

Feel'd Notes in Public Places

Affective Artful Expression for Engagement and Transformation

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Article abstract

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Feel'd Notes in Public Places: Affective Artful Expression for Engagement and Transformation¹

Stephanie Mason

ABSTRACT For my doctoral research into adults' informal learning through material objects in four public places in Halifax, Nova Scotia, I used sketchbooks as fieldnote journals. In contrast to objective observations, I recorded during my site visits a panoply of overheard conversations, drawings, remarks, puns, encounters, temperatures, and colours. These and other elements comprised my experiences in each site, and I wanted to represent their gist and connotations through multiple forms of expression. This approach aligns with arts-informed research methodology that celebrates complexity and shared meaning-making with engaged scholarship. I used these notes to produce for each site a written vignette, to introduce and reacquaint others with that place; two of these vignettes appear in the following report. In translating what I came to call my "feel'd," not "field," notes into these written pieces, I gleaned new understandings about scribbling and scrawling expressive, affective feel'd notes. I found that engagement enriched my research process, and also fostered a greater awareness of place meanings. I recognize that transformed notetaking has a bearing on understanding, research process, people/communities, and places, and offers methodological insights that carry out and further engaged scholarship knowledge.

KEYWORDS field notes, arts-informed research, place, engagement, transformation

Of the five notebooks I filled during my doctoral work on adults' informal learning through public place material objects, appearing in at least two are the notes from my visits to selected research sites in Halifax, Nova Scotia. I packed coloured felt-tip markers and my notebook of the moment for these excursions, and at each site, chose a marker in an inspired colour to sketch features or oddities, copy overheard comments, write journal entries, doodle stick figures or directions, note the weather, and record the temperature. I even pressed a leaf or two to remember the place and its atmosphere that day. I can quickly find these entries within my notebooks because they are noticeably distended from their buckled pages, which are paper-clipped and bloated from the field. They remind me that finding out about things is rarely a smooth process.

When I look at my notebooks now, they afford me the chance to reflect on the research sites—an urban farm, a library, an outdoor art festival, and a municipal park—and my encounters

¹ Approval to carry out the research described in the article was secured from the Mount Saint Vincent University UREB Committee (#2017-056).

there. My fieldnotes consist of chronicled sounds, shadows, physical sensations, pathways, lights, and other resonant indicators. I wanted to convey the feeling of being present in these places, and their impressions on me, through every expression I could.

Eventually, my fieldnotes (more properly a collage, then) comprised a research writing exercise fitting my methodological framework of arts-informed research. Following my supervisor's suggestion, I tasked myself to write one two-page summary per site, using my eclectic documentation. This exercise helped ground me methodologically: according to Cole and Knowles (2008), arts-informed research is constructed by a researcher attuned to "the natural flow of events and experiences" (p. 61) demonstrable in "accessible, evocative, embodied, empathic, and provocative" (p. 60) work. The summaries were initially several pages long, offering me interesting editing choices. For instance, ought I remove my observation that there were too many dogs to count in Shubie Park, or would the dogginess inform the overview in ways I could not anticipate? Would calling the Common Roots Urban Farm's tomatoes "defiantly red" get across their blatant resistance to early fall, even though it was "24° – I checked"? These and other decisions reanimated the sites for me, reminded me that arts-informed research is often marginalized in knowledge production (Burns, 2004), and revealed engagement and transformation opportunities distinct from academic research practice.

In this report I share two of my four summaries, or vignettes, to illustrate how an arts-informed approach to fieldnotes can enrich understandings of place. In qualitative research, vignettes are useful in "exploring people's perceptions, beliefs and meanings about specific situations" (Barter and Renold, 1999, para. 14). Narratively, they can be autoethnographic (Humphreys, 2005), or they can construct hypothetical situations (Wilks, 2004) through which to re-tell the research story differently (Langer, 2016). Using vignettes, I was able to present differently the sights, sounds, people, spaces, instances, and delights of these sites for myself and others. While engaged scholarship celebrates engaging with other individuals, groups, or communities (Beaulieu et al., 2018; Peterson, 2009), it may also manifest as a solo venture where one person engages with a problem, site, or theme (Doberneck et al., 2010). Composing vignettes allowed me to see engagement as a personal as well as a social function, aligning with the "individual and social well-being" (Beaulieu et al., 2018, p. 5) emphasized in engaged scholarship. Moreover, and unpredictably, the ways my "notes" in the "field/feel'd" took shape as vignettes showed me transformational possibilities for research process and community participation.

Research design

My fieldnotes were gathered during visits to my selected research sites, chosen for their diversity and facilities: the Halifax Central Library, the Common Roots Urban Farm/the Farm, the Nocturne: Art at Night festival, and Shubie Park. Doctoral coursework had introduced to me the qualitative research practice of fieldnotes, in which one writes observations of a phenomenon within bounded space. To recall site minutiae, researchers make use of stylistically distinct and personally significant fieldnotes that "can make difficult reading for anyone other than their author" (Sanjek, 1990, p. 92). Wolfinger (2002) states that personal preference can

be used to organize fieldnotes, while Clifford (1990) admits fieldnotes are “intimate records, fully meaningful . . . only to their inscriber” (p. 52), as was the case for me.

My focus was neither sociological nor anthropological, but educational, specifically examining how to document lifelong learning experiences using arts-informed research. This lens permits collaborative meaning-making and researcher presence, so my fieldnotes were directed towards interpreting and communicating my ideas and reactions. During visits, I concentrated on recording, envisioning, and outlining everything I could in writing, shape, or image; I wanted masses of detail to generate possible points of connection and engagement for potential readers who may want to review my notes. When I reviewed my fieldnotes’ miscellany, I saw new understandings of “text” in their multiple modes. In discussing this insight with my supervisor, she suggested I compose my fieldnotes into brief written summaries to explore mine and others’ knowings of the sites. We agreed to call these exercises “vignettes”: although “vignette” means a miniature work (Oxford University Press, 2021), the etymology of the word suggests “an ornament of leaves and tendrils,” aptly describing the marginalia from which these excerpts emerged.

What follows are two unpublished vignettes chosen from the four in my dissertation (Mason, 2020) and reproduced here in their entirety: the Halifax Public Library and the Common Roots Urban Farm/the Farm.

Vignettes

HALIFAX CENTRAL LIBRARY

The windows tell a story of a supernatural librarian who has magicked the book contents onto glass: translucent letter stencils advertise the building’s function and protect its collections. This philosopher’s stone comes in the building blocks of language.



August 2017 - Program Listings: “OPERA FROM SCRATCH. Using audiovisual examples, Dr. Bain will take her audience on an historical highlights tour, from an early medieval proto-opera to a modern cartoon spoof, entitled *What’s Opera Doc?* **Mon, Aug 14/2 PM – 3.30 PM**”

There’s this open
you can cross.
the rain, and look

space in the middle, open to all the other floors, and they’ve got these bridges
There’s so much glass around that you can sit, whether it’s sunny or watching
outside.

The armchairs are squared off, cushiony, in the East Coast’s rampant fall green and gold colours. Moving about constantly rearranged tables and chairs is serpentine navigation: curving straight lines.

5,000 cards from library catalogues are mounted behind the circulation desk in a Cliff Eyland art installation.

7.15.6

FOLKLORE – NOVA SCOTIA

Robertson, Marion

Old Settlers' Remedies

Pub. Lancelot Press, c. 1960 (4th
(printing 1974): (for the Cape Sable

Historical Society,

34 p. photo Barrington, N.S.

109-Do not give over any part of your
thinking to professionals

I remember thumbing through such cards, fingertip-smooth. I liked the compression of information they held, encoding knowledge and place within their worn whiff of learning.

I found out through someone at the library that you can download ebooks onto your phone . . . This is all information that you're finding in the Library, but its services that are also outside of the space, associated with the space, too? It doesn't just stop in the space.

COMMON ROOTS URBAN FARM/THE FARM

COMMON ROOTS

Volunteer hrs Tu-Su 3-6

Late We

Market Tu-Th 11³-5³

Late We

Drop in 3-6 pm (not Mon)

Gardening is the purpose and meaning and joy in this place. The site hosts a children's garden, accessible beds on raised wooden frames, a market stand for produce purchase, coloured stakes indicating free-range-eating fruits and vegetables, and a bee hotel, in addition to beds, tools, hoses, buckets, sheeting, watercans, twine, and straw.

I have an atavistic revulsion for horticulture (plants' non-verbal sentence frightens me), yet even I enjoyed the triffid sunflowers, turgid strawberries, and dropsied tomatoes. Plot owners can include "Poem Moments" on cards inserted into metal stakes in the beds – a quotation, a poem, a reminder to stop and breathe.



I feel mindful – the greenery is taller and somehow weighted down ... I'm tired today. My mom is ill (so I hear by text from my sister in Ontario), and I'm worried. I think of my mom and dad's last visit to Halifax: brief excursions on smooth surfaces with lots of rest breaks. I wouldn't have brought her here, but my gardener dad would have liked it. I imagine him deadheading flowers or wheelbarrowing the dirt. He was the earthier of the two.

My mother died two days later. Her beautiful coffin spray was given to a non-profit organization who delivered its flowers to nursing home residents. One flower in the spray – the sunflower? – dipped its head to me as I walked away from her grave.

In the garden, it was comfortable having all these people around with the same interests, being generous. Some would come up to you: "Here, I have too many tomatoes today; please take them."

There's a tall flag at the top of the farmers' market stand, but no one there. The screenprinted, reusable tote bags I presume are for sale are cute.

I'm going to buy a chili pepper, although I won't eat it. Because it just feels nice to be a part of something.

Qualitative research vignettes offer the chance for readers to "participate in the successive and sometimes tentative progress of interpretation" (Langer, 2016). Although initially merely a writing exercise, these vignettes based on an experiential and reflexive sensibility (Humphreys, 2005) ultimately helped me engage with sites I did not know, and showed familiar sites to me anew: "A fresh way of seeing requires the practice of noticing" (Cahnmann, 2003, p. 32). This insight/in the sites illustrates arts-informed research methodology, which offers "divergent ways of interpreting and re-presenting the research process" (Walsh, 2006, p. 977).

Arts-informed research

With its range of enquiry forms – such as poetry, literary prose, playwriting, visual arts, dance, and music (Hartel, 2014, p. 1351) – arts-informed research entices us to notice knowledge everywhere: "what we need to know and how we present such knowledge cannot always be solely dictated by or expressed in the language of the academy" (Ewing & Hughes, 2008, p. 515). Carrying out accessible, engaged research inspired by artistic processes permits arts-informed researchers to "reach multiple [academic] and community audiences" (Cole & Knowles, 2008, p. 59). This dimension of arts-informed research provides a point of connection with engaged scholarship to decentralize and rethink knowledge production (Beaulieu et al, 2018). The snippets of overheard onsite conversations I recorded enriched my fieldnotes and made stronger my engagement with public places.

Yet what I captured was only ever partial. For instance, my reluctance to rely on audio recordings in public places was ethically driven, but also seemed unfair representationally. Who was to say whether another visitor would have enjoyed the "*RED, GREEN, BLUE*" Nocturne installation, as I had? Or perhaps a Halifax Central Library patron was enchanted by the hum of its conversation and did not miss a silent setting? My research focus and capture dictated how I gathered fieldnotes, but did not account for the ways that community members relate to well-loved places. Such was my entry point into fieldnotes' possibilities for engagement.

Engagement

I found two forms of engagement through my fieldnotes: I was engaged in reporting my feelings of being in place, as I was also conscious of fostering engagement with these places for readers of my fieldnotes, such as my dissertation committee, and potentially other researchers or learners who would be introduced to the sites through my vignettes in publications or via other representational means. This, too, is engaged scholarship, constructing “creative intellectual activities with various stakeholders” (Beaulieu et al., 2018, p. 14).

Scalway (2006) writes of fieldnote capture through drawing objects and the accompanying physical engagement:

Drawing, like other embodied practices, is a form of corporeal knowing. . . . At one moment I would find my pen whisking sharply along a steel rule as I sought to re-enact the lines of a rack of metal shelves or lighting unit, the next, the pen went wisping and wandering at an entirely different speed and pressure among the tendrils of a flowery botch. (p. 456)

As Eisner (1997) wrote, “Multiple perspectives make our engagement with the phenomena more complex” (p. 8). Within my jottings, doodles, labels, and copied text, other voices and presences interceded; I wanted them to. I retraced two different park entrances using research participant directions, and found a handmade birdfeeder christened “The Shubie Inn.” In the Nocturne installation *Sunder*, the promised “loss of autonomy” (Zone 1 – Spring Garden & Universities, 2017) occurred for me on stepping into a fog-shrouded, 15-foot by 12-foot wooden structure within which, like other visitors, I disappeared from view. These encounters were not of my making, but in including them in my fieldnotes, I inscribed engagement enabled by and available to others. That is, engagement is broadly defined and permits the possibility of changed understanding; in a like manner, the capacity for transformation emerges through fieldnote documentation, research fields, communities, and places.

Transformative potential

Collective change in arts-informed research “involves the reader/audience in an active process of meaning making that is likely to have transformative potential” (Cole & Knowles, 2008, p. 62). My doctoral research eventually revealed transformations of thought and space, but as well, I realized that my fieldnotes also transformed my understanding and research. Furthermore, through reading vignettes derived from my fieldnotes, community members may be introduced to new profundities in familiar places, while the places themselves are transformed by different expressions of atmosphere and encounter that reflect unintentional meanings of these sites.

My notetaking shorthand consists of poorly-scaled sketches, partially-capIT-AL(l)ized words, and *cursive handwriting*: “there is no reason why those empirical details cannot be noted and contemplated by means of drawings or other visual creations before finding ultimate form in worded works” (Hendrickson, 2008, p. 123). My fieldnotes show a means of transforming recordkeeping, emerging from engaging with a qualitative arts-informed research methodology

and advancing it through lived experience. I adopt a poetic guise for qualitative research, which is “not just about taking notes but about how one takes and revises notes to reimagine ways of understanding the familiar” (Cahnmann, 2003, p. 32). Notetaking like this alters the tenor of meaning-making (Krauss, 2005) and aligns with engaged scholarship by “watching and listening [to]” others to discover “meanings they give to the objects, events and people in their lives and experiences” (Krauss, 2005, p. 765).

Wordplay and doodles in this style also help transform what research can mean. My drawings communicate meaning through symbols and visual metaphors (Bertling, 2019). The arts offer an alternative to standard research formats through rhetorical devices and description (Barone & Eisner, 1997). St. Pierre (2018) celebrates disrupting her dissertation writing with short aside comments: “This writing is adventure, experimentation, pushing through toward what?” (p. 605). An attitude towards discovery like this transforms how to document place; in effect, it shapes and re-shapes documentation.

Socially, the value of rendering place differently is in communities seeing familiar places anew. The inaugural Nocturne festival allowed visitors to encounter downtown Halifax

in the middle of a celebration of art – accessible, radical and every kind in between. That first Nocturne [in 2008] offered a previously unheard-of opportunity for anyone with an interest (plus a few bewildered downtown drinkers who happened to stumble upon the event) to experience the kind of communal glee that is usually reserved for hockey fans and concertgoers. (Mombourquette, 2014)

The Halifax Central Library’s moveable seating allows visitors to form and re-form discussion or study groups. The more that communities see places reflected differently, the greater the likelihood that people see themselves and their stories within these places. Negotiating this “shared narrative unity” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 3) between scholars and society is an ethical duty of engaged knowledge production.

If researchers in the field have an ethical responsibility towards “fellow humans, neighbors, and community members” (Cole & Knowles, 2008, p. 67), then “co-participation in the creation of visual and verbal field records” (Hendrickson, 2008, p. 121) is what affords places’ transformation. Since my fieldnote recordings, three of four research sites have changed drastically: due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Halifax Central Library has only recently reopened to patrons (Government of Nova Scotia), while Nocturne’s 2020 festival advertised “online programming and physically distanced installations” (SaltWire Network). The Common Roots Urban Farm/the Farm relocated its 7-year site to a redesigned green space near an overpass. Only Shubie Park is relatively unchanged, but changes in people as well as place would render my fieldnotes and vignettes different now.

While my fieldnotes did not enact these transformations, the sites are nonetheless transformed, and continually so. Rather than cleaving to fieldnotes for a stable, uniform record of a specific place in time, I gathered instead “feel’d notes”: my impressions on that particular day,

in that frame of mind, with the communities and people nearby who subsequently informed what I learned and retained of the place. Such shifts are difficult to find in fieldnotes espousing objectivity and empiricism. But when feel'd notes interweave and experiment formally to engage with place, then transformative potential becomes an exciting, shared venture into new meanings.

Conclusion

Rewriting fieldnotes as vignettes to generate engagement and transformation for understanding, research process, groups/communities, and places is the contribution of this work to engaged scholarship. While the technique bears development – for instance, engaged scholarship's reciprocity can be made apparent through community impacts rather than research products (Beaulieu et al., 2018) – there is still value in approaching qualitative research fieldnotes through arts-informed sensibilities that fashion accessible knowledge, representation, and meaning-making. Future research using this technique could include dialogue with visitors, or present visitors with responsive (Glass & Fitzgerald, 2010) illustration or commentary opportunities to co-create fieldnotes shared through newsletters or posters. Vignettes can be used to guide qualitative research and writing techniques that expand the breadth of connection and co-participation with non-scholars and communities.

My old research notebooks are still invaluable sources of information and nostalgia. I like to re-read my feel'd notes and laugh at the jokes, cartoons, sketches, and passing conversations I recall. I was engaged in re-producing the vitality belonging to me and to others and to places; that spirit infused my vignettes, producing a unique “research ‘text’” (Cole & Knowles, 2008, p. 61). I could see how much latitude is available to define engaged scholarship (Glass & Fitzgerald, 2010) through the vignette form. My feel'd notes and vignettes permitted me to call forth the ways in which engagement and transformation permeates who and where we are, and what can ensue when we “imagine new possibilities for those whom the work is about and for” (Cole & Knowles, 2008, p. 67).

Impermanent space – how it changes/grows/moves –

And how it can reflect other things outside itself.

I ate my lunch on the blue bench, about 7 steps in (my pedometer always resets itself).

Crackers and three kinds of cheese.

About the Author

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