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Sonic colonialities: Listening, dispossession, and the (re) making of Anglo-European nature

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Abstract

Creative and feminist geographers position listening as a way to build more responsive, ethical, and reciprocal relations to people and environments. In this paper I argue that for geographers to situate listening – in the broadest definition as 'sensing, attuning, and noticing' – as part of a creative approach to reparative practice, we must first understand how Anglo-European modes of listening and interpreting the world through sound are shaped by 'sonic colonialities'. These are encultured ways of apprehending and narrating environments that are derived from the Eurocentric fetish for pre-colonial natures, imagined as discrete, unmediated, and possessable. Given the now prolific interest of geographers in sonic practices, this paper argues for a closer and more critical attention to how listening and sound methods are inherently determined by sonic colonialities. Using the example of field recordings, I show how such practices create and perpetuate divisive ideas of nature and place within contemporary ecological sound art.

KEYWORDS
art, environment, field recording, listening, racism, settler-colonialism

1 | INTRODUCTION

In 'Undrowned: Black feminist lessons from marine mammals', Alexis Pauline Gumbs asks 'how can we listen across species, across extinction, across harm?' (2021, p. 35). The question posed by Gumbs is one that geographers have been seeking to attend to for decades through a variety of creative inquiries and experimentations. Before being able to advance Gumbs' question, however, a preceding query must be made: what liberation can listening enact when the globalisation of Eurocentric ways of listening perpetuates the same violences that we are trying to move beyond?[1]

This paper unfolds this query. It proposes that for Anglo-European geographies to position listening – in the broadest definition as 'sensing, attuning and noticing' (Kanngieser, 2020, n.p.)[2] – as part of a creative approach toward reparative practice, we must first understand how listening and interpreting the world through sound are shaped by 'sonic colonialities'. These are encultured ways of listening to, apprehending, and documenting environments that are derived from the Eurocentric fetish for pre-colonial natures, which are imagined as discrete, unmediated, and possessable. Given the now

prolific interest of geographers in sonic practices as part of an experimental perspective, I want to emphasise the need for closer attention to how these listening and sound methods are determined by sonic colonialities. Because most sound and geographical work is practice-led, I want to introduce the concept by way of example, namely through field recordings as they appear in ecological sound art (Gilmurray, 2017), or art that draws from, and speaks to, ecological concerns. Field recordings are here defined as 'the production, circulation, and playback of audio recordings of the myriad soundings of the world: the sounds of animals, birds, cities, machines, forests, rivers, glaciers, public spaces, electricity, social institutions, architecture, weather – anything and everything that vibrates' (Gallagher, 2015a, p. 560). They can be undertaken in spontaneous ways – a birdsong or an impromptu celebration caught on a mobile phone – and very intentionally – the premeditated chronicling of an event requiring a complex array of microphones, recording devices, and post-production capabilities.

In this paper I look at how field recordings undertaken by white Anglo-European artists (who like myself work in settler-colonies and formerly colonised places) create ideas of nature and place within contemporary ecological sound art. This is my area of practice and responsibility: as a white European and settler-coloniser geographer and sound artist who has extensively integrated diverse sound methods in my research and teaching over the past two decades, my stakes in this cannot be overstated, both personally and professionally. I begin by sketching out characteristics of sonic colonialities and showing their foundations in onto-epistemologies of nature. Through two deployments of field recordings in ecological sound art practices, I then demonstrate how these assumptions underpin the capture and framing of sound, how they are used to shape experiences of place, and how they tell stories about the world. I argue that in neglecting critical self-reflexivity and positioning, such practices de-historicise and erase the structural violence and dispossessions that Anglo-European geographers and artists are often complicit in and reiterative of.

Field recordings offer an interesting study for geographers because similar to walking a transect or cartographic mapping, they derive from scientific methods that seek to order, represent, and render landscapes knowable over time. While sound has classically been subjugated to the ocular because of its association with subjective emotionality (Rodgers, 2011, p. 515), the development of the phonograph instigated the idea that a recording device could also engender an objective replication of the world. Sound technologies were upheld as a counter to the fallibilities of human observation (Bruyninckx, 2018, p. 8). Emerging from this lineage, field recordings began as an attempt to capture the 'true' ambiance of an environment through its sounds. In geography, field recordings have been used to gather information about how environments are experienced; they are attractive to geographers because, as Gallagher points out, they are assumed to provide 'ethnographic representations of places' (2015a, p. 560). Geographers use field recordings for multiple reasons, such as assessing mechanical noise pollution, understanding social dynamics in public and private space, and clarifying human impact on eco-systems through monitoring species dislocation via changes in the sounds they make. Field recordings like those under study here are also used in creative ways, to invoke a sense of place in music, film, radio, and sound art, and artistic installation.

Within all approaches to sonic geographies, it is vital, as I have previously proposed (Kanngieser, 2015; Kanngieser & Beuret, 2017), that geographers apply the disciplinary learnings that deconstruct Anglo-European natures to the theorising and practice of sonic methods. Tom Western has identified that field recordings play 'active roles in processes of racialization, nationalisation, segregation, [and] spatialization' (2018, p. 2). This is why, as Katie Hemsworth et al. argue, 'part of a reflexive approach to sonic methods … must involve critical recognition that sonic environments tell their own stories of the effects of … colonialism' (2017, p. 149). The expansion of sound in the discipline has brought with it a challenging of Eurocentric discourses through more nuanced deliberation of the social-political contexts in which sound and listening take place. There is still a need, however, to follow the injunction of Gallagher (2015a) when he calls for engagement with the production and dissemination of soundscape and field recordings that objectify imaginaries of natural worlds (see for instance Gibb et al., 2018). The natures enacted through sonic geographical practices need to be carefully considered, so that the work that cultural geography has been doing for decades is not negated. In the case of field recordings, despite extensive theorisation on the construction of the natural and the social, this does not translate into an awareness of the conceptual foundations on which environmental sound practices lie, let alone an addressing of positionality that gives context to how sound is heard and how it is made meaning of. By explicitly turning toward these tensions, it is my aim to contribute to an unsettling that invites geographers curious about sound, and sound artists working on environment, to consider what possibilities there are for listening, and engaging field recordings, otherwise.

2 | A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO SONIC COLONIALITIES

> Whiteness is the ownership of the Earth forever and ever, Amen. (Du Bois, 2016, p. 18)

Sonic colonialities are structures of listening and sense making that are founded on, and reinforce, Anglo-European onto-epistemologies of humans in relation to, and distinct from, nature. The historical separation of the domains of nature and society was foundational to the instigation of early Christianity, which placed man as superior to non-human beings; nature was all that lay outside of the organised life of human civilisation. Who and what constituted man had been made sacrosanct by the time of the 1493 Papal Doctrine of Discovery decree issued by the Catholic Church, which permitted Christian explorers rights to claim land from non-Christians, establishing a religious, legal, and political basis for widescale dispossession and genocide. This intensified throughout the ascent of the nation-state and its cleaving from the church; the delineation of wild environments was, as Dennis Cosgrove writes, 'mapped into the imaginative geography of European nationalism' (2008, p. 109). As an extension of the European empire, wilderness was conceived as land and peoples yet to be conquered.

In her explication on what Walter Mignolo (2002) calls the 'colonial difference' initiated throughout the 15th and 16th centuries, Sylvia Wynter argues that the ascent of the European nation-state necessitated the emergence of the category of Man, which redefined the human beyond the attributions of sinfulness (the Untrue Christian Self) critical to upholding the hegemony of the Church (2003, p. 263). Inflected with 'powerful knowledge systems … that explain who/what we are' (2015, p. 10), Man 1 and Man 2 describe a schemata around which embodied life became organised. Man 1 signified the differentiation of the human as a religious being (Latin Christian theological dominance) from Man as a political subject. Man 2 was a projection of economic subjecthood emerging from 19th-century Darwinian liberal monohumanism, which divided the naturally selected (Europeans) from the 'dysselected' (2015, p. 10). The invention of both Man 1 and Man 2 (the transition Wynter identified through the 1492 Columbian interchange and European colonisation) was systematised around an Other, in the case of Man 1 – Indigenous peoples, who were 'discursively constructed as the physical referent of the 'savage' and thereby Irrational Human Others', and in the case of Man 2 – 'the category of the Negroes' who were 'discursively constructed as the physical referent of the conception of Man's Human Other' (Wynter, 2001, pp. 43–44). The perception of empty land was bound with this configuration of racial hierarchy, anti-Indigeneity, and anti-Blackness. Raciality was constructed as a strategy of power attributing reason, objectivity, self-determination, and self-consciousness to the European subject only (da Silva, 2007). European colonial humanism organised the world through raciological patterns that created 'sovereign racial orders, hierarchies and ontologies' (Gilroy, 2018, p. 10). Who was biologically differentiated as not-Man (who was seen as non-sentient and fungible) was valued only through economic instrumentalisation. The displacement of Black and Indigenous peoples was inextricable from conceptualisations of nature formed through European religious, social, and political life.

This onto-epistemological division structured Eurocentric sensorial experience. What was considered in/audible was coded by what Mayra Estévez Trujillo calls 'the colonial regime of sonority' (2016, quoted in da Luz, 2021, p. 33). Prior to the phonograph, explorers and naturalists represented their perceptions of the world through detailed sonic description. This was exemplified in the writing of German explorer Alexander von Humboldt, who was feted as a 'forerunner of the acoustic ecology movement' (Velasco, 2000, p. 24).[3] What is especially insightful for understanding sonic coloniality was how Humboldt's own embodied apprehension influenced his scientific observations. In *Aurality: Listening and knowledge in nineteenth-century Colombia*, Ana M. Ochoa Gautier closely follows how Humboldt came to differentiate the acoustic environments of nature in opposition to the sounds of his guides or the bogas accompanying him along the Magdalena River. Writing in his diaries, Humboldt was candid about his irritation with the 'unbearable racket' the bogas made, and his discomfort was used to justify his proclamation of their 'inferiority' (2014, p. 32). His interest in their conversation stretched only as far as the knowledge he sought to gain from them of native plant and animal species. For Humboldt, Gautier notes nature, then, became a refuge from 'unwanted exchanges with other human beings' (2014, p. 68). The effects of Humboldt's interpretations on his philosophies of nature were immense. From these experiences Humboldt created a world in which the 'contrast between loudness/noise and silence' came to signal 'a metaphysical difference between humans and nonhumans' (2014, p. 74).

With the advent of the phonograph in the late 1800s, this metaphysical difference was inscribed into audio documentation. Thomas Edison listed the 'preservation of languages' as one of the central benefits of his phonographic device. Field recordings were rapidly deployed in Anglo-European disciplines of anthropology, linguistics, and zoology for such preservation, driven by political programmes concerned with both obfuscating ongoing colonial violence and defining its

impacts through the lenses of loss and extinction (Sterne, 2003, p. 315). 'Salvage ethnography' featured documentation of Indigenous and First Nations songs and oral histories alongside animal songs and calls. The recording of these sounds illustrated the investment of ethnographic disciplines in possessing, defining, and dehistoricising Indigenous life as an object of research (see Brady, 1999). The impetus to crystallise Indigenous communities through sound recordings sat in tension with the fact that many ethnographers had neither the knowledge nor the connections to attune to and contextualise what they were documenting (see Gray, 2015, p. 89).

The objectification of Indigenous life was a reflection of the scientific objectification of 'the field', the sites in which science was conducted outside of the laboratory or university. The field was an amalgamation 'produced in situ through a variety of embodied spatial practices, discursively through presentation ... and institutionally through scientific and other networks across a range of different spaces' (Driver, 2000, p. 268). Despite these relational foundations, early notions of the field, and the objects of study derived from it, were grounded in Enlightenment principles of empiricism and rationalism. Methods of study including ethnography and field science, with audio recording a tool of both, were positioned as providing a transparent representation of the world. The fidelity of the recording, its liveness, was taken as evidence of its authenticity (Rodgers, 2011). To hold on to the myth of transparency, the ethnographer and their device had to be expunged from the recording process, a practice that despite the evolution of the discipline continues to circulate today.

The separation of the human from the non-human, the negation of Black and Indigenous life, and the deprecation of sounds unfamiliar to Eurocentric aesthetic regimes incontrovertibly shaped contemporary Western sonic practices and methods. There has been incisive work by scholars including Fred Moten (2017), Nina Sun Eidsheim (2019), Alexander Weheliye (2005), Jennifer Stoever (2016), Dylan Robinson (2020), and Nicole Brittingham Furlonge (2018) within disciplines of Black Studies, Sound and Literary Studies to parse out the different racialised-colonial and imperialist 'sonic inheritances' (Shannon & Truman, 2020) evident in these acoustic socialities, and the creative moves traversing and unsettling them. These inheritances, like the persistence of a pre-human nature or biological determinism, are often ubiquitous and accepted despite, even alongside, their dismantling.

Following Wynter, Katherine McKittrick notes that 'we come into being as **languaging** humans' (2016, p. 9), that the 'physiological origins' of humans are 'relational to representation and narrative' (2016, p. 9). This is useful here to think about how listening, as a component of languaging, of representation, is replicated and reiterated through the normalisation and obfuscation of social systems. An enduring sonic inheritance is the assumption consolidated over centuries that the white ear that listens is benign and objective – a dangerous and under-acknowledged construct that defines sonic colonialities, in which structural whiteness masquerades as 'lack of bias' (Stadler, 2015). This is apparent across audio-technical discourses generally, which are, as Tara Rodgers argues, 'inextricably entwined with histories of the body and classifications of bodies' (2011, p. 516). Generic terms such as '"the listener," "the body," "the ear"' (Stadler, 2015) reinscribe these inheritances uncritically. As seen with Gautier's exposition of Humboldt, how the sonic territory is inflected through white European sensibilities and structures has significant consequences for the narratives created around environments. When the body of the listener is generalised in the image of European Man, it erases the listening cultures the listener brings.

This is particularly significant in contemporary eco-sonic art where there has been a renewed enthusiasm for displacing the human to elevate the non-human world. For Marie Thompson (2017) a 'white aurality' is tied to the (re)turn in sound arts toward speculative realism, object-oriented ontology, and new materialism that posit an internally coherent essence to sound in part to renounce anthropocentrism and attain a universal listening position. For Thompson, a modest white aurality 'names a racialized perceptual schema that is at once situated and 'modest' insofar as its own active presence is obscured' (2017, p. 11). This is a common observation in sound studies: Michael Bull (2020, p. 85) too notes that the whiteness of listening and sound is maintained as invisible in these practices. 'The sonic field', asserts Andrew Brooks, 'is ... a racial formation that passes itself off as neutral. Listening is often imagined as an act of direct perception rather than a contestable construct, that is as an act that involves interpretation and criticality' (2020, pp. 11–12).

My conceptualisation of sonic colonialities is deeply nested in this interdisciplinary scholarship and brings to these conversations a specific geographical focus on nature and sound. The historical and ongoing separation of nature and the human is foundational to Anglo-European ways of being and is structurally ingrained in all relational onto-epistemologies, including those around listening and knowledge-making (Kanngieser & Todd, 2020). Crucial here are the ways that white listening structures and behaviours equate hearing with interpretation and thus enact possession through assertion. Returning to Humboldt it is significant that, as Gautier puts it, 'the zambos or free men of colour ceased to be subjects of speech yet become objects of knowledge' (2014, p. 68). Through sonic coloniality, sonic practices become another procedure for circumscribing the world. Writing on the 'white possessive' Goenpul scholar Aileen Moreton Robinson identifies white possession as a mode of rationalisation underpinned by the 'desire to invest in reproducing and

reaffirming the nation state's ownership, control and domination' (2015, p. xii). As Moreton Robinson comments, quoting her Gami (uncle) Dennis Benjamin Moreton, 'the problem with white people is they think and they behave like they own everything' (2015, p. xi). This disposition underpins capitalism as a structure of ordering relations, and the same proprietary logics can be mapped through sonic colonialities in the ways meaning is derived. Xwélméxw (Stó:lō) philosopher Dylan Robinson argues that settler coloniser listening positions constitute 'particular assemblages of unmarked structures of certainty that guide normative perception and may enact epistemic violence' (Robinson, 2020, p. 10). This is the case when sound is de-historicised and claimed as a medium subtracted from the bodies, infrastructures, and relations that give rise to it, and the ear that hears (and interprets) it is assumed as non-interventional rather than located within dynamics of power.

Cultural geographers are trained, as Patricia Noxolo points out, to develop the tools through which to view cultural form 'as it relates to content and medium as it shapes representation' (2016, p. 776). An understanding of sonic colonialities and how they assimilate the non-human world is critical for geographers because it contributes to broader disciplinary inquiries into how nature and landscape are apprehended and made sense of through creative geographical practice, particularly when they centre Indigenous communities (see Ritts et al., 2016). Angela Last observes that within arts and academia, nature-based work will often want to 'reconnect people with the Earth while ignoring their situatedness at sites of colonial trauma' (2018, p. 88). As many geographers have stressed (Bawaka Country et al., 2019; de Leeuw, 2017; Sundberg, 2014), white and Anglo-European geographers must become actively accountable for how we occupy and name the earth if we are to acknowledge the harm that our world-making continues to do. Colonisation is a structure and not an event (Wolfe, 2006), and this is as relevant to those outside of settler-colonial nations as those within them. This is why I follow the definition offered by An Yountae and Eleanor Craig, who write that 'coloniality names the regime of power that outlasts formal colonial governance, sustained in neo-colonial power relations that reaffirm and reproduce Eurocentrism, as well as the construction of ideas of Europe and whiteness over and against colonized, racialized others' (2021, p. 4). This is important to emphasise because it disrupts the idea that colonisation and the ways of relating that enact it have ended.

Following these calls, in the sections that follow I will draw out some of the ways that eco-sonic arts structurally enact sonic colonialities, through works by artists who are highly established and well regarded within fields of environmental sound arts.[4] Specifically, I want to begin to lay out how sonic colonialities are inscribed through understandings of the natural world as separated from humans, through fantasies of terra nullius, and how this imaginary supersedes very situated and site-specific relations of place. While the field recordings here do not feature Indigenous and local communities, it is their lack rather than their inclusion that stands out. The ways that acoustic landscapes are framed and narrated are always biased, and the information offered by the artist, academic, or recordist shapes the knowledge that the listener takes from it. If we recognise, as Ngāti Awa and Ngāti Porou scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith instructs, that imperialism is 'a discursive field of knowledge' (2012, p. 37), then saying that such recordings, particularly when translated into popular artistic forms, can affect how the world is seen is not a rhetorical move. The stories collectively and socially learnt about environments become internalised, repeated, and reiterated until they are rendered ubiquitous and appear incontestable. It is vital for geographers to understand how this is enacted through sound methods as a growing part of creative environmental communication.

3 | SOUNDING THE MYTH OF A PURE NATURE

The admiration that Humboldt professed for the silence of nature is endemic to contemporary European recording practices.[5] The compulsive 'puritanism' in wilderness recordings, of which the field recordings I am about to discuss include, is shadowed by the schema of the sublime (Dixon et al., 2013). The sublime, associated with the perception of nature as an unruly physical and affective force, is powerfully leveraged and modulated within recordings and their listening environments through techniques of recording, editing, and transmission. This aesthetic approach to making nature is important to situate within a wider framing of how land became differentially designated through colonial European practices as property, an extractible resource, a site of conservation, an inhospitable wilderness to be mastered, and a place of respite. In these understandings, the ideal of nature that pre-dated colonial contact and occupation held fast. Philosophies of the sublime carried within them the conception of nobody's land (terra nullius). The impetus to discover and represent 'new natures' artistically throughout the 'exotic' colonies was inextricable from the imperialist expansion of global commerce and resource accumulation by dispossession; indeed it was through exploration and missionary expeditions that artists and naturalists were able to travel and work as cartographers and documentarians (Bewell, 2004).

Both European and colonised landscapes were and continue to be shaped by Eurocentric ways of seeing and interpreting (Barrell, 1980; Daniels, 1993) that were indebted to the economics of landscape production. Colonial visualisations of land contributed to, and were influenced by, the agendas determined by the benefactors of these aesthetic representations. The environment became codified and represented through the European imagination in the service of scientific rationalism and the accrual of capital. The categorisation and ordering of nature against its immeasurability was thus underpinned by a calculus of expropriation and nation-building.

The confluence of wildness with purity, and its deconstruction, has already been extensively examined by geographers (Braun, 2005; Plumwood, 1998; Prior & Ward, 2016). Regardless, this equivocation has endured in contemporary popular culture, reflected in the environmental sound art world. Andreas Malm writes that 'authentic nature appears only where humans do not ... people are by definition the nemesis of nature' (2018, p. 4). The logic of purity justifying the idealisation of 'clean recordings' emerges from this complex antinomy of occupation and absence: who and what is considered the right kind of nature. This is seen within environmental recordings in the delineation of what a natural sound is – including selected sounds of Black, Indigenous, and First Nations cultures – and the claim to authenticity this serves. The fabrication of such environments echoes Stern's observation that the foundational function of anthropological phonography was to preserve what had been destroyed without the context of history (2003, p. 27). It is only through dehistoricisation that a wilderness recording can invoke the sublime without revealing the violence of its conquest.

Emerging from ethnographic colonial and neo-colonial practices are sonic safaris. While strong criticism in other art fields has challenged the power dynamics at play in residencies where artists from the economic global north appropriate and profit from the labour of minoritised artists and workers (Kester, 1999), sonic safaris have emerged in the sound arts from the demand for access to 'wild' and 'remote' recording locations. The most feted of these is run by Spanish artist Francisco López, who has directed several retreats in the Amazon (Mamori Sound Project) and South Africa (Sonic Mmabolela) over the past decade. Lopez's sonic safaris supply recordists with the location and time to undertake uninterrupted recordings of ecosystems: by paying to stay in catered accommodation on nature reserves, participants are afforded physical proximity while benefiting from material support. Here, recordists acquire the sounds of a 'wild' environment that give the impression of an uninhabited wilderness without having to worry about the considerable reproduction and maintenance – local coordination and facilitation, infrastructural upkeep, affective resources – that facilitates this process.

'Africa as a "field"', write Artwell Nhemachena et al., 'has for centuries now, been considered to be a [place] where animals and human beings can be examined in the laboratories of their natural environments' (2016, p. 16). The field site of Sonic Mmabolela is situated in the South African Limpopo province. From online testimonials and personal reviews, a large proportion of previous participants have travelled from the United Kingdom, America, and Europe. The retreat is held on the 6500 hectare Mmabolela Reserve, an ecotourism resort owned by white farmers that describes itself as 'an African experience' framed through the imaginaries of the sublime. On the reserve, guests are invited to:

> Experience the Africa of old: touch the great, grey, green, greasy Limpopo of Rudyard Kipling; walk in the footsteps of explorer-painter Thomas Baines; explore the haunts of legendary hunter, Frederick Courteney Selous; bring to life to writings of Louis Leipoldt and Eugène Marais; enjoy the tranquility; embrace the freedom; treasure the memories. (Mmabolela, n.d., n.p.)

The narrativisation of this imperial history draws participants into a relational arc of artistic production emergent from regional colonial legacies: Baines's mapping of the Limpopo for the South African Gold Fields Exploration Company, Kipling's intimate friendship with mining magnate Cecil Rhodes, Selous's trade in ivory. The romanticism of this retelling obfuscates how the environment is always traversed by contestation; by creating this imaginary enclave, mirrored by the physical enclave of the site itself, other perspectives and realities can be disregarded. The land that recordists are invited to maintains the fantasy of empty wilderness in which human life is minimised or entirely hidden. The foundation of field recording in the aesthetics of landscape documentation means that these sonic representations are congruent with how such landscapes are represented through colonial visual arts. Liese van der Watt argues that typically in South African landscape painting 'the land is emptied out of any human activity, ready for the taking – a powerful representation of white ambition' (2001, p. 63). Landscape vision (and aurality) reproduces 'the "nobody" of *terra nullius*' and in differentiating the rural from the urban, erases the multiple ways in which Black South African experiences unfold (Ah, but your land is beautiful, 2018, n.p.).

This conception of land as emptied of human activity is crucial for the recordings that are made during sonic safaris. Like its precedents, field recordings represent the world through often un-reflexive exercises of power. A survey of albums featuring tracks by participants from Sonic Mmabolela 2013–2018 offer a range of detailed documentations: the

susurration of wind in grass, the coming and going of birds calling to each other, the whirring of insects as the sun sets (Various Artists, n.d.). Some recordings have been woven into musical compositions, while others present the soundscape seemingly as it is. All of the recordings create an immersive depth, a sense of being surrounded by an unfamiliar and yet highly impressionistic geophysical terrain that stretches in all directions. It is a convincing artifice; there is no audible or even written indication of the systemic social and ecological stressors that shape the soundscapes being heard. David Michael observes that the places made through such recordings are 'meticulously constructed by hundreds of recordists over many decades, who have all sought out tiny windows in time and space where man cannot be heard' (2011, p. 207). It is not only in the recording but also in the editing and post production of these recordings that such aesthetics come to bear. The application of audio filters and noise reduction to eliminate 'unwanted' voices and sounds further demonstrates the deliberate evaluation of who and what belongs in an audible natural environment. These choices and values harken back to early phonographic use, where questions of who and what was deemed worthy of documenting, how, and by whom these people and places were recorded, and how the subjects of the recording were able to position themselves in relation to the recordist, were neglected. In the many albums produced through Sonic Mmabolela, the conditions and circumstances that enable the physical production of each track is unthematised, likewise the sonic presence of those inhabiting the environments in which these 'windows' of time and space are extracted. This suppression of the self in the recording reinforces white aurality by hiding the situated embodiment of who it is attending to and capturing the sound, and effectively conjuring a representation that from the outset denies its own mediation.

The landscapes that such soundscapes represent are always ideological-spatial formations, and by suppressing these embodiments the machinations of quotidian European occupation are wilfully ignored. As Selaelo Kgatla explains, 'the area of the Limpopo province was widely regarded as one of the most conservative white Afrikaner strongholds in South Africa that strictly adhered to the principles of apartheid' (2018, p. 147). The story of Mmabolela Reserve has been framed by its owners through the lens of conservation and is still engaged for ecotourism and hunting. While ecotourism has been championed by national governments as a driver of social-economic development, there are mixed responses to whether it can effectively address wide-ranging provincial impoverishment (Munthali, 2007; Zanamwe et al., 2018). There have been strong anti-colonial movements in the province both historically and contemporaneously opposed to land grabbing and 'green grabbing' (land grabbing under the justification of environmental protection) that displace communities and impede their access to land and resources (Lunstrum, 2016; Sinthumule, 2017). Though it is not possible to definitively say how the economies of redistribution work at Mmabolela, the larger setting in which it operates has been substantially challenged (see Rubis & Theriault, 2020). The coloniality of South Africa is bound with ambivalences and contradictions that none of the recordings speak to.

It is from within this environment that the natures produced through these field recordings have to be considered. As Jim Cummings notes:

> Most, if not all, nature sound recordings foster the illusion of healthy ecosystems; many times even the location being recorded is severely degraded, and only a combination of boundless patience in the field, careful editing out of human noise, or overdubbing of field recordings can recreate the primal fullness. (2001, p. 14)

The eclipsing of these contestations is hugely meaningful. That the communities and their relations to the Limpopo are not at all audible within the soundscapes produced from Sonic Mmabolela shows how deeply sonic coloniality is predicated on a separation of human activity from land. For geographers engaging with soundscapes, it is crucial to question how sonic methods reiterate colonial aesthetics through representational evaluation. The wilderness recording, here capitalised on through sonic safaris, encourages an extractive and touristic disposition mobilised toward discovery and capture. The importation of environmental sonic methods into geography must be accompanied by a substantial reflection on how such methods sit in tension with contemporary geographical ethics and practices.

4 | SITE SPECIFICITY, DISPLACEMENT, AND INDIGENOUS ERASURES

> Settler colonial societies are haunted by the host of gone peoples – they pulse at the center. (Morrill et al., 2016, p. 7)

The valorisation of wilderness, as evidenced in the soundscapes of Sonic Mmabolela, 'has accompanied an amnesia of the fate of Indigenous peoples' (Langton, 1996, p. 19). As the previous section showed, field recordings conceal the specifici-

ties of place through centring an Anglo-European concept of nature that disavows certain kinds of human inhabitations and histories. In places that have thrived despite genocide and dispossession, this is further clear in the dis-inclusion of Indigenous and First Nations communities. In this second section I want to think through the implications of transposing and installing eco-sonic arts where the sounds of one place come into contact with the sounds of another. The exhibition of sounds beyond the ecosystems and environments in which they are recorded is extremely common. While again significant attention has been given to site-specific installation by geographers with respect to the visual arts (for a review, see Hawkins, 2013), the questions of transposition, overlay, and immersion have been less attended to in terms of the sonic. This is a lacuna that is becoming more pressing to attend to as geographers incorporate sound and other creative exhibitions into their research outputs (Stevenson & Holloway, 2017). As George Revill notes, there has been limited work in geography looking at how 'particular characteristics of sonic phenomena engage with particular spatial dynamics' (2016, p. 242). Sound installation, argue Karen Wells and Ain Bailey, 'demand reflection of the sentient listener and in doing so enable us to apprehend artefacts and buildings in new ways of knowing' (2020, p. 1087). Including sound installation here is crucial to understanding how sonic coloniality makes space and place.

In 2019, British sound artist Chris Watson, the recordist for many of David Attenborough's wildlife documentaries, exhibited a major installation 'Hrafn: Conversations with Odin' for Project X, an Australian public art initiative. This was done in collaboration with Dark Mofo, an annual festival of contemporary cinema, art, and sound. Hrafn, inspired by Watson's 2014 Hy-Brasil installation for Opera North in Leeds, featured hyper-detailed recordings of thousands of ravens at nightfall. For its installation in the Hastings Caves of the Huon Valley, lutruwita/Trowunna (Tasmania), 'visitors were taken into the forest in the late afternoon with a guide to tell them about the history of the forest, the folklore and raven mythology' (Feature Dark Arts, 2020, n.p.). They were then led to a clearing where they remained for over 40 min, immersed in the sounds of two thousand ravens approaching them from all directions. Swooping, cawing, and singing through the air, the beating of the ravens' wings commingled with, and overrode, the sounds of the dusk chorus of the Valley itself. As the piece unfolded, the ravens gathered around, alongside and on top of the audience, nestling them within their roosting habitat. Finally, as the audience sat in the full darkness of night, the ravens began to settle, the cacophony fading into quieter more distinct bird chatter and cries until there was stillness.

It is in 'ideas of place that emerge from studies that explore art, memory and heritage', observes Hawkins, that 'the possibilities for productive mutual exchange [between art and geography] are made visible' (2013, p. 59). Sound installations like Hrafn can invite listeners to attune to shifting temporal and spatial relations of power. The material properties of acoustic geographies, including natural acoustic arenas, or what Blesser and Salter term 'aural architectures' (2007, p. 2), give rise to different ways sounds are experienced, which have social meanings and influence emotional and psychological and physical states. If, as Wells and Bailey emphasise, sound compositions can help to understand 'how people engage with their environments, and with the histories inscribed in place' (2020, p. 1088), then it is necessary to include the contexts these events emerge from and into. To think through sonic colonialities in terms of place-making, more unfolding of Watson's work is needed, particularly in framing overlay as displacement. The recordings played by Watson in the Valley were taken from Anglesey in North Wales. Watson captured the birds through an ambisonic microphone set-up constructed underneath their roosting site, which he left unattended for a week. The inspiration for Hafn (raven, translated from the Old Norse) was taken from the story of Odin's two ravens, Huginn (thought) and Muninn (memory) that accompanied the god as sentries and informants. The meaning of the folklore behind the work provides an interesting opening to consider what is enacted when sounds are transferred across sites. Staged after the 2019 bushfires that ravaged over 36,000 hectares of land, including world heritage listed relic forests and ecosystems dating over 180 million years, Hafrn was part of a programme aiming to generate tourist income back into the Huon Valley (Watts, 2019).

The Valley lies within the unceded lands of the Nuenonne people and band territories of the southeast area include the Mouheneenner, Nuenonne, Mellukerdee, and Lyluequonny peoples. It contains numerous areas of cultural importance and lore. In the early 1800s Trouwunna/lutruwita was systematically colonised by the British (Ryan et al., 2022); during this time colonisers disparaged Aboriginal people as 'crows', with references to Jim Crow (Pascoe, 2007, p. 7). Prior to, and following, colonisation both on the island and the Australian mainland the crow or raven held, and continues to hold, significant cultural meaning for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities (Mundine, 2008). As the forest raven is endemic across the island it has importantly contributed to community subsistence. Moreover, an intimate legacy connects the site chosen for Hafrn to early recording history. The brutality of British genocide on Trouwunna/lutruwita resulted in the declaration of extinction of Aboriginal communities there. In 1899, Fanny Cochrane Smith, an Aboriginal woman of the Trawlwoolway language group living in Huon Valley was recorded by the Royal Society. Smith's songs and spoken words were and still are considered to be the only recordings made of Indigenous language from the island. In the same year that Hafrn was exhibited, the International Year of Indigenous Languages was celebrated – a connection that went unmade. The impact on the ecosystem, the strong meaning of the raven to First Nations life, as

well as a robust and self-determined community presence – including Aboriginal-led *palawa kani* language revitalisation projects (Berk, 2017) and land governance campaigns – were not mentioned in the media done around the project. This was reflective of a larger culture of institutional omission of Aboriginal sovereignty by the curatorial team itself. In 2021 Dark Mofo curators were held accountable by the Palawa community for commissioning an artwork by Spanish artist Santiago Sierra, described as 'abusive' and 're-traumatising' for First Nations peoples (Blakkarly, 2021). This compelled the director to establish a First Nations advisory group and to commit to financially supporting Aboriginal artists.

If we follow Yiman and Bidjara anthropologist and geographer Marcia Langton to acknowledge how the constructs of landscape and inhabitant are intertwined throughout Australian colonial history (1996, p. 11), then there is much that can be drawn on here by geographers when considering the displacement of Aboriginal cultures and the sounds of local species through the imposition of European sounds and folklore. Kwagiulth scholar Sara Hunt refers to the socio-legal and cultural constructions of space that enact the dislocations of Indigenous and Aboriginal communities as colonialscapes: 'the spatial rationales through which colonial relations are continually remade' (2014, p. 60). While Hunt is speaking on Canadian-based 'Indian Reserves', elements of this idea are useful to understanding how the rationale of exhibiting work from the colony within a nature reserve of the settler-colony might move in reminiscent ways. Colonialscapes, Hunt outlines, can be understood as representations that 'perpetuate and manifest particular (colonial) expressions of power' (2014, p. 72). These representations, she argues, appear in visual forms including maps, paintings, and photos that obfuscate other spatial relations (2014, p. 72). The soundscapes here also contribute to this obfuscation. By presenting the land itself (whether Huon Valley or Mmabolela Reserve) as emptied of deeper spatial and temporal orderings and geopolitical contestations, the narrative of a benign and non-ideological nature is perpetuated.

If 'space ... becomes an extension of the ... art form performed within it', as Blesser and Salter (2007, p. 11) note, then what is enacted in this play of absent presence? For Gallagher, speaking on his own experiences of creating audio walks with overlaid sounds, this is presented as a haunting. He says that 'environmental recordings are ... ideal for amplifying the haunted qualities of sites, since by displacing the sounds of spaces they "estrange, dislocate, render uncanny"' (2015b, p. 11; see also Enigbokan & Patchett, 2012). Regardless of Watson's intention, the history of ravens and songs haunts the land and his work. Certainly, as Tuck and Ree write, 'erasure and defacement concoct ghosts' (2013, p. 643), and what has happened in these places cannot be silenced. In Hafrn, these events and relations are not intentionally acknowledged, let alone given space to honour and grieve. Many questions need to be considered by geographers around what is jettisoned in this superimposed soundscape and what is lost through this playback. When conceiving of sound installation, geographers must reflect on what happens when the sounds of one place with a history of dispossession over another are forced into relation or overlaid with another. In the face of deliberate forgetting, we need to ask: what are the ethics of disengagement?

It is worth noting that, as Tuck and Ree write, 'haunting ... is the relentless remembering and reminding that will not be appeased by settler society's assurances of innocence and reconciliation' (2013, p. 642). In Australia as in South Africa, movements for truth telling and self-determination challenge ideas of reconciliation that do not centre sovereignty and landback measures. The dismissal of Indigenous self-narration (Sparke, 1998) by institutions in settler-colonial nations has been met by Indigenous communities seeking cultural re-claimation in part through decolonising and repatriating archives of recordings, particularly those of songs and oral testimonies (for an exposition of this, see Gray, 2015). In thinking about how to answer Gumbs' question, one avenue that geographers can become attentive to is understanding how field recordings fit into these re-claimation stories. If geographers take into consideration the violence of this form of landscape documentation, a different orientation to listening might be developed. Attending to Indigenous and First Nations repatriation campaigns can also offer geographers insight into how field recordings can be approached as a site of resistance by Indigenous communities to demarcate and tell of their own kinships. Dylan Robinson writes that settler coloniser listening 'is hungry for the felt confirmations of square pegs in square holes, for the satisfactory fit as sound knowledge slides into its appropriate place' (2020, p. 51). Disturbing these felt confirmations through interventions into sonic colonialities – the Anglo-European patterns of recognition, objectification, and possession through definition – is crucial.

5 | CONCLUSION

Attentiveness then, to how sonic colonialities are formed and perpetuated, the stories they reinscribe, and the hauntings they give rise to, may be key to approaching listening in other ways. There is much precedence here. Metis Cree artist Loretta Todd indicates the importance of attentiveness when she says that 'attentiveness reflects a principle connected to how Aboriginal people come to knowledge' (2006, p. 120). Attentiveness pushes beyond listening as an end in itself. As Bawaka Country and its Yolngu and non-Indigenous collaborators write 'a methodology of attending means more than

just listening deeply, though listening plays an important part. Attending means to listen, to feel and to act, to understand oneself differently, to care, to respond' (2015, p. 279). It is this call to understand oneself, and to respond from this self-understanding, that geographers must first integrate before simply celebrating listening as a liberatory act.

In this paper I have set out to introduce sonic colonialities, which has necessitated focusing on the colonial onto-epistemologies that many contemporary Anglo-European eco-sonic art practices are derivative from. While field recordings are still relatively novel to the discipline, geographers are well cautioned to understand them as a longstanding social-technical practice and discourse founded in European colonial knowledge and aesthetic systems. The divisive fantasy of an absolute and discrete nature without humans shadows the environmental imaginaries and discourses articulated through popular sonic practices that are being taken up by geographers. These sonic colonialities foundationally shape Anglo-European sonic methods. The fantasy of nature, which often sits uncomfortably alongside its own deconstruction, is based on dispossessive anti-Black and anti-Indigenous ideologies that determine who constitutes a human and what becomes defined as extractable resource versus protectable wilderness. In this paper I have argued that in order to make sound generative for social-environmental research, a more careful reflection on how sound methods are deployed, the listening subjects and positionalities they assume, and the ideologies of nature they invoke must be undertaken. This is especially urgent for work that deals with escalating environmental crises. The arguments made for sound methods inviting a sense of collectivity and affinity through which to encourage awareness of the proximities between humans and ecosystems are compelling. However, what is neglected are that these claims are often based on European ideals that universalise what it means to listen and inhabit a body, and as such the very methods argued to situate and bring together are undone by their own onto-epistemological separation.

The soundscapes produced through both Sonic Mmabolela and Hafrn tell stories about the world. Sonic coloniality claims the authority to condense antagonistic and divergent meanings into linear thematic threads. Hemsworth et al. argue that 'critical engagement with listening as a way of knowing means recognizing the cultural histories of making and listening to sound, but also, importantly, forming deeper knowledges of acoustics, vibrations, and materialities that shape sonic experience' (2017, p. 150). If we return to the question posed by Gumbs (2021) with which I opened this paper – namely, how can we listen across species, extinction, and harm – we first need to be able to think more deeply with what it means to listen, and what the methods for listening to soundscapes carry with them that negate their own potential. The commitment of relationality, writes Trawlwulwuy geographer Lauren Tynan, is 'not a new metaphor to be reaped for academic gain, but a practice bound with responsibilities with kin and Country' (2021, p. 598). By becoming attentive to the sounds around us, and the worlds that make them, we can learn to interrupt the usual unfolding of sonic colonialities and find ways to perhaps attune to Gumbs' question otherwise, with a spirit of curiosity and repair.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this paper as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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ENDNOTES

[1] This paper sits in concert with a forthcoming essay that will focus on Gumbs' question through an emphasis on sound practices by Black, First Nations, and Indigenous artists. It is crucial for geographers to understand the legacy of sonic colonialities through this essay as a foundation for the second essay.

[2] This draws from Anna Tsing's "arts of noticing" (2015) and work on non-cochlear sound to account for the ways that sound is not only aural but also viscerally and vibrationally sensed and felt (Gallagher et al., 2017; Nóżka, 2021).

[3] As early as 1929 Finnish geographer J.G. Granö was parsing environments by way of their sensory components, influenced by the systemic readings of landscape in 19th century German geographical thought. Granö proposed mapping cartographies through phenomenological encounters, stressing the influence of the perceiver in the acts of perception and interpretation (Uimonen, 2008).

[4] The racial and gendered homogeneity of the artists producing the works chosen here in no way suggest a lack of work being produced by Black artists, Indigenous and First Nations artists, or brown artists within and outside of the Anglo-European scene that incorporates field recordings and environmental themes. However, as it stands, this canon is overwhelmingly constituted by white, educated, middle-class

people. The artists featured in this paper, and art and musical works reminiscent of these pieces, are among the most promoted, commissioned, and documented over a variety of media and institutional platforms, and for these reasons alone have been included here. The personal values and opinions of the artists are not under review.

[5] I have also spoken about different uses of silence in response to colonialisation and climate crisis, which form interesting tensions and re-imaginings to consider in dialogue with this paper (see Kanngieser & Beuret, 2017).

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