

Creaturely Acts: Three Eco-musical Explorations

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Biography

Heidi Hart is an independent arts researcher and practitioner based in the mountains of Utah and in Scandinavia. She is a Pushcart Prize-winning poet with an MFA from Sarah Lawrence College and a Ph.D. in German Studies from Duke University (2016). Heidi has received an ACLS-Mellon Fellowship, a Freie Universität Exchange Fellowship in Berlin, and a Planetary Thinking curriculum-development grant at Utah State University, where she completed a postdoc in 2019. Her research combines politically inflected music, literature, and film, with a focus on environmental media. She has two recently released monographs, one on Hanns Eisler's activist art songs and another on music in climate-crisis narrative. Heidi is currently writing on planetary listening and coordinates the Ecopoetic Salon, a curatorial platform for artists and researchers in the environmental humanities.

Abstract

This autoethnographic visual essay explores alternative modes of research and musical practice as subversion of a culture that values Anthropocentric performativity at the cost of other species. Informed by Indigenous methods, with full awareness that they are not meant for appropriation but can be instructive, this project explores sound and research projects that allow for slow, collaborative, and anti-performative work in response to climate disruption. These include a multimedia lab-studio at the Kelp Congress in northern Nor-

way, with unpredictable water sounds invading a human arts-research space; a wind harp project that allows the instrument to collaborate with moving air in mountain and desert environments in the US; and NOIR/NOISE, in which a singer and pianist “unperform” by rendering 20th-century concert music in literal darkness, along with dark ambient electronic sound. In all of these cases, human artists and researchers, myself included as experimental subject, experience a more “creaturely” relationship with sound, unlearning performative hubris in favor of participatory, inquisitive humility.

Keywords

performance, sound, Indigenous knowledge systems, environmental arts

Introduction

In the western U.S. mountains where I live, a Native tribal chairman teaches a university course on local history and ethnobotany through the lens of his grandmother’s plant taxonomies, medicinal recipes, and stories. One class assignment requires students to get to know a particular plant in the area and, as Shoshone healers have done for centuries, make up a song for it. This practical and ritual approach to music-making values connection over presentation, human humility over Anthropocentric ego. As a longtime classical performer and music researcher, who grew up in close relationship with several Native tribes in the Southwest U.S., I am well aware of the dangers of appropriating Indigenous methods for what often become even more ego-based endeavors (Keeshig-Tobias, 1997). My current inquiry draws on Indigenous approaches to sound and research not as imitation but as an invitation to re-imagine my relationship with sound-making and analysis. I am working to develop a more kinetic, questioning relationship with instruments and place, especially in a time when human impulses toward control have led

to disastrous consequences, not only for less privileged peoples but also for the planet itself.

In this essay, I trace three projects in arts research and performance, in the mode of autoethnography, meaning qualitative research based on personal experience and reflection (Ellis et al., 2011). Because I work mainly in environmental humanities, I am always close to borders of what I don't know, in other species' subjectivities and even in the weather. As Liora Bresler (2019) has noted in her work on musical autoethnography, the "*experience of unknowing*," of investigating the unexpected in one's own practice, can yield complex new information in research as well. The projects I describe here seek encounter with otherness in nature, rather than "rushing to the knowing layer" or "leaning heavily on existing knowledge and habits" (Bresler, 2019, pp. 80-81). In the first case, an arts laboratory at the 2019 Kelp Congress in northern Norway, sound and sliminess combined in unexpected ways, leading to a research project in progress. In the second project, *Wind Harp Days*, unraveling Anthropocentric performance practice has allowed for new, unpredictable encounters with weather, wood, and strings. In the third endeavor, *NOIR/NOISE*., a (non-)performance in complete darkness subverts the presentational, perfectionist classical tradition in favor of tactility and risk. In all three cases, music becomes a more creaturely than conventional experience (be it in a lab or concert hall), linking human sound-making with the spaces and species that surround it.

My methodology in seeking to un-learn and re-imagine sonic practice finds parallels in Indigenous botanist and writer Robin Wall Kimmerer's learning process. After years of training in European taxonomy and data-based fieldwork, she is working to combine efforts both as a "plant scientist" and as a "poet of the world" (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 29), rediscovering practices of naming, sowing, harvesting, and restoring the grasses on which her ancestors depended. She approaches her Native language with "beginner's mind" (Suzuki, 1970) and has learned to see relationships rather than categories in the natural world, realizing that "I was teaching the names and ignoring the songs" (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 43). For me as a classically trained

musician, the word “songs” means, on the other hand, notes scored on a page, meant to be played exactly as written, memorized, and performed in a studied, polished way. They are analogous to “classical” taxonomies in the natural sciences. Learning to play the harp later in life, I relished the slow, beginner’s-mind practice of making completely unfamiliar movements with my hands, but as soon as the time came to perform, old perfectionist anxieties returned. In the past year, I have asked what those anxieties might be telling me about human perfectionism in a broad sense, about the need to control our various environments, and about the performativity that excludes other species’ subjectivities. Learning about Indigenous and alternative (non)performance practices, through reading, listening, and observing, and sometimes acting on happy accidents (as in the wind harp example below), I have been able to experiment with sound and writing in more exploratory than perfectionist ways.

Bio-artist Sabine Popp, with whom I worked in the kelp workshop described below, has been an important guide in alternative, multispecies performativity. In her presentation *Common Notions (confusion resumes outside a few squaremeters)*, she appears onstage or in the round, wearing ordinary work clothes and speaking in a quiet voice while the audience is still chattering (Popp, 2019). She sits at a laboratory table, describing her inquiries about several kelp species, their responses to warming oceans, and their aid to humans in diet and in treatment for radiation. A projection screen overhead shows human hands’ intimate work with seaweed in bins and buckets. At the end of this (non-)performance, Popp boils water and reveals the sudden, bright green color of a kelp stipe soaked in it. She heats a wok and makes kelp fries to pass around the audience, all the while speaking in an understated tone, her voice countering the authoritative male voice of many nature documentaries and environmental lectures. The sound of *this* voice is the sound of scientific and artistic curiosity, a willingness to make room for other subjects, and to let them call her hearers to attention for the warming oceans’ sake.

Siren in the Studio

As part of a Kelp Congress workshop group in September 2019, I worked with Popp the bio-artist, a visual artist, a culture theorist, a marine biologist, a sound artist, and a video artist to become as intimate as humanly possible with the kelp forests in the Norwegian Sea. We bobbed out into the water in awkwardly fitting wetsuits, letting the *laminaria digitata* (*fingertare* or oarweed) tangle around our legs. We learned how to harvest the giant stipes, knives in our gloved hands, with two young women who run a sustainable seaweed company. We gathered *truffeltang*, “sea truffles” or “mermaid’s pubes” in local fishing culture’s parlance, and dried them in the oven as a seasoning. We baked salmon wrapped in sugar kelp for dinner. We went out in a fishing boat with the biologist, whose underwater drone recorded film of kelp and fish and autumn sea debris, while he explained the ways he measures microplastics in the ocean and monitors temperature effects. The sound artist sent down his hydrophone, to detect the sounds we couldn’t hear above the water. I let new words stick to me, names for kelp and wrack in Latin, English, and Norwegian, and watched them all unravel on my screen at night as I attempted to describe all I was learning. Mid-week, we stuffed bags and buckets of kelp into a van, on our laps and under our feet, as we traveled to Svolvær to set up a laboratory-studio that would become a pop-up gallery as well. Needless to say, the van smelled overwhelming. Strangeness had subverted our initial goal of intimacy, or perhaps invaded it.

Once in town, we unloaded our reeking cargo and set to work. Though we’d tried to keep the kelp in saltwater for as long as possible, eventually we had to release it. We spread the stipes out on the slate floor of the studio, which had once been a secondhand shop. We draped them from the ceiling, taped them to the windows. Drip, drip, drip. The studio smelled, too. Olfactory fatigue set in; humans *can* adjust to strangeness, to a point. The visual artist wove long strands of bladderwrack into a terrifying chandelier. I scrawled words on the windows and

the floor: overheard musings about holdfast and entanglement, Rachel Carson's seaweed prose, my own words about "fish dreams" in which "water seeps under the door." Soon the words spread and looped into seemingly random shapes, following the track of kelp slime, turning vaguely fungal, like the living script in Jeff VanderMeer's novel *Annihilation* (2014). Looking at what had happened to my own text, I felt a bit like the novel's baffled biologist, when she notes, carefully, "We had not been trained to encounter what appeared to be the uncanny" (p. 69). Though, as Bresler (2019) points out, "[s]ome unknowing may feel heavy, dark, and threatening" (p. 81), the act of meeting other species (and even oneself) with "beginner's mind" (Suzuki, 1970) can spread out in a more expansive way, as my words did on the slate floor. I found I needed fewer of them to voice my response to the slimy matter all around me. In between the legible chalk loops, my hand started forming new, nonverbal shapes. Words became strange matter, too.

Sound was an essential element of our week with the kelp. In a gesture of gratitude similar to that of the Shoshone with their plant songs, though from a different culture, a local artist wrote a song honoring the giant seaweeds that had once hid her uncle on the Norwegian coast, saving him from Nazi gunfire. Meanwhile, our group's sound artist had discovered something strange in his underwater recordings: an eerie, siren-like sound none of us had noticed coming from the drone. Marcellvs, bent monastically over his laptop for several days, had managed to tease it out from the background noise, this rising and decaying mechanical cry. He let it loose into the studio, as Sabine Popp pointed out the kelp transforming in front of our eyes. Traumatized outside its native saltwater, each stipe had started blistering and growing slimier, its alginic acids released in shock, its sensibility as palpable to us as it was inscrutable. We could almost hear it stretching and squeaking, as the drone wailed in the gallery space.



Figure 1. Kelp Diagramming Workshop, Lofoten International Arts Festival, Svolvær, Norway, September 2019 (photo by H. Hart).

Meanwhile, Robin Everett the video artist had projected written phrases from Emanuele Coccia's "The Cosmic Garden" onto hanging kelp stipes. Bursts of speculative botanical philosophy flickered on the slippery green skin. "Imagine you have no eyes", pulsed Coccia's words "...The world is not a variety of bodies and intensities of light. It is a unique body with different degrees of penetrability" (Coccia, 2018, p. 17). Even as we'd felt entangled in the kelp in our buoyant wetsuits, its strangeness had haunted us. What *would* it feel like to move through the world with sightless, soundless, tactile sensitivity? Now, with the drone (in both senses) un-tuning and un-nerving the studio space, we also became aware of *our* alien status in the sea. How would a deep-dangling machine feel to the kelp fanning out for nutrients, without sight or sound or ability to swim away? Vibrations travel, this spreading sensetrack of pressure waves we were not even aware of in the boat. What Melody Jue (2020) calls "cognitive estrangement underwater" (p. 9), our human reaction to nonhuman sensibilities, gave us a small insight – or insound – into our own invasive otherness, as the drone's siren wail became almost unbearable. It was as if the danger of our own presence were being sounded back to us, in the form of a literal alarm.



Figure 2. *Laminaria digitata* (oarweed kelp) blistering after removal from saltwater, Kelp Diagramming Workshop, Lofoten International Arts Festival, Svolvær, Norway, September 2019 (photo by H. Hart).

As I am working to describe sound in a space of multispecies intimacy and estrangement, Indigenous arts researcher Shawn Wilson's (2008) idea of "ceremony" or "linking of the space" between humans and their relationships while respecting difference (p. 87) is helpful. Risking relations between creatures, including humans in all our own varieties, does not simply mean one-with-nature sentiment but a deeper awareness that human presence – the vibrations of a drone we did not hear when in the boat – can actually shock and disturb the lives we so glibly invade. In the lab-studio, I felt the need to apologize in some way to the slimy kelp, suffering not in a way I could even really comprehend, for removing it from its sea of nutrients. This living, respiring plant was no longer an "it." As Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013) recalls, "I needed to know who these algae were" (p. 87). Human and non-human "exposure," to use Stacy Alaimo's term in describing environmental art (2016) can be uncomfortable. The work of acknowledging multiple alterities, including what Mary Douglas (1966) called "*the slimy*" (p. 39), requires human humility. The two words' closeness reminds me that, according to the Shoshone on whose territory I live, humans yet to be born lie waiting under the soil (Parry D., personal communication, January 24, 2020).

Weird Wind

My second project exploring alternate modes of performativity belongs to the old Aeolian harp tradition of letting wind invade human-made strings. The "acoustic surplus" (Kramer, 2018, p. 63) of air vibrating through a passive instrument reminds me of the Icelandic word *strengur*, which means both "string" and "wind direction" (Stefánsdóttir, personal communication, July 1 2020). After discovering the uncanny sounds that result from this simple movement of air, by accident during an outdoor songwriting workshop, I have been adapting this practice as an Ecopoetic Salon project in the mountains of Utah. In warm weather I take my harp outdoors, to let it shudder and sing in the wind. I want to shake off at least some of the Eurocentric,

princess privilege attached to the harp (see Knoll, 2020) and to classical music’s “toxic[ity]” in its racial biases and environmental costs (see James Rhys Edwards, “Critical Theory in Eco-musicology,” in Allen and Dawe, 2016). Virginia Woolf described the harp’s most trenchant stereotype with perfect pitch (!) in *Orlando*: “it seemed as if angels were plucking harp-strings with white fingers and her whole being was pervaded by a seraphic harmony” (p. 245). Interestingly, the gender-switching title character’s impulse toward melody (and with it, marriage) is a domesticating one, after having experienced something stranger: a creative force inside her body “as if she were made of a thousand wires upon which some breeze or errant fingers were playing . . .” (p. 239). I am still a white woman playing the harp, but I am seeking this kind of wild, eerie sound, entirely out of my control aside from how the strings are angled in the wind.

As Bresler (2019) has described her shift into more open-ended musical practice, she notes that working with dance showed her that the “drill” and “tasks” of classical training could fall away in favor of more necessary movements, “conserving energy and exploring inner forces” (pp. 88-19); my own playing outdoors becomes less about rote-practiced patterns than about listening and response.



Figure 3. Snowbasin, Cache National Forest, Utah (photo by H. Hart).



On a hot, windy morning, I take my medium-sized Gothic harp to a trailhead where hikers and mountain bikers, many in expensive outdoor-wear, with earbuds, try to get their daily workout in a place I wonder if they really see or hear. There are those who take their time, who aren't attached to taking selfies, who walk backwards down the old disintegrating road from the ski resort, because The Mountain has that kind of presence, as insistent as it is inscrutable. (I use caps not to reify the set of peaks that looms over this high-altitude valley but to acknowledge its sheer, stony scale.) When I walk the trails, I try to stop and listen, to slow the chatter in my head, in a damp grove of Engelmann spruce or in the spring-fed ravine my husband calls "science fiction" for its oversized cow parsnip, cyclopean umbels looming over us, and the crush of cottonwoods that indicates some long-past human settlement. If I listen closely, I can hear the spring's gurgle as the ravine opens into a more benign aspen meadow. On days when I bring the harp to the trailhead, my goal is not to entertain as ornament or background music (who would need it here?) but to allow for a gap in the regular routine that outdoor recreation has become for many humans, and to allow nonhuman sound to stop me in my tracks as well.

I set the harp under a narrowleaf cottonwood tree, in the high-desert, high-altitude blue light, and improvise. When the wind is ready, I can feel it before I hear it. Then I get out of the way. The wind creates a sheet of overtones that roll and ring, sometimes so loudly, hikers stop and tell me they thought they were hearing "an emergency" or "some kind of weird animal" before they saw the harp, perhaps a little bit like the ghost waiting and chanting in the long-ago Zuni village. The strange sheets of sound come and go. A keening, or a warning. What the wind would say to us self-involved humans if it could? The sound is out of my control; when I do play the already humming harp, it's often after a pause to hear where the sound will move next, as I learn to be more patient in what Bresler (2019) calls "tuned listening" (92). Respecting the wind and weather requires a new kind of humility when sitting at the harp, elemental creature that it is, made out of tonewood and gut and steel. Its soundboard comes from birch, once in a

crowd of them, then taken to a workshop in Minnesota, whose instruments “continue to breathe, expand, and contract – vibrating as their environments change” (Dawe, “Materials Matter,” in Allen and Dawe 2016, p. 119). The wind shapes sound waves more dramatically and erratically than my hands do, as I cup and release them to round out and extend each tone. It reminds me of the strangeness of sound itself, and of its contingency – my human ears hearing it because they can. It interrupts my song with otherness, reminding me and passing hikers that “the outdoors” is weirder than we think, though we are part of it.

As I try to describe the sound of harp strings played by wind, I am tempted to retell a ghost story recorded in Zuni Pueblo in New Mexico, where my father’s legal work for the tribe often took our family in my childhood. As an outsider, I never fully grasped the resonances all around the stories I heard or read, and because “[s]tories are power” (Keeshig-Tobias, 1997, p. 71) in the cultures to which they belong, I will not steal it for my own purposes. Suffice it to say that the “weird noises” of this old tale meant to frighten children (Zuni People, 1972, p. 103) show how sound and song can serve a critical purpose in community, not by comforting in a narcotic way but by haunting, and eerily evoking a sense of “*wrongness*” (Fisher, 2016, pp. 13-15) in the world. If outdoor recreators (re-creating nature for entertainment, exercise, and consumption in the “experience economy” [Pine and Gilmore, 1999]) find ourselves disturbed for a moment by strange sounds under a cottonwood tree, perhaps we’ll hear the sound of distress in the wind. Perhaps it will stop us, leaving a gap in our usual preoccupations, so we can imagine other, heat-stressed subjectivities in the grass and Gambel oaks, and sense in an embodied way that all is not right with the world.

NOIR/NOISE

The third project exploring non-perfectionist performance is *NOIR/NOISE*, currently in development in COVID-19-enforced virtual format in the U.S., Scotland, and Scandinavia. My

collaborators and I are starting to question what it means to be objects of spectatorship making beautiful music about nature, an act that feels as unhelpful today as watching lush corporate nature films with programmatic orchestration. As Amitav Ghosh (2016) puts it, “climate change events . . . are too powerful, too grotesque, too dangerous, and too accusatory to be written about [or I would add, performed] in a lyrical, or elegiac, or romantic vein” (pp. 32-33). In an upcoming project of nocturnes, we plan to play and sing in the literal dark. “Unknowing” (Bresler, 2019) in this case may mean forgetting memorized passages of music, having to improvise, having to listen more closely to each other. It certainly means not swishing onstage in expensive concert attire. If current venue closures and space restrictions continue, the project’s goal may need to become even more radical, removing the concert setting entirely in favor of other, even online forms of dark ambience. Nature, in the form of a virus, has intervened in human performance practice in ways musicians could not have imagined even a year ago.

In its current state, *NOIR/NOISE* is a developing project with pianist Laura Wahlfors in Helsinki and with me as a singer, eventually to be shared (if not “performed”!) in Stockholm, with dark ambient electronic sound by Edinburgh-based duo Silo Portem. The project includes night-related music by twentieth-century composers Ruth Crawford Seeger, Kurt Schwaen, and Joseph Schwantner, to be played live and layered into the digital mix as well. Silo Portem has incorporated small fragments of the piano music in a texture of humming, buzzing, and thundering, all of which evokes an eerie night outdoors. As we explore ways of mixing live performance with ambient sound (either amplified into the space or improvised live), we are interested in chance aspects of music (see Cage, 1961), as well as in the creaturely qualities of learning to adjust one’s eyes in darkness and pay closer attention to tactile elements in space. We are also interested in unraveling the Anthropocentric, classical ideal of perfectionism, in which, after many hours of practice, pianist and singer enter the stage in brightly lit silence and present the music’s written score, note for accurate note, with carefully cultivated intonation

and gesture. Unlike a music-in-the-dark string quartet by Georg Friedrich Haas (2001), the *NOIR/NOISE* project will not rely solely on scored suggestions for the musicians. We will allow learned material to evolve (or devolve) depending on memory and lack of light. As we test various lighting scenarios, we will also take into account the traditional invisibility of pianists in comparison to singers, and perhaps allow for some light on the keyboard. Still, if we can't easily see the notes and keys in front of us, the music may disintegrate. We may stop playing and singing altogether and lean quietly into electronic rushing and rustling. This decay, this un-tuning, may allow for a new, improvisational relationship to the sound materials, to the space around us and to our fellow listeners. We may hear the piano's wood and wires, the human vocal cords, as strange, unlikely frictions. We and the audience may feel less removed from each other, more connected by the haptic movement of sound waves. When I sing these lines by Agueda Pizarro, even if I remember all the words, I may hear the "mother" in the poem not as human but as elemental, of the earth, intimate and alien at once:

You walk with silver lions

and wait to estrange me

...

You call me blind,

you touch my eyes

with black anemones. (Schwantner/Pizarro, 1981, pp. 8-9).



Figure 5. Before disappearing into the darkness, Heidi Hart with pianist Laura Wahlfors, Fordham University, Lincoln Center, New York City, August 2015 (photo by Catharine DeLong).

Coda

Because music is as much a part of humans' biological history "as are endothermy and bipedalism" (Peters, 2015, p. 51), our responses are deeply embodied, for all our efforts to enshrine organized sounds in the concert hall. As Lawrence Kramer (2018) has noted, drawing on John Durham Peters' work, music can also take on an elemental quality if heard in moments of vulnerability: "And when being alive feels painful? If that pain finds expression in music, the music may seem to dissolve itself or its listener into an elemental medium heard as the rush of a fluid basic to life" (p. 116). A human-made drone may be painful to its sensors (if not hearers) below the surface of the sea, too. The sound of wind in a harp's gut strings may take on a life of its own. This elemental, even creaturely approach to music can be approached in aspects of entanglement in place, detachment from "toxic" performativity, and allowance for strangeness and surprise. It can allow for imaginative leaps, as philosopher Vinciane Despret (2019) has suggested in a talk on the sonic life of a blackbird: "a moment of becoming space by transforming space into the bird's own body."

At the same time, it may be the very limits of human perception where relations break down and where a new, curious awareness can grow. I really *can't* imagine how seaweed feels when it's torn out of saltwater. In that moment of accepting my limits, I can trace the edge of a kelp stipe with chalk, respecting what is strange, what is suffering, what is still unknown. As Sabine Popp (personal communication, September 22 2019) has ventured, "splitting up, turning, and putting together again, something different from the purely analytical approach . . . You don't fully control what is happening, because of the glitches." This aspect of "unknowing," in Bresler's sense (2019) can be difficult and frustrating, or it can feel like going "out on a limb," to use a botanical cliché that has, like most, forgotten its roots. Hanging there on the branch's edge, risking curiosity over authority, can be a lonely place for an artist or a researcher trained

in and rewarded for strong, confident performance. But it is this very willingness to yield control that will allow for less Anthropocentric, Eurocentric music and research practices, as the planet's drastic warming calls for radical respect for and attention to its wildly varied and imperiled lives.

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