Noise Thinks the Anthropocene: An Experiment in Noise Poetics

Aaron Zwintscher

Published by Punctum Books


For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/76691

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2651370
INTRODUCTION

Disclaimer How do I introduce this work, this textual assemblage infected with audiovisual distractions, this machine abandoned to run down in a barren desert? Perhaps it is best if I begin with a disavowal: this is not mine, I did not write it, this is a work and performance of noise/art/theory. That is melodramatic but not far off the point. This text is, in simplest terms, an assemblage of quotations from theory, fiction, poetry, criticism, and other disparate noise works that I had, after sprawling and digressive reading and research, ready to hand, cut up and remixed with my own arguments on noise and my own audiovisual noise art. I thus did not write it, but rather wrote with it, improvised over its changes. It exists as an

1 The majority of this text is built and adapted from quotations. The quotations in the main body of the text are quoted in an inconsistent and fragmentary manner as many have been written over or modified to suit the needs of this text rather than their original context. The multiple rewritings of the quoted and randomly assembled text led to a final product that is significantly distant from the original samples borrowed from the work of other writers. However, there is a danger that the experimental model and style of this text opens it to accusations of plagiarism. This is not the case. While the main text writes over and through quotations in order to develop its position, the quotes are fully accounted for in Appendix B and each cited source is faithfully listed in the List of References. While
effort to establish a noise theory and create a work of that noise theory that is itself noisy: a work that operates in the milieu it analyzes.

This project began with a noise, became an experiment, and resulted in a theoretical framework. The content of this project is noise, or more specifically, text(s) addressing the concept of noise. But the focus of the project, the goal of the work, is to address (and ideally alter) a concept even more broad: our being-in-the-world in the Anthropocene. With regard to our being-in-the-world or the many crises of the moment, noise is not the answer. In fact, noise may not even be an answer. Noise, rather, is a question, a questioning, a putting to the question. Noise is a means of interrogating systems and structures of meaning and power as and where they exist, to challenge and critique their seeming stability, their univocity. It is a means of disturbing the so-called natural, and calling into question the very idea of nature.

Fragments, Traces, Remains

The project was a product of tracing. Of wandering through the garden of forking paths, taking turns as they developed.

In Information Theory, noise is understood as the background of a signal. This theory depends on binary oppositions—noise/signal, background/foreground, environment/object. Timothy Morton’s work on environments and nature and their fraught relationships to ecology came into play here. The notion that environments and nature are passive backgrounds upon which the drama of human culture and existence plays out is pervasive. Nature is located “over there,” in some pristine beyond untouched and unspoiled by human

this text does not use a standard model of citation as it builds its argument from the work of others, in no way does it contend that it is not a work built from the work of others. There are many precedents for writing and citing in a similar manner, including but not limited to Walter Benjamin’s The Arcades Project, Mark Amerika’s remixthebook, the writings of Kathy Acker, and significant portions of William Burroughs’s cutups.
involvement, a notion that when expressed plainly, seems increasingly absurd and impossible. There is no beyond, there is nothing on this planet that is untouched by human involvement (that is the essence of the Anthropocene), and backgrounds and nature are not passive. What, after all, is nature? Is it the nonhuman animals? Because they are hardly passive, even if they intrude only weakly into the political concerns of the average human. Is it the plants and trees? For though they are predominantly immobile, they are hardly inactive, however they may seem to be on human timescales. Even the rocks and mountains and oceans are, on their own scales (temporal, atomic, etc.), dynamic and significant actors. (This is the essence of both Bruno Latour’s Actor–Network Theory as well as the Object-Oriented Ontology of Morton, Graham Harman, Levi Bryant, Ian Bogost, and others.) Noise thus presented itself to me as a means of considering and thinking the interactions of binary opposites, including those relating to nature and ecology.

In following this thread, I worked my way through Michel Serres’s concept of the parasite. Serres’s concept takes noise and articulates it as both the background term in the binary as well as an intruding third term that destabilizes the binary. One could additionally consider noise as the porous demarcation between binary oppositions, an articulation of the opposition that actively acknowledges that the division is impure, incomplete, and unstable. The Parasite also raised the question of hospitality toward noise. Combined with Jacques Derrida’s reading of hospitality as an unconditional openness to the arrivant (a concept that Morton adapts as the strange stranger and reads in relation to ecology and ecological thinking and relationships), this approach opens up a possible ethics of noise and understanding of noise in ethics and its relations to the unknowable Other.

Noise in relation to hospitality also opens the path to its opposite: noise as a means of control and domination. Here we could follow the paths of sonic weapons like the Long Range Acoustic Device (LRAD), a sonic cannon that can be mounted on a ship, a truck, or aircraft, and which is used most often for crowd control. Indeed, the mere presence of one with the New York Police Department (NYPD) at the Occupy Wall Street protests (where the gathering protestors were forbidden from using any means of amplification whatsoever and thus revived traditional organizing tactics such as the People’s Mic), set the tone for how the City understood the encampment; sound and noise and the power to wield them was deemed the sole purview of the State. I also traced the path of sonic torture, of the use of sound (often hard rock or metal music) played at high volume or silence (as a form of sensory deprivation), as a means for breaking down detainees held by the United States.  

There is also the long history of noise abatement, a complex political strategy that in theory is laudable and in practice is often only a protection for the wealthy and connected, a shunting of the problem unto the disenfranchised (we might note specifically here airports and other transportation noise—a significant source) and those who cannot afford to move away from nearby neighborhoods or take on less auditorily damaging careers.

Other paths opened and closed. Drones are heavily represented in noise music, drones here meaning long, sustained tones. But this term led conductively to drone workers and the drudgery of work in desperate need of revitalization, drone bees and the threat of colony collapse disorder (a product of the Anthropocene and indirect human interaction), and drone warfare and its complex politics and issues of control, command, and exploitation (not to mention its ties to the LRAD and thus another entry point to thinking about noise).

---

Most drone pilots are based in the desert, many in a base just outside of Las Vegas, itself a city of contradictions. Nearby are the Nevada Test Site and Yucca Mountain (the location of the majority of nuclear tests and nuclear waste storage), further extending the questions of control and contamination, of noise as waste and pollution as well as power and dominance. These issues are further explored in Serres’s *Malfeasance*.\(^4\) Indeed, the wide-ranging work of Michel Serres, his writings on noise, knowledge, pollution, waste, ecology, the senses, and the relationship between the sciences and the humanities, might be considered the connective tissue that draws together all the disparate threads of thought that went into this project into a single tapestry, which, when seen from the back looks like a meaningless jumble.

Deserts also draw us into the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, as the concept of the desert is central to their theorizing territorialization, deterritorialization, and reterritorialization. This concept of the desert de/reterritorialization is related to noise specifically in regard to the relationship that noise has with knowledge and signals: a relationship of continual flux and motion, as the bleeding edge of noise (especially in relation to music) continues to move further and further as new sonic regions are mapped out, marked as noise, only to be brought back into the Culture Industry as acceptably marketable sounds. And here we can see the connection to Theodor Adorno (including his thoughts on music, the negative, and aesthetics) and to Walter Benjamin (including his thoughts on technology, reproduction, and history). We can also see to relations here with the abject in Julia Kristeva and Georges Bataille and heresy in François Laruelle, drawing us back into questions of violence, excess, waste, and power.

Each of these and more could be considered entry points, beginnings on a path through the twisting theories of

noise and the shape-shifting role of noise within philosophy and theory. Noise delineates and escapes every cage it is placed in. (John Cage plays no small role in this text and is afforded a mention in nearly every text that even tangentially links to noise.) And this does not yet fully include the paths and concepts exploited in the creation and navigation (Serres routinely relates noise to nausea—a potential though uncertain etymology—and to seafaring and navigation) of these concepts within the text itself. The noise and silence work of Cage connected to his indeterminacy and his Zen. His methods related to those of musique concrète, which connected to the cutups of William Burroughs, which linked to the collages of Dada and Surrealism, which linked to the noise of Merzbow (Masami Akita), which linked to the art and collage of waste and excess of Kurt Schwitters, which linked to the remix theory of Mark Amerika, and so on. Paths led on to paths, to dead ends, to crossings and recrossings, in a labyrinth, or again, alluding to Borges, a garden of forking paths. Some paths expanded, some paths narrowed. Some concepts remain only in the raw text data and would only be recognized obliquely. As the paths wandered and as I wandered the paths, I developed a total but non-totalizing philosophy of noise, a means of hearing and understanding noise and the noise inherent in the system, in our being-in-the-world. This is the noise I would like to introduce you to in the pages to come.

**Demarcating Noise; or, Noise Is Everywhere and In Everything**

Primarily, works of noise research set out to understand noise under (often) unacknowledged constraints drawn from mainstream academic discourse. Paul Hegarty’s work is primarily based on musicology. Douglas Kahn’s is primarily based in modern art criticism, including but not limited to music. Hillel Schwartz’s work takes a historical approach. Bart Kosko addresses noise from the perspective of science and technology. Greg Hainge’s work is the closest to mine as it seeks the philosophical—specifically, the ontological—underpinnings of noise, but he does not do so experimentally. These works, as
INTRODUCTION

well as much of the expanding fields of noise and sound studies, begin with the provisional definition of noise as it is used within their texts (in relation to music, in relation to sound, in relation to silence, in relation to technology, in relation to vibration, in relation to war) and the authors and theorists set those definitions, implicitly or explicitly, against other possible articulations of noise that they will not address.

This issue of definitions and conceptual clarity creates an issue for any sustained study of noise. As Hegarty puts it in his book: “What exactly noise is, or what it should do, alters through history, and this means that any account of noise is a history of disruptions and disturbances.” As he phrases it in an article: “When we ask what noise is, we would do well to remember that no single definition can function timelessly—this may well be the case with many terms, but one of the arguments of this essay is that noise is that which always fails to come into definition.” Or as Hainge writes:

For whilst noise may seem like an eminently unproblematic term, concept or phenomenon when one does not really attend to it— and, as claimed here, we spend most of our time attempting not to attend to it—as soon as one does stop to think about what noise actually is, one quickly realizes that its meanings and definitions are highly subjective and unstable.

And Hainge continues: “Rather, noise is immersive because there is nothing outside of it and because it is in everything.” Kahn counters/contrasts: “We know [noises] are

8 Ibid., 13.
noises in the first place because they exist where they shouldn’t or they don’t make sense when they should. But here too in knowing this we already know too much for noise to exist.”9

Garret Keizer notes:

Noise also compels us to seek our understanding through different filters. I can think of few subjects that lend themselves so readily to a multidisciplinary approach. Physicists, musicians, historians, psychologists, artists, engineers, and philosophers have all lent their ears and their expertise to its challenges. Noise is a complex phenomenon that reveals our complexity as human beings.10

Michel Serres extends the idea: “In the beginning is the noise; the noise never stops. It is our apperception of chaos, our apprehension of disorder, our only link to the scattered distribution of things.”11 This is but a brief sampling of mostly related quotations about the concept and study of noise. Quotations dealing with thermal noise or noise pollution use completely different metaphors. As Merzbow, the godfather of noise music, poetically phrases it: “Noise is the nomadic producer of differences.”12

Noise for musicology relates to unorganized sound. Noise for wider art criticism deals with disorganization as well as disruption. Noise art expands the definition of noise to include unorganized/underorganized sound as well as the disruptive art practices of movements like Fluxus. Noise for communication is both the opposite of a signal but also the possibility of change (and thus information) in a signal and the

---

channel by which a signal can travel from emitter to receiver. Noise within a historical analysis is again a broader term as it includes the sounds of people and cities (church bells, traffic from horse carts through to jet aircraft and boom cars, the din of the marketplace and the crowd), as well as the history of noise abatement campaigning.

Noise abatement campaigns have existed in varying formal and informal capacities since the formation of cities and the placement of people in close proximity. John Stewart articulates the issue plainly: “Noise, however, is the pollutant which disturbs more people in their daily lives than any other.” But what noise represents to those campaigns is a product of taste and preference such as one type of music over another, or the appropriate place to hear music, the acceptable times for traffic and commerce, the amount of allowable sound associated with that traffic and commerce, which often manifest unspoken and unaddressed class and ethnic tensions. Keizer offers further nuance: “Noise is a weak issue also because most of those it affects are perceived, and very often dismissed, as weak. The ones who dismiss them, in addition to being powerful, are often the ones making the noise.”

Thus, he relates, “[n]oise forces us to ask knotty questions about what we want, what we don’t want, and how we negotiate between the two.” And again:

[W]hen we talk about noise today we are never far from issues that were already at the center of politics in Aristotle’s time: issues such as the rights of citizens, the distribution of wealth, and the proper exercise of power. These remain useful avenues for understanding noise. No less important, noise can prove a useful avenue in understanding our political selves.

14 Keizer, *The Unwanted Sound of Everything We Want*, 4.
15 Ibid., 24.
16 Ibid., 47–48.
Science further broadens the scope of noise, especially as it relates to concepts of thermal noise and heat. Kosko notes that because all objects give off heat (nothing exists at absolute zero), they all emit thermal noise. From his perspective, everything is, in that sense, noisy and thus the universe will both begin and end in noise. The philosophical view draws these perspectives together, addresses and interweaves them. While I did not seek to articulate a specific ontology, as Hainge does in his work (I question the possibility of being able to articulate a single and unwavering definition or state of being for noise-as-such), I am following a similar philosophical approach. Unlike Hainge, my method seeks to be noisy and experimental, because, as I contend and demonstrate within this text, a noisy method is better positioned to address and utilize the interruptive impact and potential of noise that makes noise such a provocative topic of study. In putting noise to use rather than only describing noise (whether in general or specific terms), this text allowed chance, indeterminacy, and loss of control to affect composition, thus opening previously unexplored lines of thought with regard to the subject and applications of noise.

Because of the nature of noise, there is no noise-as-such that is understandable or able to be apprehended by the human mind. While the concept of noise is articulated and understood at various levels and with various degrees of clarity, the fact of its (partial) understanding limits its noise, limits its ability to be noise so long as noise is understood as the absence of meaning, the absence of sense. The understood and understandable is signal, is meaning. So noise, even understood only in relation to the signal it is contrasted to, or simply as the shape of the unknown, ceases to be fully noise within human perception, becoming, not signal, but noise. Putting noise

18 The concept of noise under erasure (noise), which is also extended to silence, is elaborated further in the text in several sections. Primarily, though, it is used as a method of articulating a concept that by definition is meaningless and beyond the realm of sense in an academic argument.
under erasure, as noise, is my attempt to approach the topic of noise with as much clarity as possible. In my argument, however, this means losing track of noise-as-such, so that one can better apprehend the articulable concept of noise. Even as an unknown unknown, we know too much about noise for it to lack meaning completely, for it to remain noise. This differs from the relational ontologies of noise that are proposed by Hainge and Hegarty. Notably, Hegarty believes that there cannot be noise without listening, that lacking a human subject to perceive and classify it, noise cannot be said to exist. I argue quite the opposite: once it has been perceived, it has been given meaning even if that meaning is only its being categorized under the term noise, within the bounds of the meaningless. Knowing that about noise, following Kahn, is “already knowing too much” for it to remain noise.

It is then as noise that we deal with this concept. It is against a noise that exists within a relationship to our perceptive faculties and is bound and defined and shaped and demarcated by our epistemological understandings that we contend. This includes questions of volume and decibels; that is, when something becomes “noise” because it is measurably too loud according to an agreed-upon level. Questions of location and time; that is, when something is called “noise” because it exists in a place or at a time that has been deemed unacceptable according to a standard. Questions of signal and meaning; that is, when something is deemed to be “noise” because it is not recognized as having meaning, as being an intentional signal according to convention. Questions of sound and music; that

Perhaps the distinction might be clarified with a reference to Taoism: “As for the Way, the Way that can be spoken of is not the constant Way; as for names, the name that can be named is not the constant name” (Lao-Tzu: Te-Tao Ching, trans. Robert G. Henricks [New York: Ballantine Books, 1989], 53). Thus, the noise that can be thought or spoken or named is not the constant noise. For clarity, then, I make an effort, once the concept of noise under erasure is introduced in the text, to make the distinction between the elusive concept of noise-as-such (rendered as “noise”) and the articulable concept of noise (rendered as “noise”).

INTRODUCTION
is, when something is considered “noise” because it lacks the organization or presentation that would place it within the set categories of music or sound. As seen here, these categories of “noise” are not categories of ontology but of phenomenology, of perception and relation.

Ontologically, noise is approached apophatically, understood in terms of its absence and lack in relation to the known and perceived, but only approached (as noise) and never fully apprehended within thought or concept. As Derrida notes of writing in Limited Inc, we might understand as similar for noise-as-such (or as close as we can approximate and think the concept): “No context can entirely enclose it. Nor any code, the code here being both the possibility and impossibility of writing, of its essential iterability (repetition/alterity).”

There is no concept or perception of noise that is not noisy, that is not undercut by the noise that forbids the possibility of its assimilation into knowledge.

Constructing Thorybology: On Being-As-Noise

My intention in this text has been to argue noise in a noisy manner, to make the experience of reading about noise be as much as possible an experience of reading noise. This method is drawn from John Cage. As he argues in relation to his own work: “My intention has been, often, to say what I had to say in a way that would exemplify it; that would, conceivably, permit the listener to experience what I had to say rather than just hear about it.”

Thus, I have compiled here a noise work that is textually noisy and that is intercut with sonic and visual noise (see also the bruit jouissance project). Perhaps, the desire to make a noisy

---

21 See below for a description of the Ouvroir de Bruit Potentielle avec The New York Society for the Expression of Unnecessary Noise present “bruit jouissance” as performed by the Delta Brainwave Society project.
noise work is not, at first, apparent or obvious. In making this work noisy, I am immediately alienating certain readers. In working with alternate and experimental methods, I cannot predict or guarantee my results in advance. Many might see that as an unnecessary risk. Works of noise studies have been published within established forms of knowledge production and dissemination, so why change that? Why risk needless confusion, alienation, and incomprehensibility? Because noise is confusion, alienation, and incomprehensibility, and the efficacy and value of noise lies in its confusion, alienation, and incomprehensibility. As the text indicates, seeing what noise can do means doing noise. Following Guy Debord, “[o]ur unfortunate times thus compel me, once again, to write in a new way.” Or, Gregory Ulmer: “The point to emphasize here is that the text that follows is an experiment: it is offered not as a proof or assertion of truth but as a trial or test.”

Indeed, this work proceeds in line with how the Stefano Agosti describes Derrida’s Spurs in his introduction to that text: The “thought refuses to proceed in a straight line, refuses to follow in the well-marked linear rut. No, it moves in directions that are multiple, multiplied and stratified.” Moreover, “[t]he writing says nothing, but only confuses and confounds. It forces what it says into the margins and then seizes upon these margins in such a way that nothing may settle there.” This is a consequence of the concept of noise, certainly, but it is also an intentional act, a means of understanding and playing with noise according to a model best suited to its indeterminate, undecidable nature (such as it can ever be pinned down to having a single nature/stable set of characteristics).

25 Ibid., 23.
“The interactions are dynamic and continuous, with feedback and feedforward loops connecting different levels with each other and cross-connecting machine processes with human responses.” In composing and improvising with the indeterminate changes of this text, I have thus also sought to develop the methodology and underlying philosophy of this text into what I hope can be expanded into a broader interdisciplinary field of study that I have called thorybology.

Because of the argument form, however, certain clarifications are in order. The work, while an assemblage of quotations, was edited, remixed, added to, and annotated to clarify theses on noise raised by the juxtapositions and lines of thought that were generated through the experiment. The published results are far less noisy than those produced by the initial experiment, though they do remain noisy. But without clarification, the project would have appealed, if at all, to a much narrower audience. This is not to say that the work is without contradiction. The argument of the text follows much of the methodology of a manifesto. The language employed is often certain and assertive, categorizing claims in terms of “always” or “never” even as those claims clash and dispute each other. While this formal certainty is not perfectly suited to a concept such as noise, a concept that is highlighted here for its uncertainty, indeterminacy, varied and contradictory definitions, and its inability to “always” be anything without simulta-


27 I term my particular study of noise “thorybology” (from the Greek θόρυβος—noise). It is a broad-spectrum approach to noise as both object and metaphor that draws from numerous disciplines while not particularly claiming a disciplined stance of its own. While I have not included within this text all possible articulations of noise (the included uses from the hard sciences are not as numerous as those from the arts), thorybology is capable of sustaining the contradictions that such an inclusive strategy would entail. Thorybology is particularly geared towards the ontological question of being-as-noise and the implications raised by that question for reassessing the human role in the world in the Anthropocene both in relation to other humans as well as in relation to other beings and things.
taneously being something else, the contradiction is, in fact, one more of the many contradictions inherent in thinking and writing about noise. The Afterword serves to contextualize and clarify the noise experiment, its successes and failures, and its position within the greater conversation around the potentials of noise, including those mentioned above and especially as it relates to noise politics—a recurring focus of the text.

The Anthropocene and Thinking It

This brings us to the question of the Anthropocene. A central conceit of this text is that there is value in positioning noise to “think the Anthropocene.” This is not, perhaps, an intuitive, logical association and thus bears further explanation here. The Anthropocene is the proposed name for our current geological epoch, named to reflect the increasing human impact on the world to even the stratigraphic level. An effective definition of the Anthropocene is articulated by Elizabeth Kolbert in her Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History*: “The word ‘Anthropocene’ is the invention of Paul Crutzen, a Dutch chemist who shared a Noble Prize for discovering the effects of ozone-depleting compounds.”

Elizabeth Kolbert quotes Crutzen:

“It seems appropriate to assign the term ‘Anthropocene’ to the present, in many ways human-dominated, geological epoch,” [Crutzen] observed. Among the many geological-scale changes people have effected, Crutzen cited the following: Human activity has transformed between a third and a half of the land surface of the planet. Most of the world’s major rivers have been dammed or diverted. Fertilizer plants produce more nitrogen than is fixed naturally by all terrestrial ecosystems. Fisheries remove more than a third of the primary production of the oceans’ coastal waters. Humans

---

use more than half of the world’s readily accessible fresh water runoff. Most significantly, Crutzen said, people have altered the composition of the atmosphere.9

Further, “[c]ontinuing along this path for much longer, [scientists Kump and Ridgewell] continued, ‘is likely to leave a legacy of the Anthropocene as one of the most notable, if not cataclysmic events in the history of our planet.’”30 Eugene Thacker writes: “The world is increasingly unthinkable—a world of planetary disasters, emerging pandemics, tectonic shifts, strange weather, oil-drenched seascapes, and the furtive, always-loomi ng threat of extinction.”31 In reaction to the climatic crises, Timothy Morton contends: “The ecological era we find ourselves in—whether we like it or not and whether we recognize it or not—makes necessary a searching revaluation of philosophy, politics, and art.”32 It is toward this searching revaluation of philosophy, politics, and art that this text and the thorybology it describes are geared towards thinking the Anthropocene.

Noise is, among other things, a concept of destabilized binaries and boundaries. “Noise is a turbulence, it is order and disorder at the same time, order revolving on itself through repetition and redundancy, disorder through chance occurrences, through the drawing of lots at the crossroads, and through the global meandering, unpredictable and crazy.”33 Ecology is, following the pioneering work of Morton, a question of destabilized binaries as well. He continually challenges, in his work, the seemingly stable boundaries of nature/culture, noise/silence, foreground/background, subject/environment.

9 Ibid., 108.
30 Ibid., 124.
Noting specifically, “when you mention the environment, you bring it into the foreground. In other words, it stops being the environment.”

Morton challenges the idea that nature is some passive background against which human dominance plays out, arguing instead that this is an error based on, among other things, an unwillingness to focus on and individuate specific objects within “nature,” to focus on noises and backgrounds and thus disrupt the seemingly neutral binary oppositions.

“[T]here is no such thing as an environment: wherever we look for it we find all kinds of objects—biomes, ecosystems, hedges, gutters and human flesh. In a similar sense, there is no such thing as Nature.”

A further contention of the text that joins ecology, the Anthropocene, and noise is the ontological concept I term “being-as-noise.” Being-as-noise is a form of being-in-the-world that I argue best defines humans during the Anthropocene and potentially all human being-in-the-world. As Garret Keizer puts it, “[n]oise is the fullest expression of what we are, the authentic voice of our age.”

Serres makes the links between noise and waste, pollution, and excess explicit: “Now everywhere and all the time we hear sound waste, the rubbish and refuse of engines, ventilators, air conditioning, waste disposal units, reactors, grinders, tuners that saturate the old pugnacious cesspit world of the owners.” The decibel levels that humans produce and are able to produce overcome all except the most extreme of natural sounds and those tend to be uncommon. Yet if noise is conceptually extended to include waste, pollution, and excess, the being-as-noise of humanity—existing in such a way as to disrupt rather than cohabitate—can be understood as even more ontologically intrinsic to the spe-

---

36 Keizer, *The Unwanted Sound of Everything We Want*, 241.
cies. In commenting on the megafauna extinction that can be linked to seemingly benign (within human timescales) hunting practices, Elizabeth Kolbert notes that “[t]hough it might be nice to imagine that there once was a time when man lived in harmony with nature, it’s not clear that he ever really did.”38 She continues:

Indeed, this capacity [to change the world] is probably indistinguishable from the qualities that made us human to begin with: our restlessness, our creativity, our ability to cooperate to solve problems and complete complicated tasks. As soon as humans started using signs and symbols to represent the natural world, they pushed beyond the limits of that world.39

Based on these arguments, this text makes the claim that being-as-noise (a form of existence defined by its disruptive capacity) is likely inherent in the human species. It contends, though, that this capacity, when confronted directly (by thinking noise, by thinking ecology, by thinking climate change and the Anthropocene) can be directed away from destructive ends and towards creative coexistence.

**A Note on Methodology** The development of the experimental methodology for this textual project began while I was working on the University of Central Florida Texts & Technology Dissertation Research Grant-funded *Ouvroir de Bruit Potentielle avec The New York Society for the Expression of Unnecessary Noise* present “bruit jouissance” as performed by the Delta Brain-wave Society40 project. That work is primarily composed of

39 Ibid., 266.
40 The *bruit jouissance* project functions as audio/visual supplement/soundtrack to the present text. The concepts presented here are also present within the noise/music and visual noise of the project, though present differently because of the natures of the different media and the different
assembled and remixed fragments of sound (often field recordings) that have been cut together and juxtaposed for effect and then processed into a completed form. The form that the *bruit jouissance* project was taking, combined with the confluence of theories that I had been applying in my noise research—the indeterminacy methods of John Cage, William Burroughs’s cut-ups, Michel Serres’s parabolic style, and deconstruction, among others—offered a glimpse at a possible means of articulating the above stated desire to make my work of noise theory noisy. Using cut-ups and indeterminacy, I speculated that it was possible to bring to noise theory a means of more strongly representing noise within the text that did not rely on an ever growing set of negative definitions and displacements. Instead of following the established path of other noise researchers (Kahn, Kosko, Hegarty, Hainge, Schwartz, along with Frances Dyson, Benjamin Halligan, Salomé Voegelin, Joanna Demers, Brandon LaBelle, Jacques Attali, and others), I sought, in applying indeterminate and cut-up methods, to establish a novel line of noise research to see what might possibly be learned from a noisy noise project, from a textual experiment that went beyond my individual control or intention and thus beyond what I could potentially conceive about noise without the assistance of the methods.

To further develop the methodology, I brought together examples and forerunners in alternative and avant-garde knowledge production. The indeterminacy and openness to noise of John Cage set the specific program—though I used an online random number generator rather than dice or *I-Ching* tables to generate my indeterminacy. I applied to my thinking the collage practices of Dada, the merz art of Kurt Schwitters, and the multimedia cut-ups of William Burroughs tolerances/affordances that humans seem to have for noise in various forms. The audio is accessible here: https://deltabrainwavesociety.bandcamp.com/album/bruit-jouissance, and video is accessible here: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLS6PKCS99i-8ByNYcu7gqnCSVwb65X-4Lj.
for their juxtaposition of unrelated fragments into expertly crafted works of multimedia art that brought out of the text voices and thoughts that were not manifest in their original contexts. The automatic writing and the games of the Surrealists and the détournement practices of the Situationists further offered models of getting at ideas of noise that were below the surface level of my conscious academic thinking. The research methods and practices of 'pataphysics suggested a means of looking into the particular rather than the general—an arena where everything is marked as distinct and incommensurable by its noise—and the heterology of Georges Bataille was a theoretical precedent for connecting the analysis of heresy, waste, excess, and the excremental—topics that are examples of noise or maintain relations of noise. The ecological thought of Timothy Morton connected both the content of noise to the normative positions on addressing coexistence and being-as-noise, as well as provided a theoretical support for the foreground/background division inherent in noise research. The schizoanalysis developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari and the disruptive politics and manifesto writing of groups such as Tiq Quinn and the Invisible Committee were theoretical models for thinking and exegizing the noise of the collected fragments. For presentation styles, I followed the examples of the quotation methods of Walter Benjamin, especially with *The Arcades Project*, the methods of Roland Barthes’ *Roland Barthes*, the methods of Jacques Derrida’s *Glas*, the art from cracked media by artists like Christian Marclay and Yasunao Tone, the diverse noise practices of musicians like Throbbing Gristle and Merzbow. And finally, as a means of providing the final warrants for my experimental practices, I adopted and adapted the theory-based textual sampling and remixing of Mark Amerika and the heuretics of Gregory Ulmer. It was not a comprehensive list—practices of alternate forms of research and expression have a long history within the avant-garde movements of multiple art forms—but it was a means of recognizing common elements to the practices. Underlying each of these practices, to greater and lesser degrees, I found
lurking the concept of noise. Whether it is the disruptive sonic noise of the music of Merzbow and Throbbing Gristle or the juxtapositional noise of collage, cut-up, and remix, or the noise of the heterogeneous in Bataille, the Surrealists, the Situationists—there is noise underlying the elements that define these movements as progressive, transformative, and avant-garde. These reinforced my desire to move forward with the experimental project.

The combination of the theories and practices of John Cage, Mark Amerika, and Gregory Ulmer provide the clearest justification for the experiment and formed the basis of both my desire to undertake the project and the final form that the project took on. John Cage set the example for textual production based on determinate indeterminacy—that is to say, with regard to this project, a textual production that drew from a specific number of fragments from a specific list of fragments but did so by random and indeterminate means (an online random number generator). The most direct antecedents are the textual components of “Mureau”\(^{41}\) and “Muoyce”\(^{42}\) projects, where John Cage collected every reference to music and sound in the writings of Henry David Thoreau and James Joyce, respectively, subjected the order of those fragments to chance, and presented them accordingly. The value for Cage was in the experiment itself and the results were secondary.

Mark Amerika set the model for the next phase of the project. The raw experimental data is interesting and suggestive, but it does not develop arguments or present coherent theses. While I could have justified the experiment as nothing more than an effort to see what might happen \(à la\) Cage, the text was reworked into a theory remix to develop clear and supported arguments. The textual fragments were not reor-

---

dered or recut, but instead there were significant cuts of the data and additions to the text that used it as the source for a textual remix. This drew heavily from the model that Mark Amerika presented in *remixthebook*, his own textual theory remix project focusing on the value of performing textual theory remix projects.43

Gregory Ulmer’s theories and methods provide further theoretical support to the warrant of this textual experiment, specifically in the normative positions it claims can result from a reframing of noise. Both Ulmer’s associative and conductive heuretics methods and his explanation of what he terms the “CATTt.”44 the underlying structure of manifestos, were applied. This text is a manifesto for a certain understanding and practice of noise and, following the CATTt, it is in contrast to other forms of noise research, setting itself up as analogous to both the composition practices of noise music and art and a positively envisioned practice of contextomy.45 It samples, it cuts, it modulates, and it post-processes. The text enacts Michel Serres’s theory of the parasite in its reliance on and adaptation, interruption, and disruption of academic noise discourse. It specifically targets politics not in the vein of noise abatement policies but as a method for changing the political status quo, especially with regard to coexistence. The tale is the result of the experiment itself, presented below.

As mentioned above, the tale of this manifesto is self-contradictory. As a manifesto, it declaims with certainty. As a text developed as and then from a Ph.D. dissertation, it


44 “C = Contrast (opposition, inversion, differentiation); A = Analogy (figuration, displacement); T = Theory (repetition, literalization); T = Target (application, purpose); t = Tale (secondary elaboration, representability)” (Ulmer, *Heuretics*, 8).

45 Contextomy, or quote mining, is a method of quoting out of context that is generally disparaged and considered a logical fallacy. However, for this work contextomy was implemented as a research method for its generative potential, as an enacting of noise.
declaims with the authority of research. And yet, as noise, the work is defined by its uncertainty and indeterminacy. It casts doubt on the very idea of authority, research on the topic of noise, and even the ability to know what noise is in any specific sense. While this contradiction is generally the type that academic work seeks to avoid (when possible), it also forms an essential aspect of our understanding of the relational nature of noise-as-such (so far as we can come to know or articulate the concept of noise-as-such).

In order to generate the text to function as the tale, I developed the methodology of the experiment to combine elements of many of the above methods of alternate grammar and discourse. I sought to remove (with indeterminacy, cut-ups, collage, and merz) the limitations that a more straightforward, academic approach might place upon the textual fragments in an effort to allow for the randomized juxtapositions to provide unexpected insights and understanding. I followed the example of Walter Benjamin in presenting the quotes without quotations or direct attribution in order to remove the impediments to reading that were caused by the constant opening and closing of quotations marks, the excess of ellipses, and the opening and closing of square brackets that marked editorial insertions and changes, as well as to allow my thoughts and the thoughts contextomically mined and repurposed from others to blend and mix in a manner that sought to fully exploit the textual noise. All the texts that I quoted are listed in the List of References section at the close of the text, but not all of the quotations that went into the raw text remain (whether in whole or in part) in the final text. To edit the project, I asserted a level of authorial control, rather than following a programmatic editing process or simply letting the text stand, as John Cage did with “Mureau” and “Muoyce.” I read through the text multiple times, highlighting particularly resonant pas-

sages and juxtapositions and followed up on and expanded those passages. Then I cut out passages that contradicted or overly distracted from those points. I took the example of the merz project of Kurt Schwitters (and the Merzbow project of Masami Akita—the name is a direct homage) as the justification of my attempts to assemble an incomplete and noisy work of art/theory from decontextualized and often unrelated fragments. Their methods provided guidance in crafting a form of coherence, that is to say, a measure of theoretical consistence and clarity of discourse such that this text is readable as an academic argument and not just a randomized assemblage of quotations. The editing did change the text from being one where meaning could only be extracted in small parts and by chance (again I point to “Mureau” and “Muoyce”) to one that has a distinct (if nonstandard) philosophy. But had it remained a project that contained no message save nonmessage, no sense save the articulation of nonsense, no signal save the acknowledgment of its absence, it would likely not have qualified as a dissertation or the present monograph and, as the goal is to further my arguments for noise as a generative method, the work is better served (as will become obvious through reading) by the acknowledgment of the failure of the noise of the text to ever fully be noise-as-such. The Afterword offers further reflection on those choices and a consideration of their efficacy.

Towards Other Worlds Than These

The question that drives this text, that necessitates this textual experiment, is not the (incomplete/unanswerable) “what is noise?” but rather the (normative) “what can noise do? what can we do with our noise?” Specifically, I have directed this project at the political questions of coexistence (with the human and the nonhuman alike) and ecology (primarily drawn from the theories of Timothy Morton and Michel Serres), as these are topics of immediate global importance. The epistemic/ontological question of noise is one that has been pursued by other authors and thinkers (Hainge, Hegarty, Kahn, Voegelin, Dyson, Attali, Serres, Schafer, and others) within noise studies. Their work is what this one is
literally built from. But, in building on their epistemic and ontological studies, this work is designed to address the noise of everyday life by interrogating the practical realities of noise politics through noise rather than the impossible project of defining noise without defining it as a noise-for.

It must be stated here that, following any conventional understanding of the concept, this text does not necessarily “make sense.” This is a work that was composed through chance methods and interruptive insertions. As such, it challenges sense. This is not to undercut the text but rather to frame it. Sense, in works claiming a singular authorial message, is already a fraught concept that is based on consensus guarantees and paradoxes, the interrelation between language, intent, and context (cf. Nietzsche and Deleuze). Sense is riddled through with nonsense. This text does not deny that it contains its own critique, that it (cf. Derrida), too, will self-deconstruct. Rather, this text sought the contrary to sense. It sought the sense within nonsense, to carve out a signal from the noise. Indeed, given the pattern-making propensity of humans, sense will be made of this text by those who read it. Though the juxtaposition of fragments was random, the connotations and denotations that resulted from those chance encounters—examples of the generative capacity of noise—formed the basis of the text’s cyclical arguments. Because of the nature of its construction, this text is set apart by the unexpected and potentially useful insights—notably the rethinking of human ontology within a lens of being-as-noise as a means of reframing the debates around anthropogenic climate change and political equality—that are allowed by the methodology. The author function of this text is undoubtedly schizophrenic, in that it is the product of multiple authors arguing divergent points simultaneously, and the sense drawn from the work is a chimera of the assemblage and the echoes of the primary sources the fragments were carved from. But that does not prevent the text from articulating a distinct and singular position. It acknowledges the fragmentary nature of its (de)construction and the death of its author (function), staging its deconstruc-
tion in reverse. While reading habits may lead us to treat the core text as if it had a single author expressing a univocal intention, keeping an eye out for the sutures and seams of the text and allowing certain sections to read as poetry, as existing for the sound and evocative potential of the language, are strategies that I would recommend to supplement traditional academic approaches to the text. These strategies allow for the text to function as the poetic noise experiment that it strives to be, but still offer the potential for deepening one’s understanding of noise and its potential uses.

Any errors that remain are mine, whether present in the original samples or in my remixed additions.

Here begins the quoted text.