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THE NOISY-NONSELF:  
TOWARDS A  
MONSTROUS PRACTICE  
OF MORE-THAN-HUMAN  
LISTENING

Mark Peter Wright

## ABSTRACT

Environmental sound arts are based on a long-term engagement with nonhuman subjects through disciplines such as bioacoustics, acoustic ecology, field recording, and soundscape studies. Recording and representing the sounds of animals and environmental phenomena have been essential to such practices and their archival and arts-based impact. Throughout these more-than-human histories, however, there has been a relative lack of attention given to the presence of recordists themselves.

This article endeavors to re-hear the fringe identity of the environmental field recordist and analyze the promises and threats of self-erasure. I propose a new concept, the Noisy-Nonselself, as a way of understanding such an identity. It is a chimeric figuration that seeks to collapse human, animal, and technological binaries, prompt ethical critique, and ask, “what are the consequences of hearing our own monsters?”

## KEYWORDS

Capture  
Monsters  
More-than-human  
Noisy-Nonselself  
Self-silence



## Self-Silence Within Environmental Nature Recording

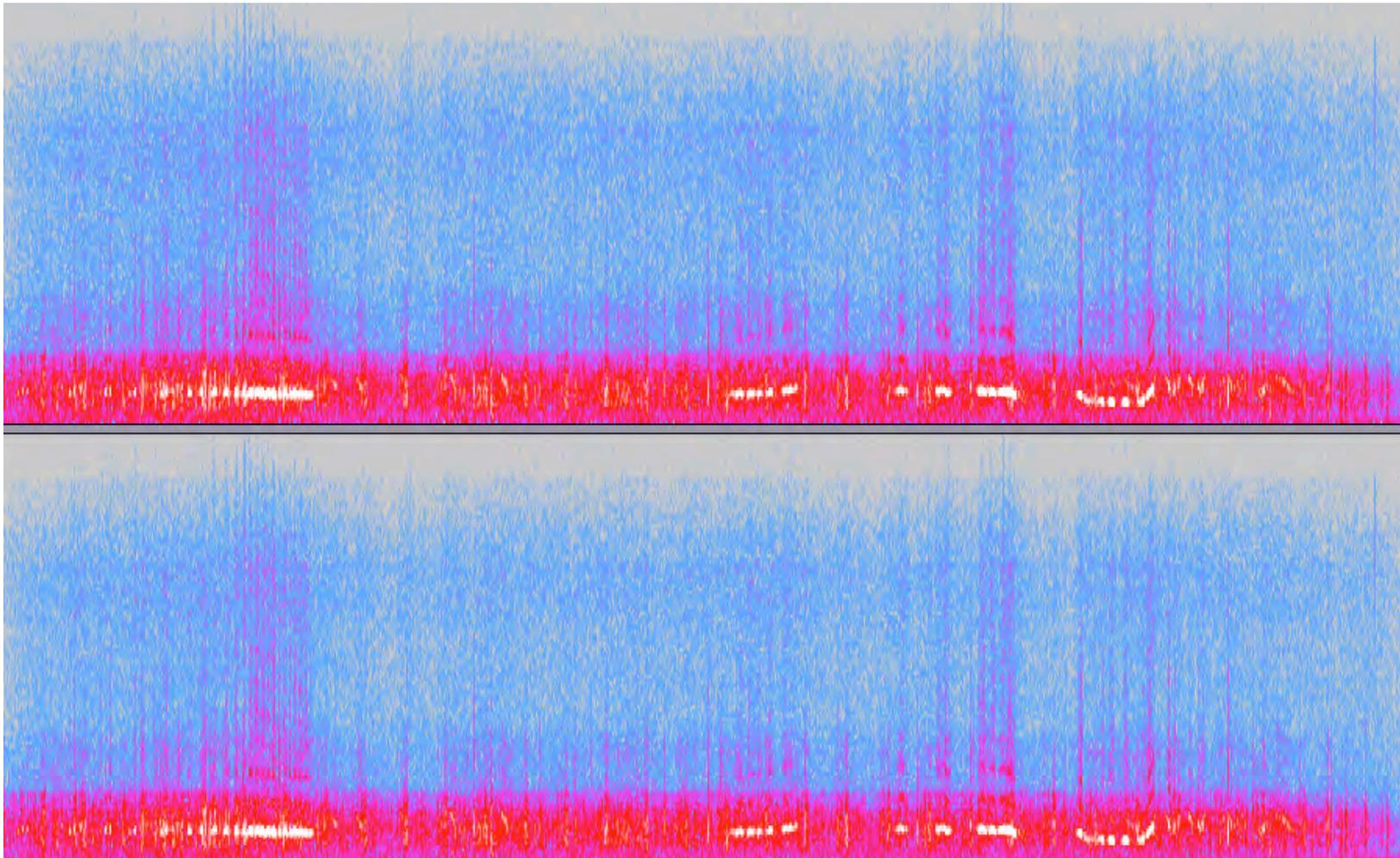
It begins with the first known recording of birdsong committed to wax cylinder in 1889.<sup>1</sup> Amongst the calls of an Indian Common Shama bird and the scratched media into which it was recorded, Ludwig Koch, the recordist, aged eight at the time, remains silent throughout. Inaudibly present within the crackling song, Koch, who would later gain renown as a naturalist, is also captured somewhere and inscribed into the wax. It may be the first media carrier of birdsong, but as this article will propose, it is also the inaugural rendering of a wildlife recordist. It sets a precedent for the next century, wherein environmental sound recordists will not be heard within the capture and mediation of nonhuman subjects and phenomena.<sup>2</sup>

By the time of the Second World War, Koch was a household name in the UK. His “Sound Pictures,” which combined wildlife recordings, texts, and imagery, were distributed nationally through publications in addition to a weekly BBC Radio broadcast throughout the 1940’s. These recordings shifted ethnomusicology’s focus on man-made music and instead placed nature,

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particularly birdsong, firmly at the fore.<sup>3</sup> Koch's work tapped into the enthusiastic vein of natural historians, wildlife experts, and hobbyists (see Jeffery Boswell; Albert M. Brand; Jean Claude-Roche) across the UK, Europe, and North America. Institutes including the Cornell Lab of Ornithology (USA) and The Smithsonian Institute (USA) played major roles in facilitating, disseminating, and developing the technology for recording outdoor environments.<sup>4</sup>

Recording and archiving environmental sounds enabled the medium itself to be considered a viable social and cultural artifact, something that soundscape studies and the World Soundscape Project would later harness in the context of acoustic ecology.<sup>5</sup> These bioacoustic archival bloodlines silenced their own authors in order to privilege objective "facts." The legacies that arrive from such preservation-based contexts prioritize non-intrusive or hi-fidelity recordings of an environment or species.



**Figure 1.** Spectrogram screenshot of Ludwig Koch's Indian Common Shama recording, 1889. The white trails show birdsong amongst the reddish pink of low-level mechanical noise. But where is Ludwig Koch? Image by the author.

Recordists are perpetually engaged in the negotiation of their own “silence.”<sup>6</sup> The recording “I” is all too often associated with lo-fi acoustic detritus such as microphone handling, wind, and interference noise: aspects that must be silenced in order to maintain an “acceptable” signal-to-noise ratio. Today, whether for science or art, the prospect of self-dissolution haunts every moment the “Record” button is pressed.

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The promise of self-erasure is an empathic, noninvasive tactic tied to claims of conservationism and art-philosophical motives of moving beyond the human and into other energies and agencies. This article does not wish to claim that recordists have no subjective intentionality within their own histories of self-erasure. On the contrary, I am endeavoring to critically and imaginatively reengage these inaudible histories so that we might begin to rehear a sense of performative self-presence. What I want to do next is jettison out from this historical departure point. I will tread quietly towards the monstrous potential of a practice-based chimera I am calling the "Noisy-NonselF."

## I, The Thing In The Margins

What potentials and pitfalls might be heard then if we begin to imaginatively bend the ear backwards towards the hiss of itself? What latticed identity might lurk in the margins of audial representation, and what speculative skins may emerge within the feedback loop of listening?

I began to materialize my own field recording self-other through a project called *I, the Thing in the Margins* (IMT Gallery, 2015). Two aspects initially motivated the work. The first was an attempt to draw attention towards the material and immaterial agents involved within human and nonhuman field encounters. In doing so I wanted to flesh out the embroiled relational ecologies of subjectivity and power. Second, rather than framing identify as a singular essential form, I sought to explore my own body as a site of multiple transgressions. I wanted to fuse the historically translucent skins of nature recordists and graft human, nonhuman, and technological registers, something that would speak towards an ethics of selfhood within such underrepresented histories. I wanted to do all of this with a healthy dose of irony and humor: to view the monstrous potentiality in myself and

the practice of environmental sound recording as something inevitably knotted by ongoing relations of power, agency, and technological becoming.

I initiated a persona that would represent a troubling doubling of the archetypal nature recordist: a crypto-character, part shadow, part absurd doppelgänger, a bipedal assemblage of another I. I moved towards my own spectral and material skins that grafted technology and the body as well as the animal. “Naturally” a fluffy onesie that resembled a microphone windshield was developed (!). Windshields or windjammers are used primarily to suppress breathing sounds and wind noise: they are the mediators of self-silence. Made commercially from synthetic fur but often adapted by DIY enthusiasts from real animal furs such as wolverines, the material encases the microphone within its meshed cage. They are commonly referred to as “fluffys” or “dead cats.” Smaller windjammers are known as “dead kittens.” The windshield continually cancels mediating bodies; technical, human, environmental apparatus, and subjects are softened into an absorbent milieu. It renders recordists as soundless agents: mute performers matted within the flesh and fur of their own body-apparatus.

The identity I began to develop aimed to dredge the hybridized relations that make up the field encounter. It was an imaginative attempt to recast the obfuscating self-body within a media history of silence and silencing and propel “the field” into a more plural space of relational possibilities.<sup>7</sup>

## The Horror Of Listening Back

On October 20, 1967, Roger Patterson filmed a sixty-second strip of sixteen-millimeter film near Bluff Creek, Colorado. The film captured the mythical presence of Bigfoot, a bipedal apelike humanimal: the Holy Grail connecting our present selves with our former other. Part natural history, part mythic hoax, this non-identity revealed itself in frame 352.<sup>8</sup> It is a moment of

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uncanny self-revelation that has since continued to reverberate beyond the film's edges and into the collective consciousness of enthusiasts, filmmakers, and historians alike.

Frame 352 fascinated and frightened me as a child. This familiar yet monstrous presence returning my gaze was a horrifying experience. Drawing upon Anne Radcliffe's (1862) differentiation of terror from horror, media activist Marcel O'Gorman suggests that terror is the dreadful, ongoing anticipation of something not quite there. Horror on the other hand is a moment of fixity, a frozen state that "exceeds death; it represents not only the cessation of life but also a challenge to the human form itself."<sup>9</sup> Given this reading, environmental sound recordings may well be deemed frozen moments of horror, the practice and pursuit of sound itself more an act of ongoing process-based terror.

I decided to reenact frame 352 as a microphonic monster. I wanted to speculatively propose that Bigfoot's elusive non-presence mirrored the marginalized identity of the environmental sound recordist. Furthermore, if frame 352 were a suspended moment of horror that destabilized what it means to be human, recapturing myself would enact a similar feedback loop of uncanny revelation and disruption.

As part of the exhibition, which also included microphonic insects and camouflaged sound installations, a still image was produced (Figure 2) along with a companion film, which deconstructed the process of its reenactment. The film in particular revealed the performance and construct involved in any type of environmental capture. It shows my collaborator Helena Hunter zipping me into the fluffy costume before positioning my unsighted and ungainly body as it attempted to adopt the iconic Bigfoot pose.



**Figure 2.** "I, the Thing in the Margins," Deluxe C-type print. Image by the author.

## The Noisy-Nonsel

Reflecting on my own alter-persona project and associated media histories of self-erasure, this article proposes a new conceptual identity for environmental sound recordists called the Noisy-Nonsel. The Noisy-Nonsel functions analogously to that of the Monster: “a strange byproduct or left over of the process of making.”<sup>10</sup> Always in the margins, “a Monstrosity never presents itself [...] it can only be mis-known.”<sup>11</sup> Historically, the monster “exceeds symbolization and can potentially rupture our sense of reality.”<sup>12</sup>

The Noisy-Nonsel is a chimeric artifact, an anomalous derivative of human and nonhuman technological encounters. Film anthropologist Jean Rouch stated that the role of the recordist is that of the “taker and giver of doubles, as an eater and shower of reflections.”<sup>13</sup> The Noisy-Nonsel is the noise in its own signal; hovering between presence and absence, it destabilizes notions of identity and knowing as the “monster stands on the threshold of becoming.”<sup>14</sup> The Noisy-Nonsel is a true-fiction that untethers the veracity of self and site. Like the monstrous agent, it is a performative disruptor, some *thing* that might affirmatively agitate from the peripheries of audible apprehension. Bruno Latour put it well when claiming, “nonhuman actors appear first of all as trouble makers.”<sup>15</sup>

The productive potentiality of the Noisy-Nonsel is simultaneously offset by the lingering threat of its own hegemonic “silence.” A history of Noisy-Nonsel echoes the colonial roots of anthropology whereby observed “others” were continually undermined through the hierarchical power figure of the non-identifiable, simultaneously silent and silencing “I.”<sup>16</sup> The power of quietude also has its aesthetic lineages in camouflage and nature hides, both of which emerge from military and stalking traditions.<sup>17</sup> Within these asymmetrical relations, it is important to transpose ethical critique onto environmental sound arts: what power dynamics are enacted by silently listening to nonhumans? Whom do “we” speak for in the continual sounding of species and phenomena? What is really being

captured and processed beyond the so-called signal? What is not being heard?

The Noisy-Nonsel self simultaneously invades environments and evades self-analysis; it occupies a parasite-host duality like a shimmering thing caught in its own medial web of entrapment. Reciprocal witnesses, both human and nonhuman, vibrate the field's own listening; bodies of technology, flesh and fur, cables and capillaries intersect; a singular being-in-the-world radically morphs into an exquisite corps of the multitude. To listen within such hybridized subjectivities and complex entanglements is to tune attention towards patterns of meaning within the feedback of noise. It suggests a listening out or otherwise of hard knowledge and a listening in to ethico-spectral becomings.<sup>18,19</sup>

Attempting to hear the Noisy-Nonsel self is therefore apophenic by nature.<sup>20</sup> Apophenia describes the phenomenon whereby clouds appear to resemble dinosaurs, rocks seem to smile, and Jesus himself emerges from a piece of burnt toast. Often anthropomorphic in process, applied in this context, apophenia facilitates a non-representational forensics of listening, both in and out of the field. The challenge for the auditioning apophenic ear is to hold onto agential relations amongst the absence of meaning or clear signal.<sup>21</sup> Listening out for the Noisy-Nonsel self therefore demands a new ethical commitment be heard amongst the dirty data of cryptofacts. Through its contingent materiality, the Noisy-Nonsel self renders the auditioning ear as an apophenic apparatus full to the brim with productive doubt.

## “|” Is Another And Another (Looped)

What are the consequences of hearing the Noisy-Nonsel self? The more-than-human focus of environmental sound arts must also include the microbes and bacteria that make up the bodies of recordists themselves. Nonhuman agents are not only found in environments or animals. They reside within

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the monstrously intimate shadow of the self, which phases in and out of apprehension. Donna Haraway reminds us that we have never been human as our “genomes can be found in only about 10 percent of all the cells that occupy the mundane space I call my body; the other 90 percent of the cells are filled with genomes of bacteria, fungi, protists, and such.”<sup>22</sup>

Technologies and tools of capture also occupy a “more-than” status. Materially speaking, the microphone is made from various geological elements, including the rare earth mineral Neodymium (*Nd*). Used as a magnet within microphones, it is mined directly from the ground. Boron (*B*) is another compound alternative used as a magnet within microphones. This metalloid is in fact born from cosmic ray spallation and the process of particle collision within extraterrestrial space. Copper, silicon, gold, and many other geophysical agents produce communication technologies. A “more-than-microphonic” perspective is therefore necessary if we are to rehear technology’s agential role within the broader context of acoustic ecology.

Amongst this “more-than” web, it is important to stress that the Noisy-Nonself initiates a diffractive process. It is not merely a figure of self-reflection; it is an interfering morphological agent. Building on Haraway’s “Modest Witness,” feminist philosopher and physicist Karen Barad claims “the metaphor of reflection reflects the themes of mirroring and sameness, whereas diffraction is marked by patterns of difference.”<sup>23,24</sup> The Noisy-Nonself is not a typical critical agent within the context of scholarly research. It diffracts knowledge away from notions of mimetic truth and instead propagates distortions of technologies and bodies.

The Noisy-Nonself is “more-than-reflexive.” It is a diffractive agent that brings about categorical crisis and horrific self-revelation. Listening out for the Noisy-Nonself is an apophenic search riddled with uncanny hauntings that “arrive to recount a lesson in the complexity of temporality. History is a tangle, full of loops and doublings-back.”<sup>25</sup> The temporal loops for environmental sound arts are again contained in rehearing its own asymmetric artifacts of silent hegemony and extraction: to listen back to one’s other is a self-revelatory time bending horror.

Reticent recordist histories stratify a monstrous promise and threat: the potential for hybrid identities to emerge amongst the peril of power enacted by silence. Scholarly research in environmental sound recording must listen beyond the so-called subject and rehear the enmeshed traces of

power and subjectivity that haunt all documents of capture. Archives and publications are full of catalogued Noisy-Nonselves, parasitic oscillations that trouble the margins of media materiality. If we turn up the noise in the signal, we begin to tune into the monstrous locked groove of selfhood. Layer upon layer of self-silent detritus that, if reheard, might also rewire sonic epistemologies built from the legacies of bioacoustics and acoustic ecology. Within this framing, Nature and Environmental recording can no longer be an inconsequential pursuit of the sound object. It must equally incorporate its makers and technologies in monstrous ways that speak to urgent matters of ethics, agency, and material (heard and unheard) intensities.

## Conclusion

This article has positioned sound recordists, technologies, and critical research within a more-than-human mesh. It has been a search for the Noisy-Nonself that haunts the affective vibrations and energetic phenomena of recorded sound. What lurks amongst the loss of listening is a hybridized identity, a practice-based chimera that agitates from the margins of sonic media materiality. Listening out for the Noisy-Nonself requires an apophenic ear that must swim through the dirty data of the real and imaginary, ethical and aesthetic; loops of knowing and unknowing blur with skin and fur; the field becomes a para-speculative world; a fractal glitch harboring the horror of its own echoes.

I have explored what happens when we attempt to apprehend this diffractive thing, but it is important to ask what level of care and responsibility I have towards my own Noisy-Nonself. If environmental sound recordists have historically abandoned themselves, now is the time to begin caring for such marginal and monstrous identities.<sup>26</sup> As Bruno Latour states, “Dr. Frankenstein’s crime was not that he invented a creature through some

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combination of hubris and high technology, but rather that he abandoned the creature to itself.”<sup>27</sup>

Environmental sound arts should stay with its own monsters as they provide access to inaudible affects and materialities that can productively destabilize practice orthodoxies and acoustic ecological perspectives. Listening out for the Noisy-NonselF can forge new relationships towards technology, subjectivity, and silence. The process of attempting to hear the Noisy-NonselF initiates the production of new ethical responsibilities and possibilities for practitioners and listeners, decentering human parameters of identity whilst treating the inaudible as ethico-aesthetic material that matters.

## Notes

- 1 Julian May, "Ludwig Koch and the Nature of Music," Accessed August 4, 2016, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/boojn4m2>.
- 2 Many practice-based examples do overtly animate such histories of self-erasure in performative ways (see Carlyle, 2009; Cusack, 2012; DeLauraneti, 2015; Polli, 2008; Wenzel, 2010; Westerkamp, 1996). The point of this essay, however, is to create a new conceptual framework (the Noisy-Nonsel) in which such works might be consequently analyzed.
- 3 Ethnomusicology is primarily the study of folk music and oral traditions within their geo-social contexts. Organizations such as the Gramophone Company of London were pioneers in the early days of ethnomusicology (1902 and 1917), recording the sounds of musical cultures onto wax cylinders (Prentice, 2012). Following anthropological fieldwork traditions, recordists such as Charles Seeger and Alan Lomax are examples from the 1940's and 50's who (in distinction to Koch's focus on animal sounds) recorded the sounds of blues musicians and Appalachian folk music in their environmental contexts.
- 4 Joeri Bruyninckx, *Sound Science: Recording and Listening in the Biology of Bird Song 1880–1980* (Maastricht: Datawyse, 2013), 11–28.
- 5 Acoustic ecology is the relational study of humans and their environments as mediated through sound. This interdisciplinary field of study was developed primarily through the work of the World Soundscape Project (WSP), which was established in 1971 at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, Canada. The WSP worked to address the question "what is the relationship between man and the sounds of his environment, and what happens when those sounds change?" R. Murray Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*, 2nd ed., (Vermont: Destiny Books, 1994), 4. "The term [soundscape] may refer to actual environments, or to abstract constructions such as musical compositions and tape montages, particularly when considered as an artificial environment." Barry Truax, *Handbook for Acoustic Ecology*, CD Rom, (Montreal: Electro CD, 1999).
- 6 "Silence" along with terms such as the "inaudible" and "unheard" are deployed in this article as active agents, not absolute states. Christof Migone's use of the term "unsound" is a useful parallel here as he describes it as "a way to focus on the sonic as opposed to sound. It's not about dispensing with the materiality of sound at all really, just amplifying its range, especially discursively. The fact that unsound also means failure, flaw, and disease adds a layer that is welcome given that it returns us to the flesh—the messy side of sound. Unsound also links productively to the Body without Organs (Artaud, Deleuze/Guattari)." Mark Peter Wright, "Christof Migone," Accessed September 14, 2016, <https://earroom.wordpress.com/2015/05/19/christof-migone/>.
- 7 "The field" is understood here in its broadest sense: a site located outside the traditional boundaries of an interior studio space. This might include anything from oceanic life, street sounds, wildlife habitats, architectures, or celestial space.
- 8 Patterson-Gimlin, "Bigfoot: A Cryptid History," *Crypto Sightings*, Accessed October 23, 2016, <http://cryptosightings.com/bigfoot-a-cryptid-history>.
- 9 Marcel O'Gorman, *Necromedia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 178.

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- 10 Peter Brooks, *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 218.
- 11 Jacques Derrida, "Some Statements and Truisms about Neologisms, Newisms, Postisms, Parasitisms, and other small Seismisms," in *The States of Theory*, ed. David Carroll (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 79.
- 12 Maria Beville, *The Unnameable Monster in Literature and Film* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 65.
- 13 Jean Rouch, "On the Vicissitudes of the Self: The Possessed Dancer, the Magician, the Sorcerer, the Filmmaker, and the Ethnographer," in *Ciné-ethnography*, ed. Steven Feld (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 100.
- 14 Jeffrey J. Cohen, *Monster Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 20.
- 15 Bruno Latour, *The Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), 81.
- 16 Fueled by its culpable ties to European colonialism and a male centric practice, anthropologists and feminists alike began to question anthropology's own methods and modes of representation from the 1970's onwards. James Clifford and George E. Marcus' publication, *Writing Culture: the Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (1987), consolidated a seismic critique upon ethnographic fieldwork, drawing attention to the crucial participant/observer relationship and histories of hegemonic authorial abuse, objectification, and exoticism.
- 17 As Hanna Rose Shell explains, camouflage is an obfuscation tactic tied into military reconnaissance and media technological development. Hiding in plain sight is a way of eavesdropping or observing a target without detection. In this asymmetric scenario, which extends to the Naturalist's hide, being invisible or inaudible enacts a position of power and hegemony over the intended recipient. Hanna Rose Shell, *Hide and Seek: Camouflage, Photography, and the Media of Reconnaissance* (New York: Zone Books, 2012).
- 18 Lisbeth Lipari, *Listening, Thinking, Being: Towards an Ethics of Attunement* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014).
- 19 Kate Lacey, *Listening Publics: The Politics and Experience of Listening in the Media Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013).
- 20 Apophenia is discussed in relation to a public listener who might audition environmental sound art publications, radio works, or installations. It is a mode of listening tied into playback and sound diffusion.
- 21 Agency is defined by Karen Barad as the ongoing performative relationship between humans and nonhumans: "a matter of intra-acting; it is an enactment, not something that someone or something has." Karen Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28, no. 3 (2003): 826.
- 22 Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 3.
- 23 Donna Haraway, *Modest\_Witness@Second\_Millennium.FemaleMan\_Meets\_OncoMouse: Feminism and Technoscience* (New York: Routledge, 1997).
- 24 Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 71.
- 25 Jeffrey J. Cohen, *Monster Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 441.

- 26 I stress “now is the time” in relation to the Anthropocene, a much debated new geological epoch defined by the pervasive impact humans have had in radically altering the sedimentary signature of the earth. Within the context of anthropogenic acceleration and entanglement, is it plausible to claim “non-impact” anymore? Transposed onto environmental sound arts, has the long empathetic notion of non-invasive field recording become a redundant ideal that is as illusory as so-called Nature itself?
- 27 Bruno Latour, “Love Your Monsters,” *Breakthrough Journal* 2 (2011): 21.

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