



ENVIRONMENTAL HUMANITIES IN PRACTICE

Sounding Together

A Reflection on Extending Acoustic Assemblages and Transforming Sonic Environments in Improvisative Music

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Abstract This article reflects on the participation of humans and other species as listening and sounding entities in creating sonic environments. The article offers a preliminary reflexive consideration of the author's current composition-improvisation project, discussing how the project's pieces transform and transport particular sonic environments of the author's experience to new settings. The author meditates through birdsong on what it sounds like to compose, improvise, and perform with the sonic affordances of our surroundings. The article suggests that extensions of interspecies and interhuman acoustic assemblages and sonic affordances in composition and improvisation can bring overlapping elements of world-making projects into focus and open up potentialities for new ones. In the article, the author blends reflection with musical description and analysis of one of the project's pieces, refusing to situate nature as other and rejecting a posture that uses nonhuman sound for personal (human) benefit. By focusing on the edge effects of the overlapping world-making projects at the site of the Zealandia Te Mārā a Tāne Wildlife Sanctuary in Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington, Aotearoa New Zealand, and on challenging settler colonial listening practices, the article reflects on the implications of sharing spaces with other humans and with countless species beyond our own.

Keywords critical improvisation studies, edge effects, sonic togetherness, interspecies acoustic assemblages, performance studies

Introduction

When sound emanates from a humming human voice, from a whirring electric car, or from the warbling voice box of a bird, it connects entities with one another. Those who feel and hear the sonic vibrations of a shout, of a thundering bolt of lightning, or of a door slamming from a draft, do so together, whether literally together in

the same place or across great distances in time and space, linked by technologies that record, replicate, and transmit those vibrations. This sonic togetherness, in its countless manifestations, is not a universal sameness connecting human and nonhuman entities with one another. Rather, it is necessarily uneven and heterogeneous, conditioned by countless factors such as species, temporality, spatiality, gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and more. Sonic togetherness is a type of what Ana María Ochoa Gautier calls an “acoustic assemblage,” the set of transformative and generative relations made between “entities that hear, notions of the sonorous producing entities, and notions of the type of relationships between them.”¹ In this article, I approach sonic togetherness as acoustic assemblage from my position as an improviser and composer, multiply situated in various contingent and shifting relations to a number of listening and sound-producing entities. Combining reflection with musical description and analysis, I describe and engage with particular processes of composition and musical performance that I have—intentionally—oriented toward the plethora of sounds and soundings that animate relations among humans and nonhumans alike.

In framing these processes of interrelational making, the unevenness of sonic togetherness comes quickly into focus.² Ochoa Gautier’s work, which takes the case of listening and other sonic practices in nineteenth-century Colombia, foregrounds the ways that acoustic assemblages bring about difference in important ways. As difference-making networks, acoustic assemblages engender distinctions between various of their constitutive entities, including, in Ochoa Gautier’s case, between human and nonhuman and between European and Other. In her concluding thoughts on the matter, she seems to make room for a range of potentialities for acoustic assemblages, suggesting that humans are defined as a species in part by their “capacity to transform the sounds they emit into multiple possibilities of relationality and signification between different entities.”³ Her formulation thus allows for, alongside the ability for acoustic assemblages to make difference and thus bring about political relations of power, other possibilities of relationality and signification between entities in such assemblages where humans exercise this agency of the transformation of sound. Entities can be distanced from each other in this transformation, but they can also be brought in closer proximity, even when difference is made, or made clear. Sonic togetherness, then, recognizes and does not ignore difference. But it also allows for human and nonhuman entities to imagine, and manifest, new possibilities for relationality and signification between them and among the world-making projects in which they are invested.⁴

1. Ochoa Gautier, *Aurality*, 22–23.

2. See Ingold, *Being Alive*.

3. Ochoa Gautier, *Aurality*, 204.

4. Ochoa Gautier’s work participates in discourses of the multifaceted field of sound studies (see, e.g., Auyoyard and Torgue, *Sonic Experience*; Novak and Sakakeeny, *Keywords in Sound*). For related approaches to the relationality and sociality of sound, see, e.g., Abe, *Resonances of Chindon-ya*; Feld, *Sound and Sentiment*; Labelle, *Acoustic Territories*; Labelle, *Background Noise*.

My discussion of sonic togetherness here is a preliminary reflection on the making processes of my current improvisation-based composition project. I initially developed much of the project's material for a quintet of musicians, including myself, who were trained in jazz performance and have experience with a number of popular music and other styles. I later expanded the compositions of this project to include a string quartet, electing to work with string players who improvise but, notably, have been trained as orchestral players. As an ensemble we have performed the project a number of times, and we have recorded the compositions of the project, released as an album titled *Ephemeral* in 2023.

The project's compositions are all, in one way or another, inspired by instances of sonic togetherness from my own experiences in particular times and places. I thus consider sonic togetherness not only in the sense of the musicians performing together, and not only in terms of the togetherness with audiences at those performances, but also as I conceived the pieces as dialogues with and extensions of sonic spaces of my experience.⁵ Attention to those spaces and to the world-making projects in which they are entangled reveals what the anthropologist Anna Tsing calls the "edge effects" at the boundaries between such projects.⁶ These compositions and performances, taken together, are an example of the "ontological edgemaking" outlined by Tsing—sonic practice focused on the making and becoming occurring at the boundaries of world-making projects, making and becoming that reflects designs (mine, others') for living together. I meditate here on what it sounds like to compose, improvise, and perform with the sonic affordances of our surroundings, with aims of grounding ways of living together at the intersection and convergence of any number of acoustic assemblages.

I focus on one example from this project, my composition called "speak to me of yesterday and tomorrow (elusive as the dead)," as it relates to the song of a particular bird. This example, like all of the compositions of this project, is grounded in the concept that sonic activity makes spaces for belonging (with the understanding that many forms of belonging have exclusionary boundaries). As human agency in sound is distributed across multiple positionalities, and as it is animated by affordances and actions of nonhumans, space is made, and remade, in ways that reflect this distributed agency.⁷ For these compositions, multiplicitous agency and multiple affordances come together as spaces are made at each performance and each hearing of the pieces. Sonic togetherness at the edges of world-making projects is translated, transmitted, and shared in new spaces to extend sounding environments and the relationalities that they engender.

In my discussion of the project, I also explore the implications of how interspecies and interhuman sonic affordances manifest in composition and improvisation, bringing

5. See Small, *Musicking*.

6. Tsing, "Sociality of Birds"; see also Tsing, "Unruly Edges."

7. Wilson, "Sonic Space-Making on the Margins of Power"; see also Steingo, *Kwaito's Promise*; Enfield and Kockelman, *Distributed Agency*; Abe, *Resonances of Chindon-ya*.

the overlapping of multiple world-making projects into focus. I refuse to situate nature as “other,” and I reject a posture that uses sounds produced by other beings for personal benefit. Instead, I situate human sonic agency, in acts such as improvisation and composition, as a constituent part of various acoustic assemblages at and across the edges of worlds and the projects making them. These improvisative compositions, then, are material embodiments of human situatedness in broader sonic ecologies of all kinds, transporting elements of those ecologies to new times and places at each performance and hearing.⁸

World-Making Projects at the Edges of the Zealandia Te Mārā a Tāne Wildlife Sanctuary

In 2017 I began noticing a particular bird call near where I live and work in Te Whanganui-a-Tara (Wellington), Aotearoa (New Zealand), not long after I had relocated from Los Angeles. The call was occasional and intermittent, and it had a distinct, singable melody that varied slightly each time. The more I heard this call, the more familiar it became. The sound became a sort of comfort for me, in the sense that I felt the bird was keeping me company at a time in my life when I really needed it, though I had never, and have never, seen this particular bird. I visited the New Zealand Department of Conservation website, which is full of photos and audio recordings of New Zealand native birds, and found that the bird was a riroriro (*Gerygone igata*, gray warbler), that this species is widely distributed throughout Aotearoa, and that each individual bird in this species has an individual call.⁹

I became acquainted with this individual riroriro and its call in the Kelburn neighborhood of Wellington, about five hundred meters, over a few rolling hills of suburban streets, from the 550-acre (nearly a square mile) Zealandia Te Mārā a Tāne Wildlife Sanctuary. Describing itself as the world’s first fully fenced urban ecosanctuary, Zealandia was founded by Wellingtonians Jim and Eve Lynch, who in 1990 conceived a plan for urban community conservation with the slogan “bring the birds back to Wellington.”¹⁰ Beginning as a grassroots community project among middle-class white settler New Zealanders, Zealandia has attracted the labor of thousands of people who shared the Lynches’ vision, as well as significant public and private funding. It developed as a tourist attraction to ensure its economic sustainability, and has inspired similar

8. I use “improvisative” in line with discourses in critical improvisation studies. Describing music as improvisational or improvisatory suggests that the music is simply related to or characterized by improvisation, sometimes implying an unplanned or spontaneous approach. Improvisative music has a slightly more active, agentive, and structural meaning in this discourse, as it refers to music with a tendency, disposition, or function for improvisation. See, e.g., Lewis, “Improvised Music after 1950”; McMullen, “Improvisative.”

9. “Grey Warbler/Riroriro,” Department of Conservation—Te Papa Atawhai, Te Kāwanatanga o Aotearoa—New Zealand Government, <https://www.doc.govt.nz/nature/native-animals/birds/birds-a-z/grey-warbler-riroriro/> (accessed December 8, 2021).

10. “The Sanctuary,” Zealandia Te Mārā a Tāne, <https://www.visitzealandia.com/About> (accessed December 9, 2021); Lynch, *Zealandia*.

ecosanctuaries around the country. In recent years, Zealandia has begun to recognize its grounding in white settler conservation projects and to incorporate Indigenous Māori individuals and values into its governance and operations.¹¹ With a “500-year vision to connect people with nature and help native wildlife flourish in Wellington and beyond,” according to its website, Zealandia is a civic project that has become a source of pride for many Wellingtonians.

The 8.6 km fence surrounding Zealandia, completed in 1999, is known for keeping out mammalian predators and enabling rare and endangered native bird species to thrive, such as the flightless little spotted kiwi, the tīeke (saddleback), and the hihi (stitchbird). As a result of the development of the ecosanctuary, as well as rat and possum control programs instituted by the Wellington Regional Council and the Department of Conservation in the 1990s, birdlife outside the sanctuary’s fence has also proliferated in what is known as a “halo effect.”¹² Surrounding the sanctuary, the populations of native birds that were formerly scarce, including the tūi, kākā (parrot), and kererū (wood pigeon), have significantly increased throughout the city.¹³ Middle-class suburban Wellingtonians have welcomed the virtuosic calls of the dual-voice-box tūi as an addition to the acoustic assemblages of their neighborhoods as the birds feed on the nectar of the flowering plants people have planted in backyards to attract them. In contrast, the kākā, formerly endangered, has been known to damage decks and roofs of suburban houses. Residents, in their enthusiasm to connect with the growing population of native birds, have fed kākā foods inappropriate for their diet, causing malnutrition, disease, and developmental deformities, as well as increasing rat populations at feeding sites. Zealandia has made efforts to educate the public on appropriate interactions with kākā to support kākā health and well-being, to avoid damage to residential property, and to minimize infestations of rats, which also prey on several vulnerable species of native birds and their eggs.¹⁴ In one of the more clear examples of edge effects, this intersection of multiple world-making projects—of conservationists, of suburban residents, of kākā, and of rats—reveals overlapping curiosities between and among humans and other species.¹⁵ The project of the conservationists and the political and economic forces behind it, in some sense, guide behaviors at the overlap of these curiosities, suggesting a hierarchy of species that is ordered by aims to reduce harm to humans (and their property) and to species endemic to Aotearoa.

My ongoing encounters and overlap with this riroriro, at the site of the halo effect of the Zealandia fenceline, illuminate world-making projects (of birds of various

11. See Marques et al., “Bicultural Landscapes and Ecological Restoration,” 49.

12. Miskelly, Empson, and Wright, “Forest Birds Recolonising Wellington.”

13. This so-called halo effect for fenced ecosanctuaries is limited and contingent on any number of factors outside the fence related to factors such as distribution of food resources and predator species (see Burge et al., “Assessing the Habitat and Functional Connectivity”).

14. Cote et al., “Evaluating the Interactions”; see comments from Zealandia Conservation Manager Dr. Danielle Shanahan, “Why We don’t Sell Kākā Food.”

15. See Hathaway, “Elusive Fungus?”; Donati, “Herding Is His Favourite Thing in the World.”

species, of middle-class suburban Wellingtonians, of settler conservationists, of governmental agencies) less clearly than interactions involving tūis or kākās. Riroriros are among the most common birds across Aotearoa, living with human populations of the islands since humans' first arrival about eight hundred years ago. They are small birds, and typically shy. As a result, riroriros are known by their warbling, high-pitched melodic calls rather than by their appearance. Only male riroriros sing, and their songs are important in maintaining their territories, which they sometimes maintain year round.¹⁶ Unlike flightless and other native birds that nest on the ground (and that have been vulnerable to introduced mammals), riroriros construct their nests to hang from a branch, with a side entrance hole facing away from the prevailing wind.

An increase in riroriro numbers in Wellington suburbs near Zealandia since the 1990s has been documented, but perhaps because of its persistent ubiquity or because of an absence of mutually detrimental activities among riroriros and humans (in contrast to kākā-human interactions), it is not a species whose presence is generally associated with the Zealandia halo effect or predator elimination efforts.¹⁷ I, however, a relative newcomer to Aotearoa, encountered a particular riroriro and its song intermingled with the sights and sounds of tūis, kākās, and birds of all the other species that had increased in number before my arrival. Unbeknownst to me at the time, the construction of Zealandia, along with a number of related conservation efforts, had given this and other riroriros affordances that further enhanced their ability to make their worlds among humans and other introduced mammals. In addition to the biodiverse ecosanctuary, among these affordances were city council and resident priorities for native trees and other plants to pervade suburban areas, as well as a national-state value system that highly revered native species.¹⁸ Riroriros' shy tendencies, small, agile bodies, and protected nesting practices have allowed the edges of their worlds and their projects to overlap with those of many species, including humans.

The call of the riroriro that maintained a territory intersecting the spaces of my life was typical of its species, consisting of a starting phrase followed by a different phrase that the bird sometimes repeated up to three times, with a total duration between five and twelve seconds.¹⁹ In contrast to the tūis that frequently occupied nearby trees with their dual-voice-boxes sounding out noisy and complex calls, this riroriro's call occupied a narrow frequency range and approximately seven distinct pitches that sometimes varied. But what piqued my curiosity about this bird was not the aesthetic of the melody or rhythm of its call. Rather, I was struck by how it periodically but

16. Gill, "Breeding of the Grey Warbler."

17. Brockie and Duncan, "Long Term Trends in Wellington City Bird Counts."

18. Most native animal species, including all native birds, are protected by Wildlife Act of 1953, which forbids killing or possessing native animals without a permit. See "Wildlife Act of 1953: Legislation," Department of Conservation—Te Papa Atawhai, <https://www.doc.govt.nz/about-us/our-role/legislation/wildlife-act/> (accessed December 12, 2021).

19. Azar, Bell, and Borowiec, "Temporal Change of the Song."

intermittently made its presence known through its call, which varied in the number of repetitions of its final phrase (and sometimes slightly in pitch frequencies) but was otherwise always the same. Soon after the bird's call had first foregrounded itself in my listening practice, its song began to condition my own space with a sense of familiarity. I felt comfort from the repeating sound that indicated the presence of another, not realizing at the time that this emergent acoustic assemblage was at the intersection of several world-making projects, including those of the Zealandia conservationists, of riroriros and birds of other species, of the university that had hired me to relocate to Wellington, and of my own.

Improvisative Composition: Expanding Edge Effects and Extending Acoustic Assemblages

My curiosities about this bird that had become somewhat of a constant presence had their limits. I didn't have a strong desire to see the bird, and I learned quickly that it was difficult to see anyway. I also didn't seek to engage with the bird through producing sounds of my own in hopes to stimulate some sort of response.²⁰ Neither did I seek to iconicize the bird's call through mimicry in a composition or performance in the legacy of Olivier Messiaen or numerous New Zealand composers such as Jenny McLeod (e.g., *For Seven*, 1969), who studied with Messiaen, Eve de Castro Robinson (e.g., *Other Echoes*, 2000, which notably opens with a solo violin mimicking birdsong), Douglas Lilburn (e.g., *Summer Voices*, 1969), or others.²¹ Instead, my sonic embeddedness with the bird was about listening and attunement. I was more curious about the assemblage in which I found myself, about how the constancy of this bird, inseparable from its call, was producing for me an affect of companionship. I was curious about how this assemblage could be extended, how this sonic togetherness and its attendant affect and feeling could be expanded. These curiosities led me to wonder whether it might be possible to extend this acoustic assemblage through improvisation-composition in a way that foregrounded listening and attunement rather than mimicry or iconicization.

Emerging from these curiosities was an approach to improvisation-composition grounded in seeking to destabilize ways of listening typical in presentational music performance.²² Instead of presenting the song of this riroriro, which would encourage a mode of listening quite distant from those of the acoustic assemblage at hand, I wanted

20. By contrast, during the 2020 COVID-19 lockdowns in New Zealand, a number of instrumental musicians reported their own experiments in sonic dialogue with birds in their backyards. The extended time period at home had directed more aural attention to the overlapping edges of worlds, which is among the effects of paradigm-shifting world-making projects related to another organism, SARS-CoV-2 (see Rothmüller, "Covid-19").

21. Alternatively, many Aotearoa composers, especially those with Māori whakapapa (genealogy) such as Gillian Whitehead, have participated in the revival of taongo pūoro, Māori musical instruments, whose use nearly died out completely as a result of European settler colonization. Taongo pūoro is embedded with sounds of birds, of the wind, and of other interconnected entities, sometimes iconicizing these sounds and always participating in a number of acoustic assemblages extending beyond performance spaces.

22. Turino, *Music as Social Life*.

to reference it in an improvisative manner. I decided to embed my hearings of the song in a number of musical elements so that multiple ways of perceiving it (or not) would be available to listeners at once, as in the acoustic assemblages of this bird. For example, near the beginning of the piece, I set an improvisative approximation of the riroriro's two phrases in the saxophone, trumpet, first violin, and cello simultaneously. The bass and guitar, each repeating three-bar ostinatos, outline two different key centers; the second violin and viola join the bass ostinato and improvise in key centers of their choice. While the call of the bird could be approximated to a major key in the European harmonic system if a hearer's listening frames it as such, the three or more simultaneous key centers (of the bass, the guitar, the approximation of the call, and the improvising strings) resist any listening tendencies that might seek to conform the call to one key or another. In terms of time, the three-bar repeating phrases of the guitar, bass, second violin, viola, and drums provide a framework, but the rhythm and pulse of the saxophone, trumpet, first violin, and cello parts referencing the riroriro are unspecified. They vary in durations and in tempo significantly depending on the performance. The call of this riroriro is thus not confined to a particular tonal or rhythmic framework. Instead, the call is situated in multiple musical frameworks at once, affording it with improvisative avenues in pitch, timbre, rhythm, harmony, and texture, by which it can transform, disappear, and reappear.

As I prepared for the first performance of the piece, I started learning more about the riroriro species, and found that it has been frequently evoked in poetry.²³ One of these poems seemed to gesture toward the affective presence of the bird with whose territory I was overlapping.²⁴ In the poem, by Central Otago poet and New Zealand Poet Laureate Brian Turner (b. 1944), from volume 56 of the series "Thoughts on Tussock," a riroriro sounds with gray, hazy weather conditions; with a time of day (dusk) when bird calls typically increase; with the place-specific geological surface of the earth; with human frustrations in relation to plant life (the vast tussock grasslands of New Zealand's South Island); and with a reference to the landscape painting of Rita Angus (1908–1970) as conditioning the experience. At performances, sometimes I read an excerpt of this poem, understanding that its references and its invocations of further assemblages of the riroriro as a species may shape the experience of the music for the musicians and the audience, who situate their listening at the performance within the frames of assemblages in which they already participate, stimulated by the images of the poem. The reading of the poem invites its invocations into the sounding that layers my experience with the riroriro with the compositional process, the improvisation of the musicians guided by that process, and the people and the place of the performance. Here is an excerpt of the poem:

23. For example, Ursula Bethell's "Rainy Morning" from *Day and Night* depicts the riroriro as a hidden "rain-bird"; Amanda Hunt's "Overture" unfurls images of the riroriro's repeating song.

24. Lummaa, "Avian-Human Art?"

Tussock and scabweed scuffed, grey far horizon hazed.
 We walked until dusk
 drawn by Angus
 and aching bones, my brother and I
 Across dry schist and scree cracked and parched as my father's feet,
 Just before he died
 Saying nothing most of the way, bar the conversation of the Grey Warbler,
 somewhere
 Elusive as the dead
 Yet now at last I hear him.
 Riroriro . . . speak to me of yesterday and tomorrow.
 Amongst this tussock tussock tussock. Lots of fucking tussock.²⁵

In her 2017 book *Is Birdsong Music?* Hollis Taylor asserts that “music (including birdsong) augments everything it comes into contact with: it energizes spaces and places.”²⁶ This echoes the acoustemology—sonic ways of knowing the world—of Steven Feld as well as Marié Abe’s conception of “resonance” as a way to think about the construction of space and sound, at once social, relational, and affective.²⁷ As I, in this composition, invite musicians and other listeners into my own space shared with a specific riroriro, I seek to spatially and temporally extend the affective way that this bird has become a sonic companion in a particular place in Aotearoa. And so in this piece, which I titled “speak to me of yesterday and tomorrow (elusive as the dead)” in reference to the poem, I am not seeking to represent the riroriro bird per se, and I have not attempted to replicate its sound, nor to incorporate a recording of it into a piece. Those actions, in this case, would inch closer to a fetishization of nature as “other,” disembodied the sound of this bird and using it as a perhaps self-serving tool for improvisation. Instead, the sonic affordance of the bird leads me to share of my experience within this acoustic assemblage, and of my relationality with this bird as a companion, as I engage in a process of “becoming with” the riroriro, an example of Tsing’s ontological edge effects.²⁸ Though I have had the desire to see this bird, indicating to me the prevalence of the visual in human perception, I have become satisfied not having seen it, understanding this riroriro not as an objectified gift from nature to me but as an example of becoming with, of sounding together. “Speak to me of yesterday and tomorrow” is an extension of my

25. In Hill, “Forget-Me-Not.”

26. Taylor, *Is Birdsong Music?*, 278. Scholarly literature on birdsong is extensive. For a discussion of ethnomusicological literature on birds and birdsong, see Silvers, “Attending to the Nightingale”; for a discussion of Black people’s long engagement with birds and birdsong, see Williams, “Black Birdanity”; for an analysis of an improvising jazz musician engaging in “multispecies musicking,” including with birds, see Ryan, “Integrating the Musical”; for an example of birdsong as nonhuman poetics, see Cooke, “Toward an Ethological Poetics.”

27. Feld, “Acoustemology”; Abe, *Resonances of Chindon-ya*, 27–28.

28. Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 3–4.

own sonic becoming with this bird and its resonance, inviting other musicians into an assemblage to improvise with the riroriro in the layers of their own listening frameworks and inviting audiences and other listeners to do the same.²⁹

Moving Away from Hungry Listening

In its extensions of interspecies and interhuman acoustic assemblages and sonic affordances, this project aims to bring the overlapping elements of disparate world-making projects into focus and open up potentialities for new ones. To that end, “speak to me of yesterday and tomorrow (elusive as the dead)” and the other pieces of the project are centrally, and crucially, concerned with challenging dominant ways of listening in presentational performance and engendering new, more expansive and inclusive auditory practices. The improvisation-composition frameworks I employ as a composer-improviser and collaborator attempt to extend the listening-based relationalities of the sonic ecologies from which the pieces emerge, augmenting and energizing, and perhaps transforming, the space and place of each performance.³⁰ In the performances, I attempt to encourage ways of listening that are not grounded in what Indigenous scholar Dylan Robinson calls “hungry listening,” a “normative, settler colonial way of listening framed by prioritising capture and certainty of information over the affective feel, timbre, touch, and texture of sound.”³¹ Hungry listening, in Robinson’s words, is about “fixing” attention of listeners, and it “fixates upon the resources provided by musical content.” In moving away from structuring the processes of this project around this kind of listening I seek to, following Robinson, “dislocate the fixity and goal-oriented teleology of listening” with the composition-improvisation strategies of the project, including those I discuss above.³²

The first time I performed the pieces of this project with the quintet I attempted to dislocate spatial elements that tend to support fixity of hungry listening tendencies. Instead of arranging the audience and performers facing each other in a stage-audience orientation, we (the musicians and I, and the concert organizer) decided to place the musicians facing one another in a circle in the center of the room, with the audience surrounding us.³³ This seemingly simple move shifted the listening practices of everyone present, as we all faced the center of the room together, our ears attuned to the sounds interacting with one another at that point. After another performance of the pieces, in a presentational mode at a jazz club in Melbourne, a friend commented to me that he enjoyed the performance and then asked, “But where was the melody?” As I, in these pieces, had turned away from the “capture and certainty of information”

29. For the recorded version of “speak to me of yesterday and tomorrow (elusive as the dead),” see Wilson and Sklenars, “speak to me.”

30. Taylor, *Is Birdsong Music?*, 278.

31. Robinson, *Hungry Listening*, 38.

32. Robinson, *Hungry Listening*, 58.

33. For an example of the spatial layout of the performance, see Dave Wilson Quintet, “Liv’s Theme.”

prioritized by hungry listening, my foregrounding of “affective feel, timbre, touch, and texture of sound” in the performance had unsettled this listener, so to speak, from being grounded in normative expectations for listening to a musical performance.

In addition to “speak to me of yesterday and tomorrow (elusive as the dead),” other pieces of the project aim to extend and expand acoustic assemblages. One piece is an echo of a song improvised by a child (my niece) and builds on the fabric of our relationship then and since then (“Liv’s Theme”); another is generated by the acoustic assemblages of a particular nightlife locale and conversations having taken place there (“High Maintenance”). Some of the pieces sonically distill the macro acoustic assemblages of relational experiences into short-form performances: the dissipation of the bonds of a human relationship inform the rhythmic movement of one piece (“Dissipation”); in another piece, a typically inaudible phenomenon (aurora borealis) is extended through the ways it shapes the activities and relationships of human and more-than-human actors (“What Shines Is a Thought That Lost Its Way”).

This larger project aims to sonically extend these and other assemblages, and to illuminate the world-making projects at whose overlapping edges they are situated. The compositional and improvisation frameworks of the project build on the understanding that all participants—musicians, audiences, other listening entities—participate on their own terms and carry with them the acoustic assemblages in which they are already entangled. These frameworks are thus flexible enough to account for the participation of entities including a bird, a cellist, a drummer, a trumpet player, and all who might hear or listen. The overlapping curiosities of these and other participants at the edges of their world-making projects—and, hopefully, their generous, nurturing listening—can open up new ways of making worlds grounded in sonic and other ways of sharing spaces with other humans and with countless species beyond our own.

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