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'SILENCE BY MY NOISE': AN ECOCRITICAL AESTHETIC OF NOISE IN JAPANESE TRADITIONAL SOUND CULTURE AND THE SOUND ART OF AKITA MASAMI

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‘SILENCE BY MY NOISE’: AN ECOCRITICAL AESTHETIC OF NOISE IN
JAPANESE TRADITIONAL SOUND CULTURE AND THE SOUND ART OF
AKITA MASAMI¹

JAMES EDWARDS

Not the voices of animals but their entrails are important to us, and the animal
to which music is most indebted is not the nightingale but the sheep.

Eduard Hanslick, *On the Musically Beautiful*

Ecocriticism is grounded on the realization that culture mediates our relationships not only with one another, but with the environment as a whole. While ethnomusicology has long sought to understand music’s place in culture, its emphasis has been largely on the way music orients us towards other humans. In contrast, ecomusicology refers to a critical stance within music scholarship which attends to the question of how music, as a cultural phenomenon, orients us toward the natural world. In this paper, I hope to expand the scope of ecomusicological inquiry beyond music, to the broader set of sounding and listening practices referred to by Japanese musicologist Torigoe Keiko as *oto no bunka*, or ‘sound-culture’² (1994). While the topics I take up (noise music, whaling, musical formalism, colonialist discourse, Japanese aesthetics) may seem far-flung, I have attempted to structure them around a single question: in what ways might certain foundational aspects of our sound culture – specifically, the criteria by which we evaluate aural experiences – shape our attitudes toward the non-human world? Working through this question, I hope to demonstrate that alternative discourses on sound harbor the potential to level critique against ecologically and ethically fraught cultural practices.

Sound and fury, signifying dolphins?

As whale-song and songs about whales have featured prominently in ecomusicological discourse (see musicologist Mitchell Morris’s “Singing Whales, Listening Humans”, 2007), I have centered this paper on a recent composition with a cetacean theme, Japanese noise project Merzbow’s *Dolphin Sonar* (2008). Largely unknown outside of the hermetic subculture of noise music, Merzbow is the brainchild of Tokyo-born multimedia artist Akita Masami. Since 1979, Akita has released hundreds of recordings on a slew of independent labels, leading the experimental music scholar Paul Hegarty to joke that Akita ‘could constitute a genre in his own right’ (2007: 155). Noise aficionados also quip that having exhausted his ‘analog’ and ‘digital’ phases, Akita has entered an ‘animal’ phase. Indeed, a number of Merzbow releases since 2001 have featured animal noise samples, animal-related titles, and/or animal rights-related themes. These include 2006’s *Bloody Sea* and 2008’s *Dolphin Sonar*, which concern

the controversial subject of Japanese whaling. *Dolphin Sonar* was released in protest against so-called 'drive catches' of bottlenose dolphins and pilot whales conducted annually in several towns in south-eastern Japan's Wakayama Prefecture. While the catches have become a *cause célèbre* for Western environmentalists (witness 2009's Academy Award-winning documentary *The Cove*), the Japanese public has yet to register much concern. *Dolphin Sonar*'s illustrated cover – which depicts two dolphins flanking a cartoon Akita, who holds a laptop marked *iruka-ryō hantai* ('against dolphin hunting') in vivid red – suggests the record was released at least in part to raise domestic awareness of the issue.

This being said, *Dolphin Sonar* is no more a stereotypical environmental protest album than Akita is a stereotypical environmentalist. Deeply influenced by surrealism and outsider art, Akita borrowed his recording moniker from prewar German fringe-dadaist Kurt Schwitters' *Merzbau*, an elaborate architectural installation constructed out of leftover building materials, outdated consumer products, newspaper clippings, scraps of wire and fabric and paint – the material and symbolic refuse of modern culture. Schwitters grouped these diverse 'anti-materials' under the term 'merz,' a word-fragment ironically purloined from the German *kommerzbank* (commerce bank). Like Schwitters' installation, Akita's compositions strike one less as traditional 'works of art' and more as immersive total environments, patched together from the sonic equivalent of *merz*. This results from his practice of literally saturating the ear with noise. Sonogram analysis shows that from second zero of *Dolphin Sonar*, nearly the entire range of human hearing (approximately 20 to 20,000 Hz) is covered with a wash of noise, over which feedback howls, synthesizer warbles, and a range of other electronic and acoustic noises are layered. With some exceptions, this sonic overload is representative of the Merzbow corpus.

Repeated listening will eventually yield a heightened sensitivity to the type of motivic and textural play that abounds in Merzbow's noise. Nevertheless, it is conceivable that even a musically-trained first-time listener would hear Merzbow's entire recorded output, 'animal' pieces included, as so many hours of undifferentiated sonic detritus. Notwithstanding his rhetorically-charged titles, this would seem to render Merzbow an unlikely example of what musicologist Mitchell Morris has termed a 'Green composer,' a composer whose work evinces 'a close fit with some of the discourses of strong environmentalism' (1998: 132). Akita Masami's commitment to environmental causes is unquestionable: a staunch vegan and supporter of PETA, he has even published a book geared to introduce the animal rights movement to the Japanese public (2005). On a purely aural level, however, it is difficult to distinguish Merzbow's ecologically themed pieces from, for example, his soundtracks for bondage performances (Akita 1991) and abstract horror films (Akita 1995). This casts some doubt on their potential significance to the environmental movement – indeed, on their potential to signify at all. What could *Dolphin Sonar*, which seems mere sound and fury, have to tell us about dolphins, or about our relationship to the earth in general?

Musical subject, noisy object

The difficulty of pinpointing meaning in compositions like *Dolphin Sonar* stems not only from the density of the noise itself, but from its marginality vis-a-vis conventional Western modes of listening and interpretation. Notwithstanding recent indictments of musical formalism as de-historicizing and Eurocentric (Kerman 1985; McClary 1991; Subotnik 1991), a significant portion of any music student's days are still spent analyzing the functions of pitched, rhythmically regular sounds: for the average Western ear, rhythm and pitch remain the proverbial 'building blocks of music'. While hackneyed, this expression – building blocks – in fact recalls a key concept in modern Western musical aesthetics: 'musical material'.

While not the sole originator of this concept, music critic and aesthetician Eduard Hanslick is perhaps its most well-known exponent. In his canonical 1854 work on musical aesthetics, *On the Musically Beautiful*, Hanslick proposes a binary distinction between mere sounds and musical material:

If one inquires into the extent to which nature provides materials [*Stoff*] for music, it turns out that nature does this only in the most inferior sense of supplying the raw materials which mankind makes into tones. Mute ore from the mountains, wood from the forests, the skin and entrails of animals, these are all we find in nature with which to make the proper building materials of music, namely, pure tones. Thus initially we receive from mother nature only material for material (1986: 68-69).

Interestingly, Hanslick does not disparage natural sound as such, conceding 'that there is a wealth of diverse voices which wonderfully enliven nature' (71). His aim in writing *On the Musically Beautiful* was not to denigrate nature, but to buttress a formalist conception of instrumental music as absolute – i.e., as displaying a beauty that is 'self-contained and in no need of content from outside itself, that consists simply and solely of tones and their artistic combination' (28). Admitting that natural sound could provide a model for musical emulation would undermine this conception and legitimate the highly referential program music of composers such as Franz Liszt, with whom Hanslick was engaged in a protracted critical dispute. Consequently, the 'wealth of diverse voices' in nature falls silent before the resolutely humanist assertion that 'the composer cannot transform anything; he must create everything new' (74) from a uniquely anthropogenic species of sound: 'pure, measurable' tones. While regarded by history as conservative, Hanslick's aesthetic thought was radical by the standards of its day, effectively opening a phenomenological rift between the experiences of natural and of musical sound.

While Hanslick's musical aesthetics ran against the grain of Romantic nature-worship, it drew heavily on another strong current in mid-nineteenth century European thought – vulgar Hegelianism. The creation of properly 'musical' sonic material ('pure, measurable' tones) becomes for Hanslick the inception of a developmental historical

process in which the ‘musically competent Spirit’ guides successive generations of composers in drawing new possibilities out of the objectified material, marking mankind’s progression from the state of nature to self-realization through culture (71). This intersects his musical aesthetics with another nineteenth-century appropriation of quasi-Hegelian historicism: evolutionist theories of culture. Associating non-anthropogenic sound with the state of nature and tonal anthropogenic sound – i.e. Western music – with arrival into culture, Hanslick locates non-tonal musics somewhere in-between:

In nature [...] rhythm conveys neither melody nor harmony, but only incommensurable vibrations in the air. Rhythm, the sole musical element in nature, is also the first thus to be awakened in mankind. When the South Sea Islander bangs rhythmically with bits of metal and wooden staves and along with it sets up an unintelligible wailing, this is the natural kind of ‘music,’ yet it just is not *music*. But what we hear a Tyrolean peasant singing, into which seemingly no trace of art penetrates, is artistic music through and through. (70)

Crossing his binaristic distinction between natural and musical sound with a drawing-room understanding of cultural evolutionism, Hanslick foreshadows the early comparative musicological vision of world music history as a linear progression from inarticulate natural noise, through various ‘primitive’ stages – of which non-Western musics are vestigial remnants – to fully-developed Western polyphony.

Of course, Hanslick was neither the first nor the only Western scholar to deploy a noise/music binary in order to mark the border between nature and culture, savage and civilized, ‘unintelligible’ and ‘artistic.’ It is telling that the first example of comparative musical transcription, a 1636 study of Canadian and Brazilian indigenous songs by Marin Marsenne, also introduced ‘a logical-analytical chain of reasoning that linked the sounds of nature, inanimate objects, animals, children, and women with non-European people and their music,’ and ‘the sounds of culture, intelligent minds, humans, adults, (and) males’ with European art music (Ellingson 1992: 113). This episteme persisted well into the twentieth century, as evidenced by comparative musicologist Curt Sachs’ 1943 exclamation that ‘it is exciting to learn that the earliest known stage of music reappears in the babble songs of small children in European countries. For once the ontogenic law is fully confirmed: the individual summarized the evolution of mankind’ (44).

Few would acquit cultural evolutionism of its complicity in Western colonialism and the spate of historical atrocities which accompanied it. One could still ask whether so seemingly innocuous a cog in the overall discursive machinery as the ‘noise = nature/music = culture’ binary warrants equally intensive critique. As Edward Said reminds us, however, it is the deployment of precisely such binaries by which ‘reality is divided into various collectives [...] each category being not so much a

neutral designation as an evaluative interpretation' (227). The vicious circularity of denigrative evaluation and political repression imparts an eerie sense of self-fulfilling prophesy: it was racist evaluations of colonized peoples as incapable of rational thought or political self-representation through articulate speech which justified the imposition of the very institutions which concretized their silence. Of course, it could be argued that music has nothing to do with speaking subjecthood; Hanslick's concept of absolute music is, after all, premised on its ostensible lack of semantic content. Even the most resolutely non-referential music, however, stakes out a parallel field of syntactic relationships which render it a potent – and often socially elevated – means of facilitating intersubjectivity. Aesthetic evaluations of non-Western soundmaking as languishing between proper music and unintelligible, quasi-natural noise buttressed the cultural evolutionist denial of non-Westerners' full subjecthood by barring them from a second realm of sonically-mediated intersubjectivity, thus further relegating them to the status of noisy objects.

From music culture to sound culture

Hanslick has garnered his share of critics; most, however, have taken issue with his dismissal of musical referentialism, not the ethnocentric and anthropocentric implications of his radical distinction between music and noise. One exception is Japanese musicologist Kikkawa Eishi, whose *Nihon ongaku no seikaku* ('The Nature of Japanese Music') helped set the stage for a growing awareness among contemporary Japanese music scholars of the relationship between musical aesthetics and socioculturally-determined attitudes toward aural experience in general. Noting that for Hanslick, 'the classification of sounds as "music" or "noise" becomes a question not only of acoustics, but of aesthetic value' (1980: 218), Kikkawa goes on to spotlight Hanslick's conflation of non-Western music and natural sounds, and to condemn his dismissal of both:

Broken down and re-phrased in more extreme terms, the relationship can be summarized: noise = strange or unfamiliar voices = 'natural music' = the music of 'savages.' As a whole, this position evinces an indifferent attitude towards nature. No: a haughty attitude. (218-19)

This attitude concerns Kikkawa in part because Japanese traditional instrumental music is flush with musical references to natural sounds (1984: 79), which by Hanslick's criteria would render it inferior to Western absolute music. Kikkawa's objection, however, amounts to more than a defense of musical referentialism. At its heart is a very different concept of the relationship between anthropogenic and natural sound (1980: 213).

Kikkawa elaborates this concept in *Nihon ongaku no biteki kenkyū* ('Research on the Aesthetics of Japanese Music'), asserting that historically, the Japanese have not strictly discriminated between 'musical' and 'non-musical' sounds (1984: 68). Until

the introduction of Western musical thought in the mid-nineteenth century, there was no general term for music: specific sounding practices were referred to with specific words, including *asobi* ('play'), *uta* ('song' or 'poem'), and *gaku* ('comfort' or 'ease') or *ongaku* (literally, sonic comfort or enjoyment).⁴ It follows, of course, that there was no indigenous equivalent to the Western tradition of musical aesthetics (exemplified by works such as *On the Musically Beautiful*). Drawing on a range of sources, including classical literature, visual art, and musical and organological analysis, Kikkawa reconstructs what could be called an indigenous aesthetics (*bigaku*) of sounding and listening practices. The quality he locates at its heart is *onshoku*, or 'sound colour'.

An oft-cited example of the importance of *onshoku* is the concept of *sawari*. Translated by Takemitsu as 'touch' or 'obstacle' (1995: 64), *sawari* refers to sound-modifiers affixed to certain traditional instruments in order to complicate their timbres, as well as to the sounds made thereby. The *sawari* of the *shamisen* (three-stringed plucked lute), for example, is a tiny strip of material affixed to the neck below the tuning-pegs, just under the lowest string; when the string is struck open, it vibrates against the *sawari*, producing a complex series of overtones. This sound color distinguishes the *shamisen* from the *sanxian* and *sanshin*, its Chinese and Ryūkyūan forerunners. Significantly, the *biwa* lute and the *nōkan* flute, both of foreign origin, also picked up *sawari* at some point over the course of their 'Japanization'. Describing the 'muddy' sound of the *sawari* as key to the *shamisen's* appeal, Kikkawa notes with interest that at the same time Western instrumental music was developing towards an ideal of 'pure, measureable' tones, the Japanese were devising means of making the timbres of imported instruments noisier (73).

In order to fully grasp the Japanese 'principle of esteem for sound color' (*onshoku sonchōshugi*), Kikkawa writes, we must look to the broader artistic outlook of the premodern Japanese. In *Oto, ongaku, otōfūkei to nichijō seikatsu* ('Sound, Music, Soundscape, and Everyday Life'), Yamagishi Miho develops Kikkawa's aesthetics in a bio-regionalist direction, arguing that agrarian life in premodern Japan necessitated the development of a heightened sensitivity to regionally specific environmental cues indicative of climactic change, including the voices of seasonal insects and birds, the sounds of wind and rain, and even the effect of atmospheric conditions on the reverberation of ambient sounds (2006: 246-47). For Yamagishi, this sensitivity is evident in musical phenomena such as the wide range of percussive techniques used by theatrical instrumental ensembles to represent various kinds of rainfall, snowfall, and atmospheric effects (247-51), as well as in non-musical phenomena such as the prevalence of onomatopoeic descriptors for different kinds of wind and rain (247). This climactic determinist account of the evolution of Japanese 'sound culture' draws dangerously close to the cultural essentialism of *Nihonjinron*,⁵ and should be qualified as speculative rather than grounded on hard historical evidence. Representational politics aside, however, Yamagishi demonstrates how the concept of a broadly-ranging sound culture can provide a theoretical interface between music, sounding and listening practices conventionally considered non-musical, and other aspects of

everyday life.

I also find both moving and significant her observation that the kabuki percussionist's timbral repertoire, for example, should contain something so sublime as *yukioroshi* – a 'dull sound, as if the entire atmosphere were vibrating,' perceived as evoking the deep, distant thunder which precedes heavy snowfall on the coast of the Sea of Japan (247). Kikkawa suggests that in order to fully grasp the aesthetic vehemence of such complex, noisy sounds as *yukioroshi* and the *sawari* of the *shamisen*, we must look beyond music to the matrix of aesthetic concepts which structure traditional Japanese interpretations of the relationship between humans and nature (1980: 213). One such concept is *mono no aware*, or 'the pathos of things.' An exclamatory particle found in classical poetry, *aware* was explicated by Nativist philologist (*Kokugakusha*) Motoori Norinaga (1730-1801) as a testament to humanity's shared capacity to be emotionally and spiritually affected by things in nature. The tradition most commonly associated with *mono no aware* is *hanami*, or cherry-blossom viewing: the blossoms, which begin to fall almost upon blooming, arouse a deeply affecting consciousness of the transience of life. Such associations have bound contemporary understandings of *mono no aware* strongly to the visual; certain sounds, however, were traditionally perceived as equally rich with *aware*. Yamagishi, for example, mentions an old custom of waiting until morning to hear the first nightingale-warble of the New Year (*hatsune*). Embraced by successive generations of poets as a seasonal marker (*kisetsugo*), the solitary voice of the Japanese nightingale (*uguisu*) became 'a formalized expression of the affective quality of life' analogous to cherry blossoms (2006: 247). Likewise, the voices of insects, heard as 'a medium which invites the tears of men,' became a seasonal marker for autumn (249).

The traditional Japanese appreciation for insect sounds in particular manifested more broadly in the practice of *mushikiki*, or 'insect-listening.' A seasonal social activity analogous to *hanami*, *mushikiki* became widespread among Japanese city-dwellers of the Edo period (1603-1868), in part thanks to the inclusion of renowned insect-listening spots in popular guidebooks such as the 1834 'Illustrated Guide to Famous Sites in Edo' (*Edo Meisho Zue*). A fascinating excursion into bio-regional history, Daimon Satoru's 'Mushi-uru Mura' ('Insect-Selling Village') shows how *mushikiki* not only impacted Japanese perceptions of regional identity, but 'trickled down' into other cultural domains, such as folk crafts (*mushikago*, 'insect cages'), eventually spawning a specialized regional economy (*mushiurigyō*, 'insect-selling industry') (2009: 104-117). Tracing the rise of the *mushiurigyō* in nineteenth century Kanazawa, and its subsequent disintegration as locals lost interest in *mushikiki* after the Pacific War, Daimon demonstrates how shifts in sound culture can ripple outward through the culture as a whole, effecting concrete changes in the material conditions of social life.

Daimon concludes his study by suggesting that post-war economic hardship 'snatched away the indulgent spirit' needed to take pleasure in natural phenomena like insect sounds, bringing an end to the popularity of *mushikiki* (117). It is telling, however, that while *hanami* never lost its pre-war vitality, eventually attaining

worldwide recognition as a symbol of the Japanese sensitivity to nature, the practice of *mushikiki* has slipped into obscurity. Following Keiko Torigoe, it is possible to speculate that the post-war spread of Western sound culture might have had something to do with this. In *Nihon no oto no bunka* ('The Sound-culture of Japan'), Torigoe contends that Western sound culture's rigorous binary distinction between musical and natural sounds has historically neglected the potential of the latter to impart singular aesthetic experiences. Likewise, in *Oto to metafoa* ('Sound and Metaphor'), musicologist Fujiwara Reiko discusses how as a result of the globalisation of Western modernity, local sounds such as the noise of festivals, traditional instruments, and the voices of seasonal insects and birds are being replaced by 'ubiquitous' sounds (2005: 12) such as traffic, the roar of airplanes, and the pulsing electronic background music of shops. Both Torigoe and Fujiwara suggest that this has contributed to a disregard for natural and other regionally-specific soundscapes which mirrors our disregard for our environment in general.

Post-natural noise

This is certainly true of Tokyo, the city in which Merzbow's Akita Masami was raised, and which deeply influenced his aesthetic vision. In stark contrast to the medieval and early-modern Japanese ideal of harmony between the anthropogenic and non-anthropogenic sound-worlds, Merzbow's noise condenses and amplifies the violently post-natural quality of man-made sound: in a 1997 interview, Akita expressed a desire 'to kill the much too noisy Japanese by (his) own Noise ... to make silence by [his] Noise' (Hensley 2004). At first glance, this seems antithetical to Morris' concept of Green composition: far from attempting 'to find some way of representing relations between subject and object that can act as a metaphor for the proper relations between human beings and the environment' (Morris 1998, 134), Merzbow deepens the antinomy between subject and object to the point of abjection. In what way, then, should we interpret Merzbow's titular evocations of strong environmental rhetoric?

One line of argument holds that Merzbow's titles and sonic content are effectively unrelated, or even that the practices of naming and of noisemaking stand in a relation of opposition. In *Noise Music: A History*, Paul Hegarty suggests that Merzbow's provocative titles are 'framing[s] which infiltrate[s] our listening...I think the listener is being asked to listen for content—i.e. the position against whale hunting, but the sound resists' (2007: 164). This position is defensible: after all, Akita himself once claimed that 'there are no special images of ideology behind Merzbow...Japanese noise relishes the ecstasy of sound itself' (Hensley 2004: 60). While this description fits most of Merzbow's early work, as well as some of his more recent animal-themed pieces, I would argue that the final minutes of *Dolphin Sonar* are rich with referential content. Cutting out the midrange frequencies which enfold nearly the entire album, Merzbow twists the high-frequency screech which has dominated its foreground to a peak of intensity, then silences it. A semi-regular metallic pounding is introduced, doubled by a harsh pulse, then a sharply pronounced metallic scraping reminiscent

of a knife on bone. Set in stark relief against a backdrop of rumbling bass, the piece's random squelches are modulated into wet and awkwardly heavy thumps, sonic traces of wet flesh. For any listener who has seen bootlegged videos of the Wakayama drive catches, it takes little musicological detective work to determine what this signifies. Emerging out of an hour-long wash of noise, the concreteness of the slaughterhouse sounds with which Merzbow ends *Dolphin Sonar* makes for a nauseating dénouement.

If the purpose of noisy sounds in Japanese traditional music is to place anthropogenic and natural sound on a continuum, evoking aesthetic sensitivity and ethical 'humility' with regard to nature (Kikkawa 1980: 219), the purpose behind Merzbow's noise, I believe, is to make palpable the unique capacity of manmade sound to cause harm. Perhaps the most chilling aspect of *Dolphin Sonar*'s conclusion is the clarity it imparts in retrospect on other aspects of the piece – for example, the regular recurrence of a dull, irregular metallic pounding. The technique employed in Wakayama, drive fishing, is named for the aurally similar practice of driving dolphins into shallow harbors by pounding on metal rods submerged in the water, disrupting their ability to navigate and forestalling the possibility of escape. Another, more anthropocentric example of the threat potential of anthropogenic sound is its recent use as a 'no-touch' torture technique: in her provocative 2006 'Music as Torture/Music as Weapon', Susan Cusick indicates that both music and multi-frequency noise such as Merzbow's are commonly used by interrogators to turn detainees' environments into sources of disorientation and pain without technically violating international law (Cusick 2006). Finally, the singularly electroacoustic quality of Merzbow's noise recalls a third, more diffuse form of sonic violence: noise pollution. Compositions such as *Dolphin Sonar* are distinctly postnatural, comprised of sounds which could not have been heard before the various technological revolutions which have irrevocably altered the global environment as a whole – including its soundscape. While not as immediately deleterious to the environment as modernity's physical wastes, noise pollution has been shown to have adverse effects on terrestrial and marine ecosystems (see, for example, Firestone and Jarvis 2007).

Noise music can be heard as refiguring this multi-tiered threat potential of anthropogenic sound as an aesthetic cue. Scholars and critics of noise music frequently interpret the aesthetics of extreme noise such as Merzbow's as an aural analogue to sexual bondage, in which the transgression of the bounds of subjectivity inherent in extreme pain is itself experienced as pleasurable. Akita's own avowed interest in Japanese rope bondage (*kinbaku*) and alternative sexualities certainly lends credence to such Bataille accounts of the phenomenology of extreme noise. As *Dolphin Sonar* demonstrates, however, the threat which extreme noise poses to the listening subject can also be interpreted on an ethical level. Merzbow's noise temporarily repositions the listening subject as a mere object upon which sound acts. In the specific case of *Dolphin Sonar*, it forces the human listener to imagine the sound-world of the hunted dolphin. Noise such as this, which places the listener in a victim position, recalls Paul Ricoeur's concept of 'an imperative to the duty of memory' (Ricoeur 2003: 88)

to consider first not the authors of actions, but the sufferers – in this case, the non-human sufferers of human instrumentalization and exploitation.

The prevailing interpretation of noise music exemplified by Hegarty and the interpretation I have suggested are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, following Theodor Adorno's writings on the critical capacity of music, one could argue that it is precisely the sadistic/masochistic aspect of extreme noise which empowers it as a critique of Western modernity. Hanslick's statement that nature gives us 'only the raw physical materials which we make subservient to music' resonates deeply with Horkheimer and Adorno's assertion that the Enlightenment was driven by 'the [Baconian] vision that we should "command nature by action"' (Adorno 2000: 42) – which is to say, that we should give form to nature's raw materiality in accordance with culturally productive ends. Twentieth-century historical and environmental catastrophes, however, have irrevocably darkened this vision, leading Adorno and others to question Western modernity's continuing ability to support a meaningful culture. Writing on the emergence of ecological crisis as a trope in postmodern American fiction, for example, Cynthia Deitering introduces the category of 'the postnatural novel', in which an inescapable 'toxic consciousness' of consumption and refuse reflects 'a shift in our cultural identity [...] from a culture defined by its production to a culture defined by its waste' (196). Deitering proposes that novels such as Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985), traumatized by the catastrophic consequences of the Baconian imperative toward instrumentalization, employ 'a new way of seeing – a sort of x-ray vision – with which we perceive the waste forms inherent in the landscape and material objects around us' (198).

I would argue that a similar thread of toxic consciousness runs through Western/global musical modernism and postmodernism, linking such unlikely figures as Adorno and Merzbow. Preceding Deitering's postnatural novels by half a century, Adorno's music criticism is haunted by premonitions of the 'waste form' of Western art music. In *Philosophy of Modern Music*, for example, Adorno outlines a process which he calls 'the musical domination of nature' (64): as our understanding and technical mastery of 'the musical material' progresses in negative-dialectical relation to changing social conditions, established musical conventions – such as tonality – begin to sound increasingly outmoded. With serialism, the systematic exploitation of the combinational potential of all twelve tones, this process of 'the musical domination of nature' reaches its apex; ironically, however, the schematized tone-scape which results fails utterly as an expressive medium (117). Caught between the 'shabbiness and exhaustion' (36) of conventional tonality and the 'alienated, hostile, and dominating power' (117) of serialism, as if between a refuse-heap and the crystalline surface of another world, Western art music 'dies away unheard, without even an echo' (133). To adopt a context-appropriate metaphor, the cause of its death is ecological neglect: realizing total control over the 'musical material,' this would-be 'postnatural' music renders itself impartial to the affective requirements of human life. Extreme noise can be heard as pushing the Adornian dialectic a step further by blurring the line between

music, famously defined by John Blacking as ‘humanly organized sound’ (1974), and the darker manifestations of anthropogenic sound: pollutant, torture technique, weapon. In Merzbow, the postnatural soundscape’s impartiality toward the listening subject is radicalized into hostility.

Conclusion: Towards an ecocritical approach to sound culture

In his 1996 essay ‘Nature and Silence’, former Earth First! activist Christopher Manes suggests that by relegating nature to ‘the depths of silence and instrumentality’, modern culture has produced a radically alienated human subjectivity which ‘only speaks soliloquies in a world of irrational silences’ (1996: 17). Though historically and structurally unrelated to the tenets of deep ecology, concepts such as *mono no aware* and practices such as *mushikiki*, which establish things in nature as invitations to shared aesthetic experience, offer a similarly provocative riposte to Western nature-culture binarism. According to Norinaga, it is the thirst for fellow-feeling touched on by *aware* which moves us to aesthetic creation, thus assuring the perpetual renewal of cultural traditions. If this is the case, might systematically subjecting nature to the regime of order signal not the triumph of human culture, but its estrangement from its historical and phenomenological roots? While it is important not to romanticise non-Western epistemologies, it is equally important to consider them with a gravity equal to that we grant our own. Accordingly, we must consider the possibility that by silencing nature, radical humanism harbours the potential to enervate culture – and that conventional Western listening and sounding practices may be complicit.

Though usually stopping short of offering such naked critique, Torigoe, Fujiwara, and other contemporary Japanese musicologists suggest that Western sound culture’s binary distinction between musical and non-musical sounds has closed our ears both to the potential beauty of natural soundscapes, and to the ways our own soundmaking practices have altered them (Torigoe 1994: 62-63). This has effected subtle but significant changes in Japanese sound-culture. Seizing on a trend toward bioregionalism in recent Japanese scholarly and popular writing, Torigoe, Fujiwara, and Yamagishi imply that a reinvestigation of traditional aesthetics could inform a more ecologically viable epistemology of sound. Torigoe, for example, argues that a paradigm shift ‘from music to sound, and from musical aesthetics to an aesthetics of everyday life as mediated by hearing’ (74) could enrich human experience by restoring our ability to find aesthetic pleasure in natural sounds – thus motivating us to moderate our own noisemaking. She goes on to suggest that the growth of soundscape studies in Japan and the consequent inception of public-works projects oriented toward the preservation of natural soundscapes⁶ constitute important first steps toward a restoration of balance between the human and natural sound-worlds.

Needless to say, the critical approach at work in Akita Masami’s sound art is less reserved. While earlier compositional deconstructions of the noise-music binary (such as Luigi Russolo’s noise concerts or Pierre Schaeffer and Edgard Varese’s tape compositions) can be heard as celebratory, pieces such as *Dolphin Sonar* establish a

disturbing dialectical tension between erotic exultation in noise and sober awareness of its complicity in targeted and systematic violence. Placing the sonic detritus of modernity in a listening context normally reserved for 'humanly organised sound,' Merzbow reveals the uncomfortable kinship of music and post-natural noise as sounds of organised humanity. This symbolically negates modern musical culture's claim to produce meaningful works, rather than just waste-to-be. One could even argue that extreme noise restores the pre-'materiality' of sound: proposing the natural right of sound to refuse instrumentalisation, it impugns the validity of the cultural ends to which natural 'materials' are put. Over a decade after Akita Masami expressed a desire 'to make silence by [his] Noise,' he has adopted the more nuanced goal of giving voice to the sonic 'material' which Western ideologies of music have long held silent. This may not have detracted in the least from the fury of his noise, but it has greatly deepened its significance.

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ENDNOTES

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2. Henceforth, all translations from the Japanese are my own.
4. *Ongaku* is the current general term for music. While first recorded in the *Shoku Nihongi*, written in 797, the word "ongaku" was used prior to the Meiji period specifically to refer to music of Chinese origin (21-22).
5. *Nihonjinron* denotes the quasi-scholarly genre of 'theories on the Japanese', which range from innocuous anthologies of cliched observations on Japanese uniqueness to cultural chauvinist polemics. Their common feature is an essentialist conception of Japanese culture as ahistorical, homogenous, and radically unique. For more on *Nihonjinron* ideology in Japanese music scholarship, see Shepherd (1991).
6. Most notably the Ministry of the Environment's 1996 '100 Soundscapes of Japan' project (<http://www.env.go.jp/air/life/oto/>)

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