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### **Creative ethnology as an invitation to play: analysis of a fieldwork-based composition**

During the past year I have explored Ullrich Kockel's challenge of "creative ethnology" (Kockel/McFadyen 2019; Mackie 2024) by converging my interests in ethnography and electronic music. In particular, I built upon his idea that 'cultivating sympathy, synthesis and synergy between anthropo-/ethnological fieldwork and art at multiple levels of engagement is vital for the continued meaningfulness of anthropology and ethnology as intellectual pursuits' (Kockel 2011). In this essay I will continue this exploration by analysing the role of play in my "intention, attention and expression" (Gershon 2020) while producing a track which is both sonic art as well as a scholarly piece. For its composition I exclusively used ethnographic field recordings which I recorded for a project on border-crossing trains. The fieldwork was conducted on a train ride from Liège (Belgium) to Maastricht (the Netherlands), and all the recordings are of sounds within the train, as well as in both stations.

The composition can be listened to here:

<https://on.soundcloud.com/Vi8WL7mVNURZDEjEA>

### **Play as intention**

When it comes to intention in music and academia I experience a similar problem: the dichotomy between creation for the sake of production, and doing it for pleasure. My intention in music making has increasingly become the production of a finished product. Similarly, in academia, research for curiosity-induced fun is slowly being overtaken by products, articles, presentations, funding applications, etc.; often with a strategic purpose. I know I am hardly alone in this situation, as well as in the problem that I face within it: that during this continuous production I am getting stuck. I am prone to moments of sitting in front of a (musical or non-musical) keyboard, not knowing what to write. When this happens while making music, my partner advises me to just *play* music: not to try to compose something, or to learn a particular piece. Playing implies a lack of rules (Graeber 2015: 191), and playing (with) music to me means removing the rules of what I need to do to create a finished product. One might thus think that it removes intention completely, but instead I would interpret it as changing my intention from production to play itself, with the purpose of having fun. This process, despite its apparent frivolity quickly becomes lucrative: Inevitably, this change of intention brings results, helping move past the creative block. Play thus becomes an essential part of the creative process.

As an electronic musician, playing music does not necessarily mean playing an instrument in a traditional sense. A large part of electronic music is sound design, where the musician uses synthesisers to shape audio, or in other words to play with sound itself. Synthesis often starts with sound as a basic audio wave, and then provides the musician with tools to make it more intricate. But instead of an electronically produced waveform, a pre-existing audio sample can also function as the basis of the sound a synthesiser produces, which is then called sample-based synthesis and enables us to play with recorded audio. Sampling in music, as opposed to sampling in science, can broadly refer not only to the collection of audio but also the editing of that audio and its use in new compositions. Thus, in music technology, a sampler usually has more functions than simply recording audio: the ability to edit samples in different ways, to play samples like an instrument, to sequence samples (ordering samples in time) and more. The intention of play is therefore often embedded into the sampler itself (Erbe 2022: 25). Might the use of these playful samplers in ethnography then encourage us to apply more play to our academic practice?

## Play and attention

The sampler I used for this project is called the Morphagene, developed by the company Make Noise in collaboration with musician and researcher Tom Erbe (Erbe 2022: 25). The Morphagene continuously repeats (loops) segments of recorded audio and offers tools to adjust it, the most basic of which is to change its speed and playback direction. Increasing the speed also increases the pitch of the audio, and decreasing the speed decreases the pitch. Further, it is possible to control the size of the segment being played back, which ranges from the full length of the sample to minuscule. As we can also slide this segment through the sample, we can precisely focus on particular parts of the audio by slowly moving forward or backward through a recording. Summarised, the Morphagene allows the musician to freely cut audio into smaller segments, play these segments forwards and backwards and to change their order, to change speed and pitch, and to overlap different segments. With these tools it becomes possible to play with recorded sound, and to use it to create new sounds.

Whereas other samplers might show the recorded audio's waveform, enabling changes being made with surgical precision, the Morphagene requires the musician to listen to the sound as it is being edited and to follow their intuition while making changes, inviting experimentation. This in itself is a form of cooperative play, a back-and-forth between the musician and the algorithms programmed into the Morphagene (it is a digital instrument after all). When I started working on the track this cooperation was particularly useful, as I did not really know what I was trying to create. Having intention but lacking attention, I arbitrarily put sounds into the Morphagene, used its tools to modify them, and listened to what it produced. Not all of it was usable, but occasionally the Morphagene produced results with a distinct musical flavour. One of these was a standard 3-3-2 rhythm. Having to start somewhere, I used this segment to form a base rhythm and a speed for the track. At that moment, the difficult part was complete, the page was no longer empty, and now it was just a question of building on what I had and filling in the gaps.

For the rest of the piece I continued the process of putting field samples into the Morphagene, playing with them, and then fitting the results into the track. As I progressed, I became more targeted in the sounds I was looking for. Instead of just intuitively fiddling with the Morphagene to see what it would produce, I would purposefully use the Morphagene to search for particular sounds in the field recordings which could fill up holes in the track. Both methods resulted in me listening to the field recordings with a lot more detail than I would ever have applied in my usual process of fieldwork analysis. For example, I listened to the different pitches of the various hums from the engines of the train, and the sounds passing outside the train after a passenger opened the window. Playing with the Morphagene thus guided my attention to elements in the field recordings I otherwise might not have heard.

### Playing with expression

The way in which the (edited) sounds are presented in the track are not only a random sequence of sounds which caught my attention, they are also expressed in a way which tells a narrative. To a certain extent this arrangement follows the linearity of the train route, with sounds of the train passing through different stations corresponding to the route itself. But I also wanted to express the feelings I associated with the experiences of the field: build-ups and releases of speed and tension, mechanised transport and moving across borders. The arrangement of field recordings in this way changes them from field recordings to interpretations of the field (affected by my intention and attention), and thus brings them into the realm of fieldnotes. As such, the piece reflects an interpretation of mine of the field, and in this case my play-infused intention and attention toward it.

Expression is “the outward release of something that is a result of producers’ processes of intention and attention” (Gershon 2020: 1166). This applies to scholarly work as much as it does to artistic work. But whereas play might not appear out of place in an artistic approach, this may not be the case in scholarly work. This piece is thus an expression of play, but I also played with expression: A creative sonic fieldnote is unconventional within ethnographic practice, as is the mangling of field recordings. At the very least, playing with expression brings us new perspectives and might reveal to us parts of our fieldwork which we otherwise would not have found. Undeniably, it was also simply fun to do, and “what’s the point if we can’t have fun” (Graeber 2014)? Finally, it may also playfully challenge how we approach our discipline. This brings me back to Kockel’s call for a creative ethnology. Both Kockel (2008) and McFadyen (2018) argue that becoming *undisciplined* plays a central role in creative ethnology: A willingness to question the perceived rules of the discipline (and academia as a whole). Returning to Graeber and his argument linking a lack of rules to play, creative ethnology could thus be interpreted as an invitation to play, or to consciously inject play in our intention, attention and expression.

### References

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