Noise Thinks the Anthropocene: An Experiment in Noise Poetics

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TOWARDS A POSSIBLE NOISE POLITICS

Noise is, in many cases, best regarded as a subjective matter of perception. What is heard as chance, as randomness, as noise, is either part of a larger pattern unrecognized (perhaps even beyond the machine-aided abilities of human comprehension) or complicit within that system (the ground from which a figure might be distinguished). Noise, ontologically, is not just what any one might call noise nor, necessarily, what is legally termed noise. Not that such an argument would hold up in court. Legally, noise, like obscenity, is determined based on the speculation of the potential impact on an idealized “average, reasonable person.” To allow noise to be defined solely through its applications in ordinary language, to allow it to be articulated only by force of law, is to reduce noise to merely the articulation of power and domination. The definition of noise would become only what those who could enforce (with violence\footnote{Violence here should be understood as a broad concept. It certainly includes physical violence or the threat of physical violence but it should also be read as including repressive and ideological apparatuses that the State and the empowered use to control and/or disempower (portions of) the populace. Noise (as sound) is certainly capable of causing physical harm but a broader understanding of noise (as misinformation, disinformation,}}) had determined. To avoid that, we must allow
noise to remain, at least in part, indistinct and ill-defined, open and complex, and inassimilable to univocal knowledge claims. With this caveat in mind, proceed, but be wary of even provisional noise definitions like the ones below.

When we ask what noise is, we would do well to remember that no single definition can function timelessly—this is the case with many terms (writing, thought, heresy)—but one of the arguments of this essay is that noise is that which always fails to come into definition. The question of noise, and who has the right to define it, is found at the center of the power struggle between succeeding generations, between hegemony and innovation. Noise is found both in the clamor of the unwashed masses and in the relentless din of “progress” and construction of the new. Noise is found in diversity and confrontation with the unknown, the other, and the strange. Noise is in structures of control and domination as well as in the failure of these systems and their inability to be holistic or totalizing.

Despite these forms of noise, noise is not a consonance of opposites, but rather a troubled unity, a unity that does not synthesize without remainder. A unity that is not without its own noise. This is tied not just to the inability to articulate a timeless definition but also in the limitation on noise being anything, being whatever might be termed noise. The ontology of noise is noisy: fragmented, partial, indeterminate. It is the contention of this text that noise does not have a convenient or consistent place in knowledge-as-such because to articulate noise as a traditional form of knowledge would mean that it was not meaningless or nonsense and thus disqualify it from being noise. Noise is the barrier and boundary, the receding frontier of knowledge as well as the nonknowledge that continually reacts against the codification and stagnation of thought.

critique (confusion, etc.) leads to a broader understanding of the violence that a noise politics can be used for or used to resist.
The effort to understand noise, to create or analyze that troubled unity, is marked by apophenia—the human tendency to see patterns in random or meaningless data. Humans are pattern-making animals. We demand a certain fixed idea or standard of coherence and consistency in the world in which we live and, failing to find it, we create it for ourselves and wrap it into our narratives. Apophenia is one expression of that pattern making impulse as it is articulated in the face of the meaningless. This text stages itself as an example of the indecision of apophenia—was this signal always there or was it created from a misrecognition of noise? Noise is both the material from which information is constructed as well as the matter which information resists—a further example of the troubling unity of noise. Noise is both background and parasite, both ground and disruption, and undecidable in the difference.

This text is explicitly the work of a noisy crowd, a parasitical work, symbiotically growing from and with the texts it cannibalizes for its own purposes. It highlights because it literally writes with the past, with the already written—the collaborative nature of writing: writing as writing-with. The act of telling is not neutral. What we tell and how we tell it are

Apophenia is a recurring motif throughout this text. It may not appear often by name, but the seeking and occasional finding of signals (or what are perceived as signals) in noise is a continual focus of this text and the text itself can be considered a work of apophenia as methodology. Another point that must be stated is that what we do with those patterns that we find is routinely more important than whether or not they are truly “there.”

Meaning and meaninglessness should be clarified here—to claim that the universe is meaningless is to adhere to a form of nihilism. It does not declare that the living do not recognize or create meaning for themselves but that that meaning is limited and conditional and the universe as such is indifferent. Naturally, this is a difficult position to articulate in language (a patterned and organized system of human meaning) as it often anthropomorphizes the universe or nature, etc. Indifference is a human trait that the universe remains indifferent to. A further point might be made about who is in a position to decide what is meaningful and what is meaningless. Who decides that an act of pattern finding is one of apophenia? Who retains the authority to determine that something is noise?
political choices. Form is content. In writing of noise, I made a choice. In writing of noise as an explicitly noisy writing-with, I made a further choice. This text exists to articulate its noise, to persuade its readers that noise is not merely nuisance or annoyance but that it retains the potential to be articulated as a political strategy to reimagine our being-in-the-world and an increasingly necessary (in the face of ecological crisis) coexistence with human and nonhuman others. The degree to which it is successful remains indeterminate as to be fully successful the program would need to be taken from theory into practice. We remain at the stage of uncertain hypotheses: 1. Noise is the inescapable nature of human being-in-the-world. 2. If our noise is inescapable and a defining characteristic of our humanity, then we must use our noise constructively, creatively. 3. This text represents an attempt to use noise constructively and creatively, to use noise as interruption and interference against noise as power and domination. Noise does not, cannot repose on identity; it rides difference, surfs disjunction. It does not respect the artificial division between the three domains of representation: subject, concept, and being. Its nature, rather than being fixable within a specific epistemological framework, gives itself over to conductivity that knows no bounds. Noise is not simply anything that one decides it is, but the conductivity of the idea of noise can be used for anything. This indeterminate position (this nonplace, this atopos) is the power and possibility of noise but it is also the danger. Noise does not have a progressive agenda. The arc of noise does not bend toward justice or freedom or equality. Noise, like the universe, is indifferent. Further, noisemakers are not a homogeneous group. This work does not champion noise-as-such (and not merely because of the difficulty/impossibility of defining such a thing). Rather, it champions noise within an ethics of responsibility, tolerance, coexistence, and a process of attunement to life, of improvisational virtuosity, of a liberating intimacy with all things. Noise, due to its indeterminate and undecidable nature, its openness and its oppositional character, forms a necessary, but not suf-
icient, condition for understanding and coexisting with the other, the unfamiliar, the unknown.

As much of this work articulates normative political positions, I now briefly note how noise exists within governance. Noise is legislated, primarily, along lines of power and influence, with an emphasis on convenience on the one hand and health on the other. The multitude of abatement laws that have gone into effect in the past centuries have in some ways mirrored many other social developments—arguments for the safety of workers and limitations on their exploitation going hand in hand with the increasing separation of the wealthy and powerful from the rest of society, physically and sonically. The study of noise legislation is interesting, not only because of the successful accomplishments of it (e.g., OSHA regulations, car mufflers, quiet hours, etc.), but additionally because it provides us with a concrete register of enforceable acoustic phobias and nuisances, as well as who has the power to enforce them.

In contrast to the noise abatement, one might ask: What is the political efficacy of noise as strategy? When we introduce noise into situations, we don’t know what results it will produce. This uncertainty is good because it’s creative, but when we talk about the variety of real struggles in the world,

This (extra)text is one such example of introducing noise as a creative strategy. The randomization that began the structuring of this text created juxtapositions and patterns of thought that were exceedingly unlikely if not impossible to occur on their own.

Vague notions of “noise,” “creativity,” or “uncertainty” will do little to nothing to solve entrenched problems. These can be either broad concept problems such as equality and universal suffrage or narrowband issues with wide-ranging complications like the current civil war in Syria and its attendant refugee crisis. Perhaps in this, though, it is akin to similar tossed-off notions of networks and social media revolutions. Noise and uncertainty are political tactics; they are not inherently emancipatory or oppressive but can be used effectively in both directions as well as others. Noise and uncertainty are also not end points or goals. Anarchism as a political philosophy and governance policy is not about instability but rather cooperation and mutual aid. However, instability can make for a powerful revolutionary strategy to bring about crises that may lead to emancipa-
what we want is action directed toward a specific aim. In its most convincing formulations, the negativity of the politics of noise is twisted into an engine of construction, and noise becomes a reservoir of rhythmic potential, a parasitic probe beckoning the future.

However, just as with any emancipatory potential, we should not get ahead of ourselves. As stated above, noise is neutral and indifferent. It is a tool. Most often, though, noise legislation and noise abatement campaigns are examples of Not In My Back Yard (NIMBY) ordinances that disproportionately affect the disenfranchised, the poor, and minorities by designating where noise (generally measured in decibels) can and cannot happen without addressing root causes of inequality or interrogating the need for loud sounds. Noise as politics, conversely, often ignores the realities of inequality in abatement campaigns and instead focuses on the possibilities of disruption. However, disruption for disruption’s sake is not a meaningful or effective strategy. Nor are these policies of disruption the exclusive domain of the progressive. One only has to consider that the term disrupt is used far more often in Silicon Valley to describe new forms of capitalist exploitation than in articulation of anti-capitalism and that gleeful disruption (for the lulz) is the purview of amoral Internet trolls.

Reality is holistic—we cannot take a part out and expect things to remain the same. But we cannot expect things to change for the better when only attacked with randomness. Perhaps, instead, noise politics might seek an endless end, a

6 Just as one cannot define noise with certainty, noise politics remains forever balanced in a state of undecidability. One must first note that noise is an exercise of power and thus is most often used politically by the empowered—one would cite here the use of noise (as volume or sensory depriva-
lasting apocalypse, an indefinite suspension, an effective postponement of the actual collapse, the definitive rupture. Noise is not teleological, there is no noise so noisy as to end all noise, there is no end to noise at all, nor any beginning to noise, or a primary or arche-noise. Thus there cannot be a specific end or consequentialist view applied to noise politics. While this is an obvious limitation, the tactic of noise politics remains a useful tool in a political arsenal.

Difficulties are not, however, mastered by keeping silent about them. They are intrinsic to the enterprise of noise, of thorybology, and of noise politics. Without the questions that I was asked, without the difficulties that arose, without the objections that were made, I may never have gained so clear a view of this enterprise to which I am now inextricably linked. Writing-with noise seemed a simple prospect: perhaps even too simple. Yet the difficulty in creating a text by writing-with noise that establishes and articulates an authoritative position on noise while still refusing to collapse the noisy fragments it is built from into a neat and orderly essay, is not to be dismissed. While it is risky, we shall advance the above hypotheses even if, for the moment, they must necessarily remain abstract. In writing-with noise, it is what you select, how you transcribe it, express it, present it, and appropriate it that

tion) in torture, the LRAD and the use of noise in crowd/protest control, and the in the simple ability of the powerful to make noise without censure and to retreat to the quiet abodes whenever they desire. However, a noise politics can also be described as a politics of disruption—this is not meant to imply disruption in the colloquial sense that it has been given by Silicon Valley and the entrepreneurs that are “disrupting” capitalism with more capitalism—but, as will be indicated elsewhere, a politics of undecidability, power arrayed against the entrenchment of power (the Occupy movement and Anonymous come to mind here). The unfortunate nature of a noise politics is that, given our results-oriented utilitarian political mindset, it is difficult to place a recognizable value on noise politics. If the results cannot be determined in advance (seen as a feature, not a bug), there is no means of offering a clear valuation based on extant frameworks. Clearly this implies the need for supplementary frameworks. This text offers itself as one such, obviously incomplete, framework.
marks a successful experiment. One could object that all of this means nothing, but the hope is that a signal is found (or created) nonetheless. The text does not evolve in a linear fashion, but is caught up in the complexity and circularity of the movements of its fragments. This text does not deny nor occlude that we live in confusion, violence, and injustice. We cannot ignore those unfortunate facts about human society nor reduce them to silence. As the text elaborates below, existence is coexistence, coexistence with the human and nonhuman, the organic and the inorganic, the self and the other alike.

There is much more to this noise analysis than a mere shifting of terms, a substitution of noise in the place of established revolutionary politics. Change is nonsense, is noise, is a rupture with and within an existing program or paradigm. In this, change is a deconstruction of a paradigm, an exploitation of its supplements, ruptures, and remainders. But precisely for this reason, noise is the reality of thought itself and the unconscious of pure thought. But that’s not the real question. Rather: How do we interpret something we cannot possibly understand? How can we begin to interpret that which we define as meaningless except haltingly, experimentally, apophatically, and apophenically? How can we follow a line of thought that is organized by its ruptures and limits and not continuity?

Distortion in communication is systemic, but it is not merely a matter of chance or accident whether there is noise, nor is it simply a matter of fate whether one is understood or intercepted. Noise is an intervention at the level of meaning, one that challenges existing meanings and patterns, leading to questioning (and therefore highlighting the attribution of

Noise precludes purity. All is stained, tainted, corrupted. Every argument contains its contrary, its critique, its pharmakon. Ironically, the term “pure” and the concept of purity infect much of the following text despite its position contrary to that of noise. Noise, however, does not exclude its opposites or need to in order to be itself. While the term “pure” (and concept of purity) will resurface in the text, it should always be viewed with suspicion.
meaning) and, eventually, if not always, in the recuperation of noise as new system. Noise questions assumed meanings, assumed structures, normative values and methodologies. This text uses noise to analyze noise, critique noise, and understand noise, knowing full well that such a project is destined for failure (if failure is defined by incompleteness). However, the incomplete nature and failure of this project will ideally recuperate as a separate noise system (to then be analyzed and critiqued in turn). We begin with words, phrases and propositions, but we organize them into a limited corpus that varies depending on the problem raised. Here the questions entail: Which sounds do we want to preserve, encourage, multiply? Which noises are expressions of life and which are articulation of domination and exploitation? What is the nature of our being-as-noise and is it possible to articulate a human expression of noise that is creative, interruptive, and emancipatory without being exploitive, disruptive, and dominating? When we know this, ideally, the destructive sounds of power will be conspicuous enough and we will know why we must eliminate them.

We write only at the frontiers of our knowledge, at the border that separates our knowledge from our ignorance and transforms the one into the other. Technology extends poetics. Do I contradict myself? Noise is contradictory, even self-contradictory. Contradiction is inevitable in any discourse on noise. These assembled fragments carry traces of their former emplacement, which give them a spin defining the arc of their vector. But noise also contains a difficulty in principle that we must reiterate in order to clarify our own perspective: Noise is neutral. Noise cannot be guaranteed. Noise, as a political strategy, is always precarious. What is therefore necessary is a commentary on noise, an exegesis of noise towards revolutionary goals, according to an ethics based on coexistence and responsibilities over one based on independence and rights. We cannot distinguish if noise politics is strategically paradoxical (purposefully made to appear puzzling, subversive) or merely self-contradictory (a mishap without purpose, an accident). But we need not force the distinction to settle. It is this disequi-
librium that makes revolutions possible even as it makes them fragile and difficult to achieve.

Noise cannot be accommodated in any existing category: therefore we must invent and characterize a species for it. We classify information to discover similarities, contrasts, and patterns. Like all techniques of analysis, this can only be justified if it leads to the improvement of perception, judgment, and invention. In short, the sound and the fury never signify nothing or, rather, just nothing. But what the techniques signify and how noise is enacted are indeterminate, the product of particular sites and circumstances, which are difficult to generalize or extend.