Happy To Be Here:

Exploring the Relationship between Community and Place through Mobile Media

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MSP 4541: Mobile Media

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December 12, 2022

Mobile audio projects can transport the listener to a new location being described or enhance their experience of their own environment with site-specific projects. Geolocative audio, specifically, connects the listener to a space they are moving throughout. One form of geolocative audio is a soundwalk. Soundwalks are a form of mobile media that create an audio landscape for the listener that allows them to recreate this experience at their own pace and by their own means. My project, "Happy to Be Here", explores the connection between physical location and community through everyday life experiences in North Philadelphia. Many of the field recordings composing this audio project were recorded walking around my own neighborhood in North Central Philadelphia. While reflecting on my walk and relistening to these recordings, I considered how similar these everyday interactions in my community are to my past back home, despite being totally different environments. I believe that anyone may listen to this while walking around their own small town or city block and recognize familiar sounds from their everyday lives and experiences. This project was recorded on my iPhone and edited in Audacity. I was walking as I recorded with the occasional pause to capture a passing sound, but my footsteps and motions are intentionally audible in my recordings. My intention was to convey the sense of movement to the listener and highlight the role of mobility in this project.

Geolocative technologies and mobile media allow for listeners to become more engaged with their physical spaces while engaging with this type of content. Smart phones, laptops, and iPods are a few examples of mobile media technologies, but it also includes audio that explores a physical location. This technology has unique affordances that shape the user's experiences, and how media is engaged with in a broader scale.

Though listeners are encouraged to listen to this soundwalk while walking around their own neighborhood (or about two blocks for the runtime of this project), listening while at home or in the car would also be sufficient as the sounds in this project recreate the walking experience. During my soundwalk I passed by neighbors chatting, dogs barking, birds chirping, leaves crunching, the ice cream truck, many cars, and someone cooking at the corner deli. I then layered these field recordings with a mellow background looping sound for ambiance and my own vocal narration to add stories to the audio composition. While reflecting on my walk and relistening to these recordings, I considered how similar these everyday interactions in my community are to my past back home despite being totally different environments. I believe that anyone may listen to this while walking around their own small town or city block and recognize familiar sounds from their everyday lives and experiences.

Project Goals and Improvements

The goal of my geolocative audio project, 'Happy to be Here,' is to highlight everyday experiences, in this case those that are encountered on a walk around a city block, and that these shared experiences establish our communities. I also seek to embrace the similarities of these everyday experiences in one's community or neighborhood in both rural and urban spaces. This area of North Philadelphia has a negative reputation for being unsafe due to high rates of gun violence, and I seek to challenge this narrative by sharing my own experiences living here, though as a non-native to the city. My hometown is a small, rural college town and prior to my move here I was warned of the potential danger living in this area. However, I have found that the there are more similarities in how tightknit neighborhoods interact with each

other in everyday life than differences. A goal of this project is to present a counternarrative of how this neighborhood is perceived by non-locals.

My project was recording using my iPhone to gather field recordings from the actual, physical space to create this soundwalk. This process was quite simple due to the affordances of mobile media technology. Just carrying my phone while I walked around the block allowed me to capture all the field recordings, quickly, and without the use of bulky microphones or audio equipment. The field recordings were then organized and edited in the computer software Audacity. Using my Macbook to edit this soundwalk is another example of how mobile media technology was used for this production. Since this project was edited on my laptop, I was not physically restrained to any location during this process. Further, the content of this soundwalk also embraces the characteristics of mobile media. Listeners can hear me move throughout the space through the sounds of passing cars, my keys jingling, and footsteps. Engaging with this project itself comments upon the "mobility" of sound. The soundwalk is hosted on Soundcloud, which is a mobile media app that allows users to experience the project on the go via their smartphone or other mobile media device.

Happy to be Here has been improved since its first iteration with the integration of more background audio effects, narration, and more advanced audio editing. Feedback from both my professors and peers was taken into consideration during my editing process. One large addition was the inclusion of audio used with permission from my friend to recreate the sound of loud music playing from a passing car. This was a suggestion from one of my classmates during our peer review session, however we were unsure how to include this while following copyright. Panning the audio of the passing car sounds is another improvement I

made to make the project more immersive to the listener. More narration and personal stories were also included towards the end of this project where there previously was a large gap. I initially included this break in narration to highlight the background audio, but I decided that the use of narration was much more engaging and helped the flow of the soundwalk.

Research-Connection

This project is composed of field recordings from my own neighborhood and were recorded while walking to and from my local grocery store. I was walking as I recorded with the occasional pause to capture a passing sound, but my footsteps and motions are intentionally audible in my recordings. My intention was to convey the sense of movement to the listener, which may either match their own pace while they walk around their neighborhood or enhance their imagination of that experience if they are in a fixed location while listening. Seaward (2015) explains the power of field recordings in contextualizing sounds to create a narrative, and that "finding musicality in sounds is a powerful part of the getting one's message across" (p. 302). I believe that through composing my field recordings of everyday neighborhood sounds with a more ambient background looping track has established a sense of musicality in the project. Though some field recordists and mobile media producers argue that passing chatter is intrusive to the recordings (Seaward, 2015), I believe this is what makes my project meaningful as it highlights the real experience of my neighborhood where passing conversation and noises are the norm. Though these sounds could have been edited out or avoided, they were intentionally embraced to represent what everyday life is like on my street realistically.

Rodriguez explains how media technology is used to transform raw experience into meaning, which may then transmit that meaning to others (2019). Field recordings are the

collection of my raw, lived experience in my neighborhood that have then been modified and arranged to establish a meaningful narrative of the space. How people interact in a community and with their surroundings is deeply relational and informs an individuals' connection with both the outside world and other people (Bull, 2006). The use of mobile media technologies therefore allows us to construct our own sense of reality in relation to place and determine a shared representation of our space with our community. The use of mobile media technology in urban spaces, like North Philadelphia, is specifically important because it allows individuals to become immersed and deeply engaged with their everyday movements through space (Bull, 2006). This sensory experience allows listeners to become attuned to their own mundane everyday actions, thoughts, or desires. For example, in my project I am not only stating that I am walking on the sidewalk with crunchy leaves and dogs barking nearby, but it is audible in my project, and you can gain a sense of the space I am in. The dog's barks getting louder indicates that they are closer to me versus when they get quieter, and they are further away. Highlighting the chatter of neighbors walking by encourages the listener to be aware of the people around them, and how they have their own mundane everyday reality.

Though this project is not necessarily site-specific (I could share the location, but for the scope of this project chose not to since it is where I currently live), it is inspired by Farman's idea of locative stories representing how space and narratives simultaneously impact each other (2014b). Farman explains that the stories associated with a physical place imbue meaning into the site, but the way individuals experience the space will also impact their own narrative of it. This again relates back to the idea that mobile media projects may either transport the listener to that location through immersive sounds and narrative, or it may further inform how

they engage with their own location. One of the goals of this project was to illustrate the similarities between everyday life experiences that are not necessarily bound to a physical location but highlight the site-specific sounds that I came across in my field recordings which make this neighborhood unique. Experiences like talking to neighbors, seeing animals, getting breakfast are essentially universal, therefore I believe that any listener may identify with the soundscape I present. However, due to the geolocative aspect of this project is may specifically enhance their perspective on North Philadelphia neighborhoods. If the listener is also living in this area, they may experience the project differently than someone not from the United States would. Through sensory orienting ourselves in a space, we are therefore understanding the culturally inscribed meanings associated with it (Farman, 2014a).

This project, and all mobile audio projects, allow listeners to use our mobile devices in new ways to create meaning, and impacts how we navigate everyday life via the affordances of the technology. Mobile media technologies are significant because they may be used to establish new meanings for a community that may lead to social change. They also give producers agency in constructing their own narratives of how they experience a space from their perspective, which may differ from dominant representations that exist in mainstream media. I considered this idea while producing this audio project because it was recorded in North Philadelphia, which has a negative media representation due to high amounts of gun violence in the area. I am conscious of my presence in the neighborhood as a transplant and temporary student living in this space, but I also was reflecting on the way this area was portrayed to me prior to moving here from both friends back home and Philadelphia locals. My intention in this project was to highlight the normalcy and mundanity of everyday life and the

impact of strong community here, despite the negative representations that exist. I believe this type of representation is important to challenge hegemonic ideas of communities. As Farman argues, the symbolic representations of objective spaces have the power to establish real "facts" via maps and locative media representations (2014a).

Further, Farman emphasizes the importance of understanding whose space is being considered and represented through locative media projects as space is inherently social (2014a). Representations of spaces, including the actual map representation of a space, are imposed on communities as a way of colonization. Mobile media technologies and geolocative media projects could benefit citizens media initiatives because they allow individuals to "name the world in their own terms" through their own representations of their community (Rodriguez, 2011). Citizens' media allows individuals equitable access to media technologies, which affords communities agency in challenging or subverting hegemonic media infrastructures and therefore their representations of everyday life. The idea of "naming the world in your own terms" was coined by Jesus Martin Barbero to illustrate how identity and language are powerful tools for harnessing civic engagement and political power from a grassroots perspective (Rodriguez, 2011, p. 100). The production of mobile media projects shapes cultural meaning and understanding of a physical space, and allowing community members the agency to create their own narratives of their neighborhoods illustrates this idea. Communities may be empowered by the ability to produce their own cultural representation of their spaces.

My project "Happy to be Here" is a reflection on my own everyday experiences living in my specific community in North Philadelphia and immerses the listener in a five minute walk

around my block. Comparing my experiences living here in an urban setting to my childhood

experiences in a rural farm town, and how North Philadelphia was represented to me as a

transplant here, was my inspiration for creating this project. The map for this project is very

simple, and more of a symbolic representation of what the listener will experience. I created by

map by screenshotting the area in which I walked on Google Maps, but modified and distorted

the image. I then drew over this the route that I walked, which was a simple loop around the

block which passes many homes, businesses, and a school. The background of the map is

actually two images that I layered over one another. The first image is of an empty lot and wall

of graffiti a few blocks down from my apartment, and the other is a rural country road that is

near my mom's house back home. I include both of these images to represent how everyday

spaces and neighborhoods, though dramatically different in appearance, are the focus of this

project.

Conclusion

Mobile media is a powerful tool for cultivating a collective meaning associated with a

physical space, and these technologies determine how users engage with the space around

them as they move through it. Mobile audio is specifically useful in immersing the listener in

the space that they are passing through because the audio may be synchronized to that space

with intention. In "Happy to be Hear" the listener will pass by common locations that are likely

found in their own towns, and therefore this project is not site-specific and may be replicated in

other neighborhoods. This was an important factor in the planning of my soundwalk, as I want

this project to be as accessible as possible. However, it was also important to me to highlight

stories or characteristics of my neighborhood that are unique to Philadelphia, which is done

through the vocal narratives added in.

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