



Geopolitics and the Anthropocene: Five Propositions for Sound

Anja Kanngieser

To cite this article: Anja Kanngieser (2015): Geopolitics and the Anthropocene: Five Propositions for Sound, GeoHumanities

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/2373566X.2015.1075360>



Published online: 11 Sep 2015.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Geopolitics and the Anthropocene: Five Propositions for Sound

Anja Kanngieser 

University of Wollongong

This appeal calls for sound to be considered as a geophilosophical provocation to, and a method for, political thought. It arises from experiments in ways of knowing and inhabiting the world, gesturing toward disciplines concerned with sound, the politics of language, and the physical and philosophical environment. Anchoring sound as an inherently political medium, it outlines five propositions on inequality, imperceptibility, translation, commons, and the future; it argues that these are critical arenas into which the particularities of sound afford inquiry. Developing this specific reading of sound positions the sonic as a means for opening spaces that challenge hegemonic and violent forms of subjectivation, which are productive of contemporary states of ecological and economic crisis.

Key Words: commons, geopolitics, inequality, sound, subjectivation.

In her keynote speech for the 2014 Anthropocene: Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet conference, science fiction author Ursula Le Guin asked:

May there not come even that bolder adventurer, the first geolinguist, who, ignoring the delicate trenchant lyrics of the lichen will read beneath it the still less communicative still more passive wholly atemporal cold volcanic poetry of the rocks, each one a word spoken how long ago by the earth itself in the immense solitude, the immenser community, of space.

Le Guin called for a geolinguistics that expands what is considered as language into matter, into the material; an expansion that can be undertaken specifically through the medium of sound. In this article, I take sound, only in part the utterance, as a geophilosophical provocation to, and a method for, political contestation. This project sits at the crossroads of different ways of knowing and being, gesturing toward disciplines concerned with sound (music, poetry), the politics of language (cultural, literary, and gender studies), and the physical and philosophical world (biology, philosophy, geography). Working together through five propositions on inequality, imperceptibility, translation, commons, and the future, I argue these are affordances of sound that can open space from which to challenge hegemonic and violent forms of subjectivation; forms that have produced this Anthropocene moment. This is the moment with which this appeal is concerned.

It is not accidental that Le Guin (2014) drew on sound, language, and voice: “the delicate trenchant lyrics of the lichen,” “the less communicative still more passive wholly atemporal cold volcanic poetry of the rocks.” For Le Guin, sound resonates on levels audible and inaudible, linking together matter and beings through time and space in unanticipated ways.

Sound is not just about hearing and responding, or communicating. It is about becoming aware of registers that are unfamiliar, inaccessible, and maybe even monstrous; registers that are wholly indifferent to the play of human drama. Sound is not only of the human, it undermines human exceptionalism; everything vibrates on some frequency and is touched by vibration, regardless of how imperceptible to human sensibility this might be (Gallagher, Kanngieser, and Prior [forthcoming](#)). Although this might come across as rather enigmatic, it has much political significance.

PROPOSITION 1: INEQUALITY

Sound comes from relations of things (LaBelle 2010). Sound does not exist in a vacuum. Following Guattari (1984), sound, as all transversal phenomena, is situated in an always-political dynamic. Transversality—a cutting across of all scales and levels, a way to “think the interactions between ecosystems, the mecosphere, and social and individual universes of reference” (Guattari 1989, 135)—affects that which it crosses. Sound does not just connect things; it changes them. It displaces bodies and matter—unequally and sometimes savagely, as in sonic warfare (Goodman 2009; Kanngieser [forthcoming](#)). Sound brings into the world novel relations, it shifts paradigms and builds new formations. Schafer (2004) argued that the “general acoustic environment of a society can be read as an indicator of the social conditions, which produce it” (4).

These conditions are not limited to a human politic. Indeed sound requires an expansion of ideas of subjectivation, moving toward a more plural approach. This has consequences for how one might consider sound as generating environments in which knowledge is produced, and as undergirding and forming the power structures it participates in.

Sound can help to differentiate the sweeping universality—and hence the seeming unchangeability—that the Anthropocene poses. In positing the effects of “humankind” on geophysical life, it is imperative not to gloss over the very asymmetrical possession of economic-technological means for resource extraction and accumulation. The Anthropocene is predicated on exploitation, colonialism, slavery, and genocide, and any claim to an equitably “responsible” humanity subjugates these structural brutalities. By listening to places and spaces, it is possible to discern uneven, often-obscured, and gradual processes, such as extinction and dispossession. This is something that bioacousticians advocate for with regard to biodiversity loss due to sustainable logging in which changing population densities can be heard but not seen (Krause 2012); it is apparent through the severe effects of infrasonic and ultrasonic devices used for offshore oil and gas exploration on marine life vocalization (Foley 2014).

By listening to environments one can also hear processes of neoliberal enclosures in urban, periurban, and rural spaces. The changing soundscapes of eviction and construction evidence changing distributions of power and governance, as seen with issues of noise pollution in India, for instance (Kanngieser [forthcoming](#)) and clashes between farming communities and airport developers in Japan (Carlyle and Cox 2012). Such complex, long-range durational and geographical shifts, which occur across species, ideological, infrastructural, and biotic ecosystems, might confound political contestation predicated on speed and spectacle.

PROPOSITION 2: IMPERCEPTIBILITY

Conventional notions of activism are, as Berardi (2011) suggested, almost blindly driven by mobilization and activity. There is a need for slower, more careful, reflective and different kinds of activism to deal with gradual and less visible processes. In recent conversation with Johnson, Neyrat commented that a different notion of passivity might be useful in this regard. He stated that “without passivity, without a ‘negative capability’ . . . there isn’t any creative imagination, this chaotic imagination that generates the promises of new worlds” (Johnson and Neyrat 2014). For Neyrat, a strategic deactivation enables the kind of separation that makes it possible to “really experience a relation.” In supporting moments of deactivation by inviting quietness, sound offers a way of building the different ecologies necessary for political attenuations to forms of life and matter, which are not of the human. It calls for a different realization of time, whether a deep time or atemporality, in which, as Le Guin (2014) put it, the “poetry of the rocks” resounds.

Opening up and listening very carefully to the imperceptible, to the prospect of things beyond human cognitive and sensorial reach, and accepting their value and validity, is to leap into the unknown—a difficult process. Yusoff (2013) asked, “What does it mean to allow oneself to inhabit that which is strange, nonintuitive, insensible—that which is remote from human comprehension or intelligibility?” (225). This pushing away from a sense of oneself is imperative. Anthropomorphisms are virtually impossible to escape, but it might be possible to become sensitive to that which humans have no claim to, or over, and to which humanity is of no concern. Such sensitivity can show what is at stake in making the imperceptible perceptible, or representable. What hierarchies are invoked when visibility is demanded in human terms (or what is denied when visibility antagonizes what is human)? What is arrested when matter and organisms are enfolded into capital relations and modes of production? What does it mean to be in solidarity with nonequivalence?

PROPOSITION 3: TRANSLATION

How sound is translated and interpreted, how it mediates, through oral, written, and other forms of language, is contested. This must always remain so. Such skepticism is necessary to suspending assertions about what knowledge is and how it should be produced. Solomon and Sakai (2007) wrote that translation is related to violence in two essential ways: the inability to convey the exact resonance of the articulation, and the replication of institutionalized hierarchies. The violence of translation, especially through its institutionalization, is precisely why skepticism must be embraced by any aspiration to make the Earth a provocation for thought. Rather than being divisive or dismissive, this skepticism is cognizant of the highly mediated foundations of translation itself.

Diverse inquiries into the Anthropocene that emphasize forms of knowledge largely marginalized in Anglospheric institutions can move toward addressing this violence.¹ This does not entail the homogenization and assimilation of manifold and singular indigenous, outlier and so-called minor expertise into white canons. Instead, such inquiries might attend to what Davis (2014) called an “intersectionality of struggles.” Recognition of the power endemic to knowledge production and its forms of legitimation, especially at this time of asymmetrical global ecological crisis, underscores this appeal. It is here that listening, actually and quite literally listening and hearing, become central practices.

Listening to other articulations can help draw out ways that various divided natural or social entities, materials, processes, and systems are constitutive of one another. Giving weight to the articulations of others, even when agonistic or irreconcilable, can contribute to intersections of struggle that do not demand equivalence or unity, and that remain reflexive to the violence and limitations at the heart of translation.

PROPOSITION 4: COMMONS

In cutting across matter and beings, sound renders apparent that the world is not *for* humans. The world is rather *with* humans—a relation that is not without antagonism. The creation of the commons requires responsiveness, a turning toward one another, at the same time leaving space for adversity and silence. The commons are social systems and relations, coming together and moving apart under various conditions. The commons are not just resources that should be free (air, water, land) and they are not only so-called natural resources—the state and the social resources of corporations are also commons, as are public amenities and workplaces (De Angelis 2010). Commons are resources that commoners govern together, the emphasis being on the social reproductions and relations in the acts of governing.

A key issue in thinking about the commons is how individual interests constellate into collective interests without demanding equivalence. After Guattari, to work toward a commons is to find points where desires conjugate, where relevance might be found in spite of radical differences or methods (Kanngieser 2013). This need neither be a fleeting moment of coming together nor full communism (indeed, many arguments persist around revolutionary strategies, particularly on questions of duration). But the logics of capital do not govern evenly—nonhuman labors, the work of women, colonized peoples, those characterized as marginal or disposable—are all forms of labor made free by capital. Strategies of refusal to this, which is what commons can articulate, need to admit to these asymmetrical structures of subjectivation and how they shape and are shaped through commoning practices.

A focus away from unification toward intersections of struggle helps to frame how commons might function. It is useful to think about this from the angle of affectivity and common stakes or desires. The affectivity of sound emerges out of and through exchange, linked to particular kinds of intensities (Gallagher, Kanngieser, and Prior [forthcoming](#)). Working within and through space and infrastructures, sound creates affective atmospheres through its vibrations, pitches, amplitudes, frequencies, harmonies, and disharmonies. Sound envelops affectively, thoroughly, but also singularly; sound has general affordances, but these are contingent and always nonidentical. This is how commons must be approached, with a keen sensitivity to polyphony. Thus an ethical comportment within the commons must leave space for nonaffirmation, for changing temporalities, for waxing and waning desires, and still find some means of finding collective stakes and being alongside one another.

PROPOSITION 5: FUTURES

Throughout this article I have spoken of differentiations, asymmetries, and translations. Sound creates a suspension of immediate understanding through its nonlinear durationality along with

its ambiguity (What am I hearing? Where is it coming from? What is making it? What does it mean?; Gallagher 2013). It can be both immediate and run on epic time scales—a characteristic that can reveal the unfoldings of slow violences. The hesitancy that sound creates underpins an epistemological perplexity and vulnerability, one not designed for generalization or finality, but with meaning primarily in concrete situations and practices (Stengers 2005).

Given the acceleration of global warming and the economic, social, and political conditions and issues feeding into and emergent from this acceleration, it is all too easy to fall into ideological didacticisms or universal claims. It is harder to remain transversal; to retain a mobility that accommodates multivalent bodies and situations, to organize across conditions and sites of struggle while remaining generous toward the difficulties encountered by radical incommensurability.

By using sound to explore political relations, matter might be brought into contact with ideology in ways that do not try to make them fit, or so that one might negate the other. Rather, it becomes possible to see how those political relations can help to build new and creative terrains for human and more-than-human negotiations. A geophilosophy is not a definitive, stable thing; it is not easy, it is a process of experimentation, it is fierce and invites contestation as much as collusion, pause as much as progress. This is a political position, a sounding position, a position of listening and hearing, a position perhaps as competent for approaching the lichen and the deep time poetry of the volcanic rocks as for unsettling the ongoing colonization and exploitation of resources and bodies by capital.

ORCID

Anja Kanngieser  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5522-4835>

NOTE

1. Scholars have been rightfully emphatic as to the importance of antiracist positions in decolonizing knowledge, institutions, and disciplines (Harney and Moten 2013; Luisetti, Pickles, and Kaiser 2015; Mbembe 2015), with critiques on the whiteness of academic theory and curricula (Pulido 2002; Andreotti et al. 2015). These have been forged on historical challenges to intellectual essentializations in academic scholarship (Spivak 1988; Mohanty 1988).

REFERENCES

- Andreotti, V. dO., S. Stein, C. Ahenakew, and D. Hunt. 2015. Mapping interpretations of decolonization in the context of higher education. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education and Society* 4 (1): 21–40.
- Berardi, B. 2011. *After the future*. Oakland, CA: AK Press.
- Carlyle, A., and R. Cox. 2012. *Air pressure*. Frankfurt, Germany: Gruenrekorder. http://www.gruenrekorder.de/?page_id=8437 and <https://vimeo.com/30538389> (last accessed 13 July 2015).
- Davis, A. 2014. Transnational solidarities: Resisting racism, genocide and settler colonialism. Hrant Dink Memorial Lecture, Bosphorous University, Istanbul, Turkey.
- De Angelis, M. 2010. On the commons: A public interview with Massimo De Angelis and Stavros Stavrides. *E Flux*. <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/on-the-commons-a-public-interview-with-massimo-de-angelis-and-stavros-stavrides/> (last accessed 1 June 2014).

- Foley, J. A. 2014. U.S. Navy sued for violating Marine Mammal Protection Act in connection with sonar training exercises *Nature*. <http://www.natureworldnews.com/articles/5803/20140128/navy-sued-violatingmarine-mammal-protection-act-connection-onar-training.htm> (last accessed 29 January 2014).
- Gallagher, M. 2013. Listening, meaning and power. In *On listening*, ed. A. Carlyle and C. Lane, 41–44. Axminster, UK: Uniformbooks.
- Gallagher, M., A. Kanngieser, and J. Prior. Forthcoming. Amplifying listening sensibilities in geography: Landscape, affect and geotechnological lifeworlds *Progress in Human Geography*.
- Goodman, S. 2009. *Sonic warfare: Sound, affect and the ecology of fear*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Guattari, F. 1984. *Molecular revolution: Psychiatry and politics*, trans. R. Sheed. New York: Penguin.
- . 1989. *The three ecologies*, trans. C. Turner. *New Formations* 8:131–47.
- Harney, S., and F. Moten. 2013. *The undercommons: Fugitive planning and black studies*. New York: Minor Compositions.
- Johnson, E., and F. Neyrat. 2014. The political unconscious of the Anthropocene. *Society and Space*. <http://societyand-space.com/2014/03/20/frederic-neyrat-the-politicalunconscious-of-the-anthropocene-interview-by-elizabeth-r-johnson/> (last accessed 1 June 2014).
- Kanngieser, A. 2013. *Experimental politics and the making of worlds*. London: Ashgate.
- . Forthcoming. Transversal geo-politics: The violence of sound. In *Transversal geographies*, ed. J. D. Dewsbury, T. Jellis, and J. Gerlach. London and New York: Routledge.
- Krause, B. 2012. The sound of a damaged habitat. *New York Times*. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/29/opinion/sunday/listen-to-the-soundscape.html> (last accessed 29 July 2012).
- LaBelle, B. 2010. *Acoustic territories: Sound culture and everyday life*. London: Continuum.
- Le Guin, U. 2014. Keynote address. Presented at the Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet Conference, Aarhus University, Denmark.
- Luisetti, F., J. Pickles, and W. Kaiser. 2015. *The anomie of the Earth: Philosophy, politics, and autonomy in Europe and the Americas*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Mbembe, A. 2015. Decolonizing knowledge and the question of the archive. Text from talks presented at Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research University of the Witwatersrand; Rhodes Must Fall Movement University of Cape Town; Indexing the Human Project, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, University of Stellenbosch. <http://wiser.wits.ac.za/system/files/Achille%20Mbembe%20-%20Decolonizing%20Knowledge%20and%20the%20Question%20of%20the%20Archive.pdf> (last accessed 28 June 2015).
- Mohanty, C. 1988. Under Western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses. *Feminist Review* 30:61–88.
- Pulido, L. 2002. Reflections on a white discipline *The Professional Geographer* 54 (1): 42–49.
- Schafer, R. M. 2004. Soundscapes and earwitnesses. In *Hearing history: A reader*, ed. M. E. Smith, 3–9. Athens: University of Georgia Press.
- Solomon, J., and N. Sakai. 2007. Translation, violence, and the heterolingual intimacy. *EIPCP*. <http://eipcp.net/transversal/1107/solomon/en> (last accessed 1 June 2014).
- Spivak, G. C. 1988. Can the subaltern speak? In *Marxism and the interpretation of culture*, ed. C. Nelson and L. Grossberg, 271–313. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Stengers, I. 2005. The cosmopolitical proposal. In *Making things public: Atmospheres of democracy*, ed. B. Latour and P. Weibel, 994–1003. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Yusoff, K. 2013. Insensible worlds: Postrelational ethics, indeterminacy and the (k)nots of relating. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 31 (2): 208–26.

ANJA KANNGIESER holds a Vice Chancellor's Fellowship with the Australian Centre for Cultural Environmental Research, University of Wollongong, Wollongong 2522, Australia. E-mail: anjak@uow.edu.au. Her research uses sound to explore geopolitical and ecological shifts, with a focus on (human and more-than-human) self-determination and self-organization.