Post-Natural Sound Arts

Mark Peter Wright [http://markpeterwright.net]

Post-Natural

The term "Post-Natural" is currently situated within arts and humanities discourse and the pervasive debates surrounding the Anthropocene. This proposed new epoch underscores how humans have, and are, changing the geological make-up of Earth by way of fossil fuel extraction, war, slavery, technologies, and advanced capitalism. Significant registers that pinpoint start dates include the Industrial steam engine (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000: 17-18), colonialism, and atomic bomb testing (Lewis and Maslin 2015: 174-176). To consider humans as a geological force collapses the divisions between nature and culture (Chakrabarty 2009: 221). Amongst many repercussions, it forces a radical reconsideration of human and nonhuman relations by foregrounding issues of ethics, power and agency. Moving beyond a human-centered view of the world prompts "new" ecologies where actants – including microbes, people and machines – are brought into relational becomings and ethico-political cartographies (Latour; 2004; Braidotti 2013; Parikka 2015; Tsing 2015).

Such more-than-human entanglements are anything but new however. The current Anthropocene fever whitewashes many long-established, non-western, post-anthropocentric thinkers and practices (Todd 2014). Furthermore, although the subject is undergoing a current wave of academic territorialization, much of its discourse bootstraps writing from the 1980's onwards. In relation to Nature and the environment specifically, long before Crutzen and Stoermer's (2000) epoch-making report or Timothy Morton's call for an *Ecology without Nature* (2007), many others were troubling Nature from perspectives within political ecology, feminist philosophy, and postcolonial studies. Critiques included the cultural appropriation of a universal western Nature (Guha 1989), the anthropocentric plundering of Nature (Haraway 1992), the separation of humans and Nature (Latour 1993), the rights of Nature (Serres 1995), the masculinized narrative of a pristine Nature (Cronon 1997), and the frictions embed within technological Nature (Hayles 1999).

This article situates itself within such critical contexts and takes up the consequences of these long-term debates. To realize this I apply literature from a broad range of fields including political ecology, animal studies, critical posthumanism, feminist new materialism and media ecology.

Introduction

This article examines three archival representations that form the basis for a Post-Natural Sound Arts. Although contemporary practice is discussed within the section "Representation and the Dangers of Aw[e]ful Listening," that particular emphasis will be addressed another time. Rather than create a conventional survey or claim an exclusive territory, I hope to open up new modes of enquiry that can inform a way of rehearing environmental sound arts. Specifically, I want to reassess the roles of silence, technology, and subjectivity and fuse them into broader claims of an acoustic ecology. The emphasis throughout rests in the application of an eco-political ear, one that is not without its uncertainties and limits, but nonetheless endeavors to listen in, and out, of intersectional power. The article is structured in order to:

- Situate the term Post-Natural within the context of eco-critical philosophy and establish its relevance for environmental sound arts
- Present three historical sonic case studies that derive from archival recordings
- Discuss the problems of representation in contemporary artistic practice
- Offer concluding thoughts, questions, and prompts

Towards a Post-Natural Sound Arts

Moving towards a Post-Natural Sound Art prompts a deconstruction of acoustic ecology, a discipline attached to the soundscape studies school of practice: those motivated by conservation and composition as global unifiers (Hempton 2010; Krause 2012; Schafer 1994). Acknowledging the importance of such work, this article aims for another type of ecology, one that consistently examines heard and unheard aspects of ethics, power and agency within the practice itself. A Post-Natural filter aids this new approach by reinvigorating environmental sound art's relationship to silence, technology and subjectivity. Furthermore, it offers new methods for listening, through publications and creative audio works; it provides questions to sonic materials and treats recordings as documents to be read through a listening approach that fuses cartographic research with imaginary speculations.

In a time where human impact is radically altering the sedimentary signature of the earth, a Post-Natural approach asks if it plausible to claim "non-impact" anymore? Has the long-empathetic notion of non-invasive environmental recording become a redundant ideal that is as illusionary as so-called Nature itself? Can the recording of species and phenomena continue to be deemed inconsequential? How is technological agency performed and part of an ecological approach? Whom do "we" speak for in the sounding of environments? What is the impact of such questioning in the field and how do aesthetic modes of documentation and production respond?

The first job here is to remain with the problem of the discipline's Western bias and lend an ear to the remarkably under-critiqued practice of environmental field recording. Its second task is to destabilize the term "Natural" through an exploration of the asymmetrical frictions at the heart of any human-nonhuman process of capture. Listening is positioned throughout as an ethico-aesthetic methodology used to produce new criticisms and potentials in discourse and practice. It is a non-essentialized act that has the agency to be philosophical, violent, aesthetic and political, bringing new knowledge through a complex consideration of its own limits.

What follows next are three listening exercises that draw out such Post-Natural emphasis.

Silence, Subjectivities & the Rights of Nature: Listenings #1

[Indian Common Shama, Ludwig Koch, 1889, BBC Archives]

A fourteen second section of birdsong pierces the crackling hiss of mechanical noise. It is an underwhelming aesthetic anomaly within a contemporary context of technological fidelity and spectacular representations of Nature. I am listening to a BBC archival recording of birdsong: the first-ever, committed to wax cylinder in 1889. Amongst the noise of early phonographic media, I hear the song of a captive Indian Common Shama Bird native to Southeast Asia. Dis-placed, re-located, and housed within a cage, it seems to have been part of the Victorian era's penchant for curiosity, collection and display. The bird hails from *Muscicapidae* lineage, a large family of small Passerine birds emanating from the Common House Sparrow. Ironically, these birds are not known for their song, yet it is from this species that the world has its historical first.

The famed naturalist and wildlife sound recordist Ludwig Koch, aged eight at the time, captured this historical precedent and in doing so provides a baseline for a Post-Natural history of sound arts. The recording contains heard and unheard artifacts relating to silence, materiality, animals, and technology that, when listened with, reveal a raft of consequences in relation to ethics, power and agency, matters at the heart of all PNSA inquiries.

A point of departure for this listening exercise is to ask: what are we *not* hearing? In this particular recording, amongst the birdsong and pops of sonic materiality, is a notable absence. Inaudibly present within the media-animal crackles, Ludwig Koch, the recordist, is also captured somewhere and inscribed into the wax.

Koch's "silent" presence underpins aesthetic representations of Nature and environmental encounters. Early 20th century bioacoustics and archival motivations for wildlife recording continually erased its own authors for matters of objective fact. Nature documentary and the growing influence of genres such as soundscape studies or acoustic ecology (circa 1970), although more artistically inclined, continued to support a legacy of self-erasure for compositional purposes. The dominant aesthetic message is an unheard one, as recordists perpetually mute their own presence for the most "natural" or technically "cleanest" documentation of an environment or species. The recording "I" is associated with lo-fi acoustic detritus such as microphone handling, wind, and interference noise: all are aspects that must be silenced as part of the general signal-to-noise ratio. Whether for science or art, self-dissolution hovers over every instance the record button is about to be pressed.

Within such histories and representations we should ask what is really being preserved beyond the so-called signal? What power dynamics are being enacted, not only in silence but also through the very act of silencing? PNSA performs a listening towards the non-sounding noise of such questions. Its process is a forensic yet non-representational one, entangled amongst the erasures and absences of the unsound (Migone 2011). The task here is not to speak on behalf of silence but recognize the

potential agency of its performativity (Malhotra and Rowe 2013). Listening with such obscure materialities forges new possibilities for an aesthetics situated in radical notions of becoming, where subjectivities, both human and nonhuman, can be actively performed, hybridized and renegotiated.

It is the promise and threat of the "Noisy-Nonself" (Wright forthcoming) that I speak towards here. The Noisy-Nonself is a conceptual character that invites environmental sound art practitioners to harness their own silent para-histories, reanimating the marginalized self in order to blur the so-called subject. The term itself teeters on the edge of nonsense and draws upon Donna Haraway's essay *The Promises of Monsters* (1992) along with related literature from cultural monster studies that forge a pathway towards the potentiality of hybridized and marginalized subjectivities (Cohen 1996; Mittman and Dendle 2012).

Such ethico-speculative work brings important listening towards the rights of Nature. This is another paradoxical area where the negotiation of agency, between humans and nonhumans, is an ambiguous territory built upon lossy forms of representation and knowledge: fidelity and veracity become replaced by artifactual truths within the limits of listening.

The MGM lion roar sets a legal precedent in terms of the rights of Nature. In 2008 European courts granted this nonhuman sound legal status: trademark number 005170113 (EUIPO 2008). The trademark document includes the technical details of the sound recording, the name of its legal owner, and a statement that it is from an individual classified as "Nature." It omits the specific subject, namely Leo, who produced the roar in 1995, one of seven lions to have been used by MGM over the years.

The endless possibility of granting sonic rights brings with it a swathe of complex ethical dilemmas around advocacy, anthropomorphism, and profiteering. Formalizing Michel Serres call for a "Natural Contract" (1995) in the media entertainment business might only reinforce the anthropocentric mastery of nonhumans. In response to Wittgenstein's famous philosophical observation that if a lion could speak, we would not be able to understand it, this may well be the case, but we humans can, and certainly do, exploit and monetize animals, both visually and sonically.

Here, I am interested in both the rights and rites of Nature. Not only hard codes of conduct but the mediated rituals and constructs bound into technological practices of nonhuman capture and representation. As a consequence, I take seriously the proxy proposition that sound is a social political agent and strive to treat the medium as material that matters, working against a culture of digital sound capture that falsely claims inconsequentiality as its implied default.

The recording of the Indian Common Shama bird therefore helps explore the promise and threat of self-erasure. It challenges critical reflexive practice to imaginatively bend the ear backwards, towards the hiss of its own Noisy-Nonself. It asks what latticed identity might lurk in the margins of audial representation? It provokes a necessarily ethico-imaginative response in practice that foregrounds the rights/rites of Nature. Both areas are bound by an application of loss: loss in terms of what is beyond the so-called signal, loss in terms of formal representation and loss in terms of knowledge production. PNSA hears with loss to perform a listening *out* rather than in (Lacey

2013). It harnesses loss as a methodological instigator for real and imaginary contextual mappings.