affective experience of returning to my family's farm, which my father has recently transformed into a wildflower and bee sanctuary after several years of cash cropping, to make recordings of the soundscape. My aim is to listen in and around the land and its inhabitants and thereby to meditate on the intertwined forces of territorialization and de-territorialization that inform and inflect for me the phonographic reception/transmission of this rural location.³ The swarm has

2 R. Murray Schafer in his book *The Soundscape* describes the "soundmark" as akin to a landmark, a sonic signal which can be heard by all within a community and therefore defines the place (Schafer 1993: 10).

3 My understanding of "territorialization" and "de-territorialization" are indebted to Deleuze and Guattari (1987).

I look for refuge as I walk back towards what used to be the irrigation pond. When the orchards were taken out, the weeping willows, mulberries, and pear trees that surrounded this human-made body of water were also razed. It had been like an oasis: an old fruit stand in the corner that my grandfather had converted into a bee hive; rope swing on the far end with which we could jump into the water on the hottest days; a dock in the middle from which we caught mostly small bluegill fish at night after work. A fence, too, around the outside of the pond, making the place like an extra-private park amidst the semi-public workspace of the farm. Incredibly, however, willows grow quickly. The noise from the highway still feels much louder than I remember, but the rustling leaves and creaking branches of the weeping willows, now fully regrown, elicit the comfort of a favorite vinyl record.

On the eastern border of the property runs a strip of weeds and scrubby trees, a sort of miniature windbreak or buffer between our land and the neighbor's, across which a field of soybeans presently grows. There was a story about a previous owner of that farm, who one early spring day was witnessed by my grandfather on our land, digging up topsoil to spread back on his own fields. My grandfather was furious. The windbreak had thus not been strong enough to keep out human intruders, but neither is the pair of Rode NT5 condenser microphones that I am using to record as I stand atop weeds mere inches away from the property line. A bird flutters away out of the sanctuary near the pond and I can still trace its chirping as it moves out and away.

The western boundary is more fortified. Within the past year my dad has installed a wire fence along the entire edge on that side, from our house all the way through to the back of the bush, which comprises a quarter of the territory. I wonder whether the fence has played a role in the migratory patterns of certain wildlife, such as the coyotes and deer that pass through the area. My recording device, a MixPre-3, will not inscribe the sound of this wire fence, however, which does not seem to make a noticeable impact on the movement of the wind or birds at least. Even when I place my microphones directly in front of the wire, the obstruction does not register.

Track 2

<https://archive.org/download/buzzing-lines-of-flight/Track02.mp3>

After a day of wandering around with my field recorder, harvesting, in my way, the soundscape, I follow my father as he works with his bees. He kindles paper and twigs within a small smoke-pump, which he then blows across the top of a hive, a method of temporarily stunning or subduing the creatures. We can already hear the throng of the colony. But when he removes the top lid—first cracking the seal, which the bees patiently re-glue after each time they are disturbed in this manner—there is a wild surge in amplitude. It sounds like the machinations of an industrious organism also capable of instantly modulating, in response to the slightest threat, into a defensive monster. A sprung potentiality of stingers.

I return later with my microphones to inscribe the fenced border again by the corn, then moving towards the closest hive, which sits behind a row of cedars in the bush. The corn itself, I now recognize, acts as a form of sonic boundary on the recording, a line of tight scraping and ridged swaying. Walking along this edge, the line takes on a degree of solidity in my field of audition. But as I reach the bush, ducking below branches and moving towards the hive, my

The broad and interdisciplinary movement of post-humanist theory has followed Deleuze & Guattari into their radical paradigm that finds logical and political fault with categorization, identity, and borders. According to science scholar Donna Haraway, for instance, the detached separation of reasonable, upright *man* is an illusion that props up a fantasy of domination and exploitation, against which she influentially proposes the image of the cyborg (1991: 149–182). In her recent book *Staying with the Trouble*, Haraway proposes that the concept of the Anthropocene, which describes an historical epoch at which point the natural world has become a product too of human culture and society, is a site at which humanism persists; Haraway thus proposes instead the concept of the “Chthulucene”: “The chthonic ones are not confined to a vanished past. They are a buzzing, stinging, sucking swarm now, and human beings are not in a separate compost pile” (Haraway 2016: 55).

Scholars of sound, culture, and media have long been scrutinizing the place of the senses and sound within modern and capitalist processes of subject-formation (e.g. Adorno 1990; Attali 1985; James 2019; McLuhan 2003; Ong 2002; Sterne 2003). More recent work has additionally examined the tactical utility of various sonic media as means of counter-power (e.g. Goodman 2012; Robinson 2020; Svec 2018; Weheliye 2005); the radical potential of field recording and even soundwalking have also been considered (Butler 2006; Jackson 2019; Jones & Fairclough 2016; Paiva 2020). Informed by these discourses, as I listen back to the many field recordings I have made in and around our property lines, but also in and around the hives, and as I commune with the bees through my ears on the dance floor—and as I open up this soundscape to *strangers* via networked communication technologies—I can hear too the ways in which even the soundscape recording tradition is capable of undoing the stability of its own emplacement and vantage point. The registered vibrations of bees lure us into a dizzyingly busy and productive ecology, where boundaries are less significant than connections and in which the name of the game is honey, the sheer volume of which is almost always too much for any one hive alone. As Jussi Parikka has put it with respect to bee language, “Here communication becomes less a matter of abstract conveyance of symbols and more a matter of embodied interactions in intensive spatial environments” (2010: 136). Perhaps the microphone is the best way to interface with this dynamic, fruitful topology. The rich and mysterious resonance of the world when auditioned through this perspective, a map of flowing exchanges and co-responsibilities, offers an alternative diagram of bodies sounding in relation and thus also a different way of being emplaced together.

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