Noise Thinks the Anthropocene: An Experiment in Noise Poetics

Aaron Zwintscher

Zwintscher, Aaron.
Noise Thinks the Anthropocene: An Experiment in Noise Poetics.

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=2651387
CONCERNING SILENCE

It is necessary, at this point, to consider silence in greater depth. Silence, as indicated above, is a concept inextricably linked with noise. Rather than opposites or contraries, they are as two sides of a coin. To wit, this text, in calling for a noise politics, is advocating a politics that will, ideally, enable the silence that might allow us to finally hear the cacophony of voices that have been excluded for so long. Just as with noise, silence, as theorized within this text, is better clarified if also put under erasure, rendered as silence, to indicate true silence is impossible (at least within the human perceptual realm). Thus, silence should be considered relative and relational within this text, especially as it takes on normative positions. This is a point of contention this text has with noise abatement campaigners, who often advocate for silence when they, in fact, merely desire their particular versions of quiet. Without a focus on the concepts themselves, undecidable and contradictory as they are, a sustainable and equitable noise/silence politics cannot be developed. Indeed, it is this age-old attempt to flee a noise rather than tackle it at its source which keeps coming back to haunt us in this history of sound and that thorybology is being developed to address.

Just as one cannot successfully flee noise, one cannot fully pass over in silence. Passing over in silence would suggest
that you knew the shape and boundaries of that which you could not speak, an origin and *telos* to silence. In fact, those who cannot speak cannot pass over in silence, for the poor are poor in silence. Passing over in silence is still addressing an issue, still adopting a position, still demarcating what can be addressed and what cannot. And every demarcation creates its own noise. Noise, when confronted and carefully considered, forces us to ask knotty questions about what we want, what we don't want, and how we negotiate between the two. Noise is the fine print in our contract with the world. It cannot be escaped, eliminated, or silenced. Silence is impossible, no doubt in the same way that the experience of death is impossible (since death takes away the consciousness necessary to experience). By extension, to be silenced is tantamount to losing one's self.

Silencing is rightly defined as a quintessentially anti-democratic process. Who has been silenced? It might be more effective to answer instead, who has not? Silencing, both as a literal process of sonic restriction as well as disenfranchisement, have, to widely varying degrees, affected all but the most privileged populations. But just as this text argues for noise as interruption against noise as corruption and for noise as possibility, randomness, and chance opposed to noise as power, domination, and control, this text also argues for silence as contemplation, meditation, and listening against silence as silencing. We need this contemplative silence, because without it we cannot hear the voices of others who had been drowned out by our certainty. We must combat the desire to turn our backs on noise, on our fellow human beings, in pursuit of some rare and elusive notion of silence as purity, harmony, or exception.

More and more, it is coming to seem that a life of noise is our destiny, our inevitable, and perhaps necessary, being-in-the-world. We must, however, work to ensure that the expression of noise that expresses this destiny is the cacophony of the now audible voices of the previously excluded and exploited rather than a continuation of noise as power and domination. There is a spectrum running from silence to silencing that has to be kept under constant review. The politics
of silence and the politics of silencing are not always the same
and the latter does not deserve support. Extreme noise making
and extreme noise abatement point to the same extreme posi-
tion: the republic of one. To ethically advocate noise is to con-
tinue to ask: Is this noise the rasp of democratic discourse or a
repudiation of the discourse itself? and to adjust the discourse
and research accordingly. Properly handled, silence has the
ability to create disruption and radically alter our conception of
the world around us. From this perspective, silence is a refusal
to do what is expected, to destabilize established political order.
In this, silence functions much like noise, as a complimentary
tactic to noise politics. Noise is the sound of revolt, the refusal
to be ignored or silenced. It is possible to silence the oppressed
but not to oppress them silently. Subjugation must always
make a sound. Instead of being against noise and for silence
(or quiet), thorybology advocates searching out reasons for
noise as well as for silence. In the end, after all the physicists,
musicologists, and social theorists have had their say, there
are only two kinds of human noise in the world: the noise that
says, “The world is mine” and the noise that says, “It’s my world
too.” We need to quiet the first and make more of the second.
We need to hear the whole world inside the “too.”

Beyond that there is only silence…