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Introduction

In the 1980s, qualitative researchers engaged in a variety of debates about the problems and practices of ethnographic fieldwork and considered a host of issues that arise when writing about cultures. In fact, the phrase *writing culture* seemed appropriate shorthand for the larger implications of what many qualitative researchers recognized as a "crisis of representation." Some of the most respected ethnographic researchers and critics of the time argued that (1) we must foreground ethical questions about representing others when writing about the people and places we study, (2) we must begin to think about ethnography as a research method and written text, and, more generally, (3) we must consider the critical significance of authorial reflexivity in the construction of ethnographic accounts. These concerns engendered a variety of responses from scholars, spawning a sense of excitement for experimentation in various forms of representation and a democratic impulse in ethnographic work. While many researchers commented on the crisis of representation and sought to understand its historical foundations, numerous scholars from wide-ranging disciplines called for a shift toward ethnographic practice that was inclusive of various media and took into account a sense of aesthetic appreciation (and appropriation of aesthetic forms) that might counter the so-called legacy of objective empiricism that anthropology and ethnography had historically adopted. For instance, in *Living the Ethnographic Life,* Dan Rose argued for alternative ethnographies that aimed to include not only a variety of media but also a plethora of approaches and voices that would open up ethnographic practice beyond the path of corporate conventions that ethnography seemed to follow in the university.[1] Amid all the clamor over and critiques of the practice of ethnography, one principle seemed to continually appear with a sense of ethical and representational obligation: a dialogic approach to ethnography. On this matter, most agreed that a central goal should be the inclusion of more voices, and many researchers considered how the ethnographer might be most useful as a conduit for giving voice to those who did not have access to the mechanisms of representation. Put simply, one of the central ideas that permeated "new" approaches to ethnography and qualitative fieldwork was an aim to be as inclusive and inventive as possible.

It is this general context that gives rise to *Recording Culture: Audio Documentary and the Ethnographic Experience.* A range of people are engaged in qualitative research; some want to explore alternatives to so-called

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objective forms of scholarly writing and are hungry for alternatives to written accounts of qualitative research. This book holds up audio documentary as a premiere form of qualitative research that serves as an alternative form of inventive storytelling based in the practices of fieldwork. Audio documentary is a representational form that materializes a dialogic approach to the construction of an account. It is a method that can underscore the constructed and reflexive dimensions of ethnographic research. Because of these qualities, audio documentary also increases opportunities for researchers to reach academic and popular audiences and to collaborate with participants in a common pursuit and representation of experience and knowledge.

In a general sense, it's clear that most qualitative researchers are excited about documentary on some level. Professors and students seek out documentary videos to enhance their understanding of various subjects. They view documentary photography in galleries. They read documentary writing in academic books as well as in magazines such as *The New Yorker* or *Harper's Magazine.* And they listen to documentary stories on programs such as National Public Radio's (NPR) *All Things Considered.* Obviously, these practices are not confined to academic pursuits; documentary has also had a renewed sense of vitality among the public. To a large extent, scholars who write and teach qualitative methods tend to use documentary as a source to exemplify and criticize representational practices. Unfortunately, documentary is taught less often as a model for pursuing ethnographic work. We find there are important convergences between qualitative research and documentary outside and inside the university.

Recording Culture considers one avenue for revitalizing and engaging qualitative researchers in the creative and scholarly virtues of a sonic approach to ethnographic work. Our goal is to energize and infuse qualitative studies with some of the current excitement and longstanding traditions of documentary work. We think it is important to study audio documentary as a qualitative method, and we believe that using audio documentary as a qualitative method will increase opportunities for dialogic fieldwork that uses a converged media environment to record and represent research. In fact, these issues have been at the forefront of our own teaching efforts. We both came to documentary as fans of the genre in its broadest expressions and interpretations. Various documentary forms and movements suggested an intriguing and inspiring response to some of the issues of representation that many ethnographers had been wrestling with since the mid-1980s. In different ways, documentary makers and literary journalists had been struggling with similar issues, and we found that such forms of research and creative expression offered some provisional answers and a great deal of

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encouragement for approaching the study of cultural life. Both of us make audio documentaries, which have aired on public radio and on Internet sites. Moreover, our excitement about the documentary form has been the impetus for the creation of courses about documentary that speak explicitly to documentary as a qualitative method.

This book brings together a set of questions and issues that connect audio documentary and qualitative research methods. There are two general reasons for studying audio documentary as a research method:

1. *Documentaries are an expression of curiosity about the world.* The study of documentary offers researchers an opportunity to understand the process of creating broadened and more nuanced portrayals of experiences, people, and places that are well known, extraordinary, or seemingly ordinary. Documentary encourages people to be curious about the world, models a willingness to take some chances, and foregrounds a desire to tell stories about the people and places that help create and sustain these worlds. In particular, audio documentary emphasizes a dialogic approach in that it asks researchers to listen to the world and to create representations that literally bring together different (and divergent) voices. In this way, documentary functions as what John Grierson called "the creative treatment of actuality."[2] Such an approach reflects an understanding that the worlds in which we live are often far more interesting than those created in fictional entertainment. In short, audio documentaries can make the familiar strange and the strange familiar; they are powerful pedagogical tools.

2. *Audio documentary asks students and scholars to consider what is at stake in their attempts to imagine and represent reality.* The ongoing questions about truth that are bound to and grow from documentary work allow researchers to engage in rigorous contemplation of issues surrounding accuracy and advocacy, fairness and balance, and assessment of the quality of one's sources. In many cases, audio documentary involves more than constructing arguments; it often creates an occasion when practitioners can engage in the construction of a sonic environment that comes to represent reality. The editing and mixing of gathered sounds, interview voices, and ambience all come to bear in the composition of acoustic environments. As early practitioners of radio drama were quick to point out, radio offers listeners an imaginative theater of the mind. In a similar sense, nonfiction forms of audio provide their own version of a sonic theater by composing an arena of sound that creates a sense (and illusion) of presence and immediacy. In this way, audio documentary entails lessons in the construction of realities. Ethnographers have long debated the representational politics of

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giving voice to others, and audio documentary is an effort to let people speak for themselves. However, it would be naïve to think that such voices have not been editorially managed. The creation of sonic realities; an engagement with questions of accuracy, balance, and fairness; and the managing of others' voices require researchers to contemplate aesthetic and ethical production decisions in their own work and in the work of others, especially because these decisions connect to storytelling and lines of argument.

In Chapter 1, we chart some important efforts of individuals—mostly those working outside the academy—who have set a tone for diverse approaches to recording culture, modeling the very spirit of polyvocality that has become a central thrust for contemporary interpretive and critical qualitative researchers. We argue that many of the same issues that concern qualitative researchers have also inspired amateur and professional documentarians, and their recording projects also reflect many of the goals advanced in our most important contemporary theoretical debates about qualitative research. But, most important, we show how audio recordings can provide qualitative researchers with opportunities to more fully engage the people and places being studied while functioning as an alternative to the privileged written text that dominates scholarly work. Audio documentary provides one important and creative alternative to the written account that can simultaneously engage both academic and popular audiences. In this way, we are poised to reinvoke the potential of a dialogic approach to qualitative research as a central consequence and concern of recording culture.

In Chapter 2, we examine various forms of and approaches to using audio recordings as a basis for fieldwork and the composition of soundscapes, soundwalks, sonic maps, radio diaries, and audio essays, as well as audio documentaries and historical documentary that uses archival sound. Each of these approaches shows how sonic recordings can provide a set of models for the possibilities of the audio form. We explore how each approach can provide researchers with unique ways to expand their representational repertoire. Audio documentary is a form of research that reflects Paul Stoller's call in *The Taste of Ethnographic Things* for ethnographers to move beyond sight as a privileged position and consider how other senses can be incorporated into fieldwork and ethnographic texts to "render our accounts of others more faithful to the realities of the field."[3] Although audio recordings most explicitly focus on helping audiences hear culture in practice, implicit in our discussion are the ways that audio also allows

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people to see and feel the environment that is being studied and how these approaches extend forms of observation, participant observation, historical research, and interviewing. We conclude this chapter with a discussion of the unique possibilities and challenges that emerge when researchers use audio to record and represent culture.

Chapter 3 focuses on citizen storytelling as a form of collective media production that links qualitative research and activism as a mode of participation in public life. Using audio documentary to conduct qualitative studies in cooperation with residents of communities can contribute to public dialogue and debate about important historical and contemporary issues. It also can ultimately function as an opportunity for qualitative researchers to share knowledge and skills in an effort to extend a vision of education in fostering a classroom without walls. We begin with an analysis of citizen storytelling as a way to access community assets and then move to a detailed discussion of the types of citizen storytelling efforts that can be adopted by qualitative researchers. Ultimately, this chapter shows how citizen storytelling can be a powerful assets-based form of community activism and fieldwork while embodying a critical qualitative ethos.

By considering these possibilities for the audio documentary form, we aim to instigate a broader public sensitivity and appreciation for ethnographic work. We attempt to help researchers and citizens engage in a process of collaboration that is no longer confined to academic journals and venues sanctioned by universities. Instead, we appeal to researchers to engage in public life and invite the public into the collaborative experience of research and representation. In our view, audio documentary provides an excellent medium for promoting such a culture of collaboration.

Finally, we conclude with an appendix that briefly discusses how professors and students can start their own projects. There is great interest in audio documentary in the public sphere. Of course, in addition to being members of this public sphere, many academics are excited about the prospect of using audio to represent fieldwork. When we present audio work at conferences, we receive a tremendous response from attendees, and the same response occurs when we teach audio documentary in our classes. Yet we understand that many qualitative researchers might view the technological features of audio documentary recording and editing as a major hurdle. In the appendix, we provide readers with guidance on getting started in audio documentary. We discuss the types of equipment and software readers can use to work with audio recordings in fieldwork, and we provide helpful tips to achieve broadcast-quality recordings.

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NOTES

1. Dan Rose, *Living the Ethnographic Life* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1990).
2. See John Corner, *The Art of Record* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996).
3. Paul Stoller, *The Taste of Ethnographic Things* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press), 9.