CHAPTER 15

SOUND ECOLOGY IN THE WOODS: RED RIDING HOOD TAKES AN AUDIO WALK

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This was different. He was
different.
Asked my name, I told him. He smiled. I smiled back. Why wouldn't I?
He turned, bent over the flowers—trilliums, I think, and something pink.
A trickle of noise, a single pebble falling down a rain stick.
Look, he said, look at this trout lily—it's pushed through winter's leaf-mat.
Leaf-mat: nobody talked like that. And this *collar of leaves* hugging the stem.
He flicked the leaves away. His fingers went
Flick.
I said I had to go.
What's your hurry? Don't be such a schoolgirl.
Of course I was a schoolgirl.
Look, he said, throwing his arm toward the trees and making his fingers
dance like dust motes
in sunlight: Look where you are. Where we are.
He leaned against a tree, propped one foot and pushed
his sole back against the trunk. From a shirt pocket pulled a pack.
I'm not allowed to smoke, I blurt.
He tapped the bottom, shook one out, brought it to his lips, smiled.
Didn't take his eyes off me as he lit the tip. The sting

> of sulphur up my nose, his in-
> suck of breath. He shook out the match, dropped it.
> Smoking's not allowed in the forest—but I didn't say, just thought it.
> Nobody ever looked at me in a way that made me feel the look.
> Said my name like it mattered. Showed me
> plants like those tiny drink umbrellas in Shirley Temples folded
> under my feet, beneath my hands—my hands.
> I could feel
> pulsing, my wrist or maybe
> my heart.
>
> —Cornelia Hoogland, *Woods Wolf Girl,* 8–9

My retelling of the fairy tale Red Riding Hood, inspired by the Grimm's 1812 version, concerns Red meeting the Wolf in the woods, and his instructions to notice the flowers growing at her feet. In the epigraph (the above poem), the Wolf encourages Red to see where she is by noticing the minutiae of the forest. Paying attention to one's surroundings is both a poetic focus and a pedagogical one; poets "read" their worlds for the images that shape their poems. In this chapter I theorize the educational uses of attention, particularly young people's (in)attention to the natural world through their immersion in audio culture, and explore how poetry might serve to redirect and inform such attention.

We often say of good writing that we felt we were "there," living the events with the character in his or her particular setting. In the epigraph, for example, the phrase "the sting of sulphur up my nose" can help the reader feel the sensation of a match igniting and thereby experience the events and the setting of the poem affectively. Indeed, stories contain important cultural and social information as well as knowledge about the places in which they are set, and in this way, good stories ensure human survival (Boyd, "Origin of Stories"). Furthermore, evolutionary theory adds imperative to the literary arts (as argued by Brian Boyd) in two distinct ways. First, the teller or writer must remain invested in completing the literary problem she sets before herself—Boyd calls this "individual attention"—and second, her story must engage listeners to the end of the telling, so that, ideally, they learn something about what being human means to the writer—what Boyd calls "communal attention." In the same way that the wolf in the epigraph embodies his lesson (Red says "nobody ever looked at me in a way that made me feel the look"), so poets try to make the familiar new and strange, and thereby catch and hold their readers' curiosity. In most versions of the fairy tale, a key dramatic moment is when the heroine meets the wolf in the woods. The opposition of "evil" wolf and "innocent" girl creates the story's tension. My poetic version of the tale "flips" this familiar story in order to challenge its ingrained expectations (for instance, that wolves are evil killers), to complicate the easy binary of wild versus civilized, and to generate new meanings. My wolf is a predator, but also a teacher.

My analysis of attention, and the ways of gaining and holding it, is set within ecopoetics and experiential education, which assert that people need to experience the natural world in order to understand their place in it. I have led groups of students on excursions into "natural" places with the purpose of developing their ability to express their experiences in language that values the participatory life of the senses in concrete, emotional, imaginative, and sensory ways (Hoogland, "Trees in Emily Carr's Forest," "Land Inside Coyote," "Aesthetics of Language").

I choose Red Riding Hood as a narrator/guide in my work because of her ageless mythic and literary qualities. Most people know something of this story and—here's what I love—they know it in their own way, usually the version that they first learned as children. My methodology, however, embraces new audio and sound technology and requires that I move my poetry from the page to the spoken word, and from the safe venues in which poetry readings are held, such as libraries, to the woods. Moreover, my approach to the audio walk differs in key respects from popular installations such as Janet Cardiff's *A Large Slow River* (2000). Cardiff's audio walk takes participants into the Gairloch Gardens, in Oakville, Ontario, and, through a stream-of-consciousness recording, transforms the garden into her personally informed landscape. In contrast to Cardiff's surrealistic journey, which privileges the vagaries of the mind, my performance research connects to, and engages, the people and animals, as well as the particular place in which the research occurs. My audio ecodramas build on, for example, the teaching moment provided Red by the Wolf (see earlier). In this way, Theresa May's aspirations for an "inclusive ecodrama," namely, "complex connections between people and place; ecological identities; and a focus on the concerns of a particular place" are present in ecological installation such as an audio walk (May, "What is Ecodrama?").

In this chapter I discuss young people's estrangement from the natural world in terms of the larger critique of young people's audio culture. Then I argue for the educational and artistic use of personal listening devices and discuss how an audio walk might work to challenge certain concepts about the natural world (for instance, wild is dangerous) and reengage young people with the places in which they live and play.

"I WEAR MY IPOD ALL THE TIME"

Many educators believe that contemporary young people are estranged from the natural world, a condition that can make them uninterested in it, uneasy in its presence, or fearful of it. In *Last Child in the Woods*, Richard Louv claims today's wired generation suffers from "nature-deficit," and links that disorder to some of the most disturbing childhood trends, such as rise in rates of obesity, attention disorders, and depression (47–48). Many North American young people live in urban cultures that do not encourage familiarity with the natural world. Our mediated environments mean that weather and landscapes have little or no immediate impact on people; traveling between cars and buildings, it's possible to spend most of one's time indoors. Consequently, many urban North Americans are unaware of their dependency upon the physical world. At the same time, young people globally live in contexts of fear and uncertainty with regard to the physical world; those children who are fortunate enough to avoid being victims of natural and human-made disasters are barraged by media images of the effects of tsunamis, hurricanes, earthquakes, global warming, famine, nuclear meltdown, war, and terrorism. Simultaneously, our love of technology both removes us and our children from the natural world and digitally mediates what little experience we have of it (Louv, *Last Child*). Not only do urban youth spend less time outside, when they are outside they often isolate themselves from the natural environment through the use of audio equipment that enables them to seal themselves in personal aural landscapes.

Youth's experiences occur within a technological worldview that posits a transcendent narrative of satisfaction through consumerism and technology. Television and computers offer mediated versions of nearly every aspect of life. In private spaces, individual family members, in separate parts of the home, connect to geographically distant groups and communities through their personal computers, thus creating a virtual "public space" in the privacy of family/home life on a scale unheard of in history. At the same time, even as they inhabit public spaces of parks, cafes, and sidewalks, individuals maintain a faux privacy via technologies such as personal stereos and cell phones. Insulated from most of the sounds around them, people listen to their personal musical selection as they move through the public sphere. In these technologically mediated worlds, the physical concreteness of the material world as well its immediate social and biological surround is often ignored or transcended.

In this "new moral geography," technology constitutes private spaces that transcend everyday physical and social realities in favor of virtual ones (Bull 2). Michael Bull claims that as individuals use technology to privilege the personal over the social or public, they pay a price in alienation from the very reality in which their embodied self resides, exists, and functions. Bull comes down especially hard on young people, claiming that the use of personal stereos by 14- to 19-year olds is "narcissistic" (172). For these young people, he argues, the environment "is perceived as something 'other' remaining out of their control, and simply 'boring'" (25). Strapping on their headphones seems to give young people control of the environment and allows them to engage with people and things on their own "power-infused" terms (174): that is, they use personal stereos to alter and thereby manage their experiences in nonreciprocal ways (25). By contrast, the poem at the start of the chapter shows Red and the wolf in a direct relationship that allows for embodied learning: "He smiled. I smiled back" (*Woods Wolf Girl* 8).

Bull blames technology for the lack of reciprocity. He notes that music alters mood, it is potentially calming or stimulating, and it enables young people to shape personal realities by superimposing the music's vibrations, narratives, and themes upon the scenes and people before them. Such fictional accounts of experience are far more exciting than unmediated environments, which many young people typically describe as "meaningless" or "unpleasant" (25). Bull gives as an example an interaction with a homeless woman on the street that "becomes 'real' if it is filmic" (172). That is, the response to the woman is directed inward, back to the perceiver and his or her emotional reaction, rather than outward, toward the woman and her situation. Highly energetic rock music playing in a young person's ears sets up entertaining misalignments of sight, rhythm, and pace with the events and people on the street, such as the contrasting passiveness of the homeless person. "The narcissistic recreation of meaning in terms of a heightening of the individual's sense of meaning through music is a significant aspect of personal stereo experience" (172) that produces in the user a "tentative invulnerability" (2). Traveling as they do in their "bubbles," young people give prominence to their own privately encoded experience as a way of distancing themselves from others and thereby controlling their environment and experience. Personal-stereo users move through these spaces, either by withdrawing to be at "home" with themselves or by aesthetically recreating their experience in which "a personalized fiction is created from the environment" (25). According to Bull, both instances distance the young people from the people and circumstances that materially surround them.

Each generation must define, navigate, and transform the traditions it inherits. Indeed, each generation will redefine notions of public and private space, in part through the uses to which it puts technology. Friends and relatives began to reach one another with revolutionary immediacy with the common use of the telephone in the early nineties, and images of war and disaster entered the privacy of most homes via television since the sixties. These once new and controversial aspects of our lives are now unquestioned and seemingly "natural." What interests me in Bull's research is the potential opportunity to put to artistic use the very technology that he claims damages young people, thereby harnessing the parodies young people create through the contrast between the environment and the varying vibrations of sound and its sonic effects. Although Bull casts in negative light the way the young person sees the street person (as described earlier), the experience he describes as narcissistic is commonplace. Many of us walk down the street preoccupied, without noticing the homeless person we pass. Young peoples' creations still involve imagination and artistic manipulation. The challenge is to help young people understand their creative acts and offer them alternative models or visions. They may be intimately connected to technologies that seem to offer them "the world" but what they may not realize is that, simultaneously, those same technologies disconnect them from not only their home place and its people, plants and creatures, but also from their latent desire to be connected to the natural world of which they are a part.

My pedagogy for artists and educators, which aims to rehabilitate young people's embodied engagement with the surrounding world, implicitly questions Bull's claim that personal technologies serve only to damage young people's social capacities. Experiential and outdoor education has contributed many participatory methodologies, and my exploration here builds on the field's principles of embodied engagement (Louv, *Last Child*). Many educators look for ways to harness young people's enthusiasm for the kinds of virtual narratives spun endlessly through online games, apps, texting, and online social networks. As sound, music, images, and other media are instantly exchanged via this technology, educators can use "personal technology" to encourage young people to become reengaged with their environmental and social surroundings. Students can be taught to look and listen in such a way that the imaginative emotion follows (Greene). Students' preferred technologies, deployed to deepen ecological awareness, seem an ideal pedagogical tool for use in performance that is at once digital and embodied.

By utilizing audio walk technologies, artist-educators might begin to address May's call for ecodrama that "illuminates the complex connection between people and place" ("What is Ecodrama?"). The following example from my own completed and proposed work highlights the complexity of such connections, and urges participants to question their own relationships to place and society.

"I'M NOT ALLOWED TO GO TO THE PARK, MY MOM SAYS IT'S DANGEROUS"

Urban students with access to a natural setting are an ideal combination for addressing nature-deficit disorder suffered, it would seem, not only by the student who made the above remark, but also by his/her mother. In this last section I argue that audio walk research, such as I have suggested, will model for students such things as: paying attention to where they are; the effects of poetic language and imagery and audio technology; and how traditional stories can be shaped into contemporary, environmentally aware versions. Based in part on *Woods Wolf Girl,* my SoundWalk uses poetry, storytelling, and digital sound technologies in a site-specific guided walk. On a preselected route through the woods (or local natural area) students hear the wolf's stream-of-consciousness account as he watches Red approach. "Thrown" sound will heighten the telling. For instance, tension will be created as students hear distant-to-closer footsteps as Red approaches, then a hesitation, then a breaking branch, and so forth. Besides having ambient qualities, sound has a physical component as well, which allows for the stretching and pulling of time. On the SoundWalk, the students, hearing the technically "placed" sound of wolves howling "over there" as it were, may feel temporarily transported. Red, the speaker, reacts to the sound the wolves make:

> From the woods
> a banshee music—who knows how many
> wolves in harmony. Abrupt breaks, eerie wails
> hackle my body's un-
> civilized hair. (Woods Wolf Girl 84)

The student participants may know that historically wolves once lived in city parks before they were cities and parks. (The history of this once outlawed species might be foregrounded in classroom work prior to the trek.) They won't, however, expect to hear them howling on this walk on this particular morning. Logically, the students may reason to themselves, the sounds (and of course the wolves) are within the Red Riding Hood story frame. The students may reflect upon the wolves' disappearance as they are led to see "where they are" and to reconnect with nature in multiple layers that include the present as well as its historical, cultural, storied, contingent, and discursive associations. These contrasting layers of meaning should challenge not only the participant's sensory experience, but also societal assumptions about ownership and dominance. The students may wonder where the wolves are now, or when they left, and why. Who is privileged? What is the cost of such privilege? And so, in part, the SoundWalk aims to move participants to a state of appreciation (and to the political consequence of such appreciation), that, in North America, if we become aware and act, we will still have mountains that house the white Spirit Bear, the grizzly bear, the black and brown bears, the wolf, coyote, moose, and elk.

An ordinary field trip can become an imaginative and aural experience as it superimposes layers of meaning onto the present. Similar to Cardiff's audio walks, my SoundWalk uses "binaural technology—a means of recording that achieves precise three-dimensional sound in order to create an experience of physical immediacy and complexity" (New York City Public Art Fund). Jean-Francois Augoyard and Henri Torgue, founders of an urban ecology of sound, note a "'surplus of feeling' in sonic perception" and "its ability to invoke astonishment, wonder (and it should be added, shock and awe) within music" (quoted in Goodman 45). The success of advanced headphone technologies is not only based in their ability to create distorting three-dimensional sound ("shock") and the consequent unsettling of participants' assumptions ("awe"); the headphone technologies also "interiorize the performance" by relocating the sound and physical presence to within the viewer's brain, or "headspace" (Petrailia, quoted in Tompkins). Tompkins suggests we call this form of immersion "psycho-acoustics" in that the destabilization experienced in many audio walks is "a deliberate attempt to humanize the crisis . . . that is at the core of its narrative" (234). I aim to "humanize the crisis" by creating characters student participants can care about, within a plot dramatized by audio as well as by the physical act of walking[1] (Hoogland and Wiebe, in press).

Hearing the poetic narrative via the audio headsets in a specific site has the additional benefit of increasing the drama and the immediacy of the text. For instance, seeing the encroaching salmonberry plants that surround the students as they hear the narrative will help them imagine the vines' cat-like properties. "Tentacle vines twist . . . grab at me, howling, arching their backs and spitting. / Saplings swarm my limbs, skinny little things / no higher than my chest, slap / their nervous tails" (Woods Wolf Girl 14–15). In this way, the setting becomes a character in the performance, encouraging associations and involvement. As well, the emotional and imaginative map of the story invites participant response to an affective geography. The lines "Hemlocks, tower tall. / Douglas fir, taller yet, farther than the eye can see . . . " (14) invite participants to look across the forested valley. This adds feelings of expansiveness and grandeur to the trees, and suggests a scale by which human beings might measure themselves. One participant, when invited to say goodbye to a tree that had been our meeting place during one of my projects, said "our tree looks greener now" (Hoogland, "Land Inside Coyote").

"WHAT DID RED RIDING HOOD CARRY IN HER BASKET?"

The participants of audio walks not only traverse a set area of ground, they also traverse the plot lines of a story, which in my work is not at all like the fairy tale that they thought they knew. Students will recognize the revisionary nature of the fairy tale as they listen to a story that has been told continually, in countries over the world, for hundreds of years and in hundreds of different ways. By flipping Red Riding Hood, and setting her into contemporary understandings of nature and wilderness, students are reminded that they too can take liberties with the fairy tale, and restory it according to their own images, setting, and characters, and based on their own understandings and concerns. In workshops of the fairy tale this past year, students created a variety of wolves and settings. Most interesting were the nearby nuclear energy plant cast as the "evil predator," which threatened not only Red but the entire country, and a heroine obliged to take public transit through the dangerous east end of the city on her way to grandmother's house.

SoundWalk models ecological concerns in text, technology, sound, and by walking through a natural area. The participants are not simply hearing a story about somebody else, they are walking where the narrator instructs them to walk, seeing what the narrator instructs them to see, and implicitly, feeling and thinking what the performance of the audio wants them to experience. In this way the participants are encouraged to "become" or "merge" with the characters and thus experience the story and the setting more deeply. For instance, Red, the speaker in the poem, is aware of herself as an embodied human. The skin at the back of her neck hackles, and her uncivilized hair won't be restrained (Woods Wolf Girl 84). She *is* nature, one of the many creatures of the world.

Creating an artifact rich in diction, tone, details, instructions, suspense and pace will help young people identify with the particulars of the place in which they walk, and thus participate in May's "sound ecology" ("What is Ecodrama?"). Poetry's work to name, to tell, to be specific, and to report what is seen and felt, can help people better see the natural world they are part of (*Oh, grandmother, what big eyes you have! The better to see you my dear*), thereby potentially renewing people's feelings of connectedness and hope. I don't mean a passive hope, as in wishing things were different, but the activated hope of experiencing the natural world as alive and relevant. The methodology that I propose taps art's capacity to dramatize and humanize learned responses such as those of the young people in Bull's study. The emotional, imaginative, and sensory conventions of art may serve environmental efforts where science and economics have failed. SoundWalk attempts to shock and thrill young people into seeing clearly while also finding ways to face the environmental concerns posed by storm-destroyed trees and disappearing wolves. Artists working with language forms that are connected to the natural world, and contemporary technology within site-specific settings, may provide young people both the insight and tools to reinterpret and revision the culture and natural world of which they are a part.

NOTES

The subheadings in this chapter are comments from student-participants in the projects Narrative Inquiry and Shape Walk.

1. My research studies the effects of the aesthetic, narrative, and physical features of the walk on students' perceptions of the environment and on their relationships to the natural world. In exploratory projects already completed (Hoogland 2009b), I found that student responses reinforced the project's concern that each new generation be responsible for reimagining the traditions it inherits. Students often prefaced their observations with the phrase "I didn't know (the wind storm knocked down so many Douglas-fir trees)," or "I wish I had known (that wolves lived here first)."