Noise Thinks the Anthropocene: An Experiment in Noise Poetics

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The most powerful forces in nature are loud. At least what we perceive as the most powerful forces in nature are loud. In contrast, life forms exist precisely to the extent that they are fragile. Life is marked by its limitations, its weaknesses, its capacity for failure and breakdown. This is seen in questions of disease, mortality, and extinction, in population dynamics and predator/prey relationships, on to evolution itself and the series of accidents and chance occurrences that led to the possibility of composing the dissertation that this work developed from. While on the one hand we as humans, as prominent noise makers, must make do with this fragility and this contrast, on the other we must acknowledge that the glaring disparity between the human and nonhuman impact on the planet (through noise, waste, excess, pollution, disruption, etc.) requires a reconstruction of the objectives and the methods by which we understand and enact coexistence under the conditions of the Anthropocene. We cannot, in good faith, deny that our being is, especially in relation to nonhuman life, loud and disruptive. There are degrees to which this can be adjusted, but it is not possible for over seven billion humans to
be silent. Even quiet and seemingly unobtrusive acts produce, at that scale, a significant impact.

Everything is nature,

including the deviations and differences. My aim is not to contest this point; rather, it is to underscore a conceptual distinction and to show its philosophical import. In making the conventional distinctions between nature and culture, between artificial and natural, we set the human as outside of nature or above nature, often in a position of domination towards nature. In breaking down this distinction, in focusing on the noise within the distinction, we can revise our problematic position of domination, as observer of rather than participant in nature. Following this, thought must play a catastrophic role, must be itself an element of catastrophe, of provocation. Thought, especially within thorybology, must force the breakdown of these barriers to action, these preconceived divisions between the human and the other that prevent us from interacting, accepting and offering hospitality,

While this work will obviously not settle the long-standing debates about nature, culture, humanity, and the environment, it might be valuable here to articulate the position that undergirds the following arguments. Following, among others, Timothy Morton and Bruno Latour, this work uses the argument that there is no nature or environment-as-such. This is not to say that nonhuman entities do not exist or even that there is no way of discerning an external reality beyond sensory perception. Rather, it is an argument that says that there is no passive and stable background that can be called an environment or nature. What is nature? Is it nonhuman life? Which forms? As one gets into specifics, one finds that the environment recedes as the specifics come into focus. As there is no passive background upon which life (especially the often prioritized human life) plays out, there is no nature off in some inarticulable beyond that we can define ourselves over and against. These objects and life forms exist and interact with each other and us but they are not passive and cannot be uniformly rendered as static background scenery. This is the same foreground/background argument that arose earlier in the text. While environments exist at certain scales from certain perspectives, at other scales/perspectives they come into the foreground. The distinction is noisy and in constant flux. An unwillingness to recognize the flux or admit to any perspective/scale other than the human is at the root of many current and historical ecological crises (e.g., climate change, ocean acidification, megafauna extinction, etc.).
and coexisting. The concept of noise that is developed through this work and formulated in throrybology is traced through relation, passage, variation, and invention. Noise is found in the spaces between fixed points and positions, in excess, chaos, possibility, and indifference. It is both inside and outside, flux and play, and the risk of internal catastrophe is constantly present. There is nothing unnatural about this noise (this noise), this uncertainty, the lack of control implied by its catastrophe. Let us not, however, lose sight of the literal catastrophe even as we come to understand noise as a metaphorical catastrophe. To conquer nature is not to change its structure, but its climate. Insofar as climate change threatens us with a danger unprecedented in human history, we need to overcome the catastrophic bias of human exceptionalism that we find in our social and political thought, so as to take into account the manner in which human social assemblages are embedded in a broader ecology. Thus, the point argued here is designed to go against the grain of dominant, normative ideas about nature, but to do so in the name of sentient beings suffering under catastrophic environmental conditions. Consequently, I would like to stay for as long as possible in an open, questioning mode as the compulsion to reduce inconsistency results in yet more inconsistencies.

Thinking (with) noise is not a question of erasing the contours of thought or reality but of folding and thickening them, diffracting and rendering them iridescent. Ecological awareness forces us to think and feel at multiple scales, scales that disorient normative concepts. Throrybology provides a possible framework for understanding and working with that disorientation. Ecological politics is bound up with what to do with pollution, miasma, slime, things that glisten, schlup, and decay. Thus ecological politics is a question of noise (waste, excess, pollution, the unwanted) and noise politics, as argued for here, could be grouped with ecological politics as sharing both content and goals.

The Anthropocene is not characterized by necessity, eternity, and inevitability, but rather by contingency and
history. Thus, if we could just get the aesthetic form endemic to the Anthropocene right, we could crack reality, open it up, and change it. It is the contention of this text that noise is the aesthetic form that we must get right in order to crack up and change the contingent and historical realities that have justified the designation of the current epoch as the Anthropocene. Noise is the form of being-in-the-world that most accurately describes the human (in the Anthropocene as well as potentially to our earliest act as a distinct species) and thus the form that must be properly understood and accepted (perhaps even embraced) if we are to escape from the climatic death spiral we have put ourselves on. Since the world is evolving towards a frenzied state of affairs, we have to take a frenzied view of it.

We are surrounded by noise and this noise is (at present, seemingly) inextinguishable. 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. That revaluation should focus on a reassessment of the value and efficacy of noise as a creative/interruptive process. Thinking interdependence and coexistence involves thinking difference, thinking noise. This means confronting the fact that all beings are related to each other negatively and differentially, in an open system without center or edge. To compose (write, paint, envision, act) ecologically is to build in openness, and therefore vulnerability, to accept interruptions, ruptures, refractions, fragmentations. Nothing is riskier than living in this gap. Thorybology is based on a choice: a choice to distort, to dwell within these gaps, ruptures, and fragmentations. Thus thorybology is taking us into a world steeped in definitive uncertainty.