

txtrMap_terrainArray

by Jamie Sutcliffe

It's dawn, and all I can see is a plane of dull textured greens. I'm not focusing too much on the colour though, it's a sound I'm listening out for. A sound I'm quietly describing to myself as *the muttering of the green*. There are friends either side of me, and they're listening too. Their heads plunged ponderously like mine into this thick tangle of herbage on the outskirts of a field of oilseed. Because the sun has risen and around four and half hours ago each of us decided to ingest a modestly saturated tab of acid. And now we're sure that the field is communicating something to us... which it is. It appears that the deeper we plunge our heads into this wall of crops the more sonorous its verdant crackling utterances become.

Oilseed in flower sploshes a radiant custard slop across the countryside. Its pollen candies the air. Post-flower—as we were encountering it—it forms an affronting web of elongated stems, each twisting itself into a claw of fibrous pods that ripen and burst, noisily scattering their hard

black seeds as if proudly announcing their own potent maturity. It takes a long time to disentangle the reality of this sound from the perceptual weirdness of the acid. What we initially interpret as the plant's response to subtle gradations in temperature and shade effected by the proximity of our bodies, unfolds into a realisation that the cacophonous popping we can hear actually preceded us, had been taking place all along. This realisation wasn't any less marvellous, because prior to that moment none of us had previously tuned-in to that peculiar bandwidth, the impressively textured static of which was now encouraging within us an unprecedented state of attention, a state of 'being-with'.

In her recent book *Through Vegetal Being* (2016)—co-written as an act of correspondence with Michael Marder—the feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray details the divergent evolution of her own thought, away from the strictures of the Western intellectual tradition by way of an encounter with the *Yoga Sutras* of Patañjali. In a series of sensitively composed reflections, she describes her attempts at cultivating sensory perceptions that might catalyse a process of 'becoming human' more responsively and ethically rooted in co-habitation with the vegetal world. Listening forms a huge part of this endeavour. So does breath, and an acknowledgment of the co-dependencies of respiration. 'Silence is crucial for being-with, without domination or subjection,' she writes, and it's worth giving her words some room to breathe here, as silence...

'...is the first dwelling for co-existence in difference. It is, or it creates, a place where we can finally listen to the other, and not only register a message as a machine could do. Then, I can listen to the music of the wind in the leaves, and also to the sound of the wood in accordance with the warmth, the dryness, or the

level of humidity of the atmosphere. And all that contributes to restoring to me my breath, my freedom, and a living presence, in spite of so many codes that had transformed me into a robot.”¹

Weird then, encountering Irigaray’s hushed piety in light of Brenna Murphy’s *txtrMap_terrainArray* (2019), an interactive browser-based synthesiser that animates visual reproductions of plant matter and topographic data into a form of tentative interspecial, intra-mattered music.² Find and pair a couple of stray notes within its kaleidoscopic interface and with a few spare prods of the finger you have a series of warped ditties. Feeling brash? Smear your digits across the trackpad to create abrupt punctures of sound that dissolve pleasingly as quickly as they’ve erupted. It’s a strange experience hearing these noises emerge from a visual keyboard of limited rotational animations that vertiginously mimic the forensic plunge of microscopy. Where might these sounds be coming from? Where might they be headed? How might all of this be in some way relatable to the emergent complexities of post-human communication in a politically fractious present?

On the one hand, some of Murphy’s sounds—a bitter electronic hiss, or an apparently escalating mono-tonal buzz—are forebodingly reminiscent of the ubiquitous sonic backdrop that reverberates around and through the infrastructures of planetary scale computation. Following the work of writer and musician Steve Goodman we might refer to this repertoire as the ‘viro-sonics’ of capital, that is, if we can come to think of the machinic hum of communications technology as a kind of audio-contagion that keeps us hooked anxiously into habits of connection and production, just as the pop music or muzak of an earlier period might have conditioned our rhythmic-emotional responses to the marketplace.

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(...As a brief side note here, it seems important to pay attention to these audioscapes. While the rumbling, ominous and localised discordances of the ‘satanic mills’ of modernity might have been significantly muted and displaced into the omnipresent whirr of the cooling fan and the labouring processor, the geographically rooted hardware of our apparently ephemeral networked age carries with it the threat of new forms of territorialised legislation, perhaps best exemplified by data-sovereignty and the mechanism of extra-judicial rendition alarmingly recounted by engineer and theorist Tung-Hui Hu in his excellent book *A Prehistory Of The Cloud* (2016). Tracing the often occluded presence of such infrastructures by listening to the sounds they make might provide one (at least psychical) strategy of keeping their encroachments in check...).

But I’m less inclined to read *txtrMap_terrainArray* as a reductive tool in the diagnosis of what our neoliberal impasse might sound like, and a heck-of-a-lot-more-hyped to think about it as an experiment in vibrational communication with the non-human. Respectfully but impatiently setting aside Irigaray’s reflective silence for a moment, I’m all for thinking Brenna’s work as an urgent, frothing and gregarious attempt to fantasise what visual and sonic forms an interfaced eco-babble might take, just as I’m keen to believe that playing Mort Garson’s phenomenal album *Plantasia* (1976) every once in a while might make my own house plants a little happier. Because as the recent and widely-reported work of environmental scientists Heidi Appel and Rex Crocroft at the University of Missouri appears to suggest, ‘hearing’ is a sense that we may be able to attribute to plants. Not ‘consciousness’, of course, but a kind of intermediary space of reception where the vibrational properties of sound are received and interpreted according to a sophisticated defence rationale.

In their study, published in 2014, Appel and Cocroft were able to map the sound of caterpillars feeding on *Arabidopsis*. They then replicated that sound and played it back to other isolated test specimens of the same plant. As a result, the plants distributed a higher level of mustard oils throughout their foliage in order to deter predators. One remarkable aspect of this research however, was that the plants were then played other recordings of atmospheric disturbances in the same manner and were able to distinguish between those which posed an immediate threat and those which didn't. Not full-on 'plant talk' then, but a definite reclamation of plant communication from the dustbin of disrepute, and a profound complexification of our entangled natures. When thinking through an environmentalist-ethics in an age of rising fascisms and voracious industrial interest, such research certainly enriches the empirical subsoil of science-fictive speculation.

Brenna's work has always seemed to invite such speculation in acts of interpretative co-fictioning. Ever since I first encountered it years ago in Jonas Delaborde and Hendrik Hegray's amazing noise graphics anthology *Nazi Knife*, her floating arabesques and texture-mapped geometries resembling ancient tech—luminous remnants of a digital Angkor Wat overrun with mutant weed—seemed to encourage the attribution of mysterious purpose. Uses I'm sure she knows intimately and has been able to employ in her ceremonial performances with Birch Cooper whenever they play together as MSHR, often embedding themselves in her sculpted fractal architectures as an immersion in a kind of digitally posioned psychedilia.

So what if the sounds of a browser-based synth could be taken outdoors and transposed in scale to vibrationally stimulate pollination?³ Or

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acoustically rupture huge amounts of seedpods to assist in regrowth programmes?⁴ Or even fore-worn a vast crop of an impending locust attack? Scrap the burdensome asbestos cement and solar panels of Ant Farm's *Dolphin Embassy* (1974) for a moment, what if we thought of *txtrMap_terrainArray* as a step towards some kind of discursive summit, an attempt at a language of reconciliation and understanding with the vegetal?

Regardless of how we might extrapolate a series of future applications for Murphy's synth I'd suggest that it's imperative—as with all acts of ecological speculation right now—that we do so in mind of the dangerous political movements that seek to appropriate ecological discourse to justify their own applications of hatred. While thinking about this particular piece of writing, I was agitatedly mulling over the current pliancy of the phrase 'eco-fascism', a body of ideas that seem to constitute both a term of slander and a form of self-identification for the contemporary right. Initially, the 'eco-fascist' denoted an immovable moraliser whose 'eccentric' climate science was hell-bent on reducing national economies to 'emissions markets', regulated zones of commerce and production where financial incentives might be used to bait ecological compliance. However, as Sarah Manavis noted a few months back in her insightful essay for the *New Statesman*, contemporary white supremacists were returning to the *Blut und Boden* (Blood and Soil) philosophy of the early twentieth century in order to append their right-to-the-land ideology with a supposedly 'progressive' green politics, thus embodying a dangerous new form of fascism that masks its poison with ecological responsibility and a meme-ready arsenal of conservationist slogans and imagery.⁵

Writing in 1970, the surrealist Roger Caillois warned of the potential limitations that various nodes of scientific research might suffer as a result of their relative isolation from other exploratory pursuits. ‘It remains that research itself suffers when each scientist, burrowing away in his own special tunnel as if he were some efficient and myopic mole, operates like a complete maverick, like a miner who is digging ever deeper, almost utterly unaware of the discoveries made by fellow workers in neighbouring galleries, and even more so of the results in distant quarries,’ he wrote. ‘What we need are relay stations at every level: anastomosis and coordination points, not only for assembling the spoils but above all for comparing different processes. When it comes to investigation, genius almost always involves borrowing a proven method or fruitful hypothesis and using it in a field where no one had previously imagined that it could be applied.’⁶

Caillois termed this approach ‘Diagonal Science’, an attempt to reconcile disparate fields of enquiry in order that we might decode ‘latent complicities’ and expose ‘neglected correlations’ in a gesture of scientific holism. Thinking of *txtrMap_terrainArray* as a ‘diagonal’ proposition might seem absurd, especially in light of the political circumstances previously outlined, but Caillois’ thinking seems to restore to such absurdity a kind of dignity and apposite purpose in a moment when our imaginative armouries need to be enhanced. His essay ‘A New Plea For Diagonal Science’ concludes with the memory that it was botanists—not military strategists—that had provided the Allied naval strategy for the Battle of the Atlantic in 1942, ensuring the safety of convoys from fascist attack by deriving the most effective deployment of destroyers directly from the helicoidal patterns present in leaves. Brenna Murphy’s eco-babble synth might not provide an entirely

effective form of communication with plants and earth (...not just yet, anyway...), but its resonances might certainly encourage us to imagine the fraught inter-special discourses and conflicted camaraderies of our emergent ecologies.

Notes

1. Irigaray, Luce and Marder, Michael, *Through Vegetal Being [Two Philosophical Perspectives]*, Columbia University Press, 2016, p.50.
2. I'm thinking here of Stacy Alaimo's paraphrasing of Karen Barad in the final chapter of her superb book *Bodily Natures*, with a specific focus on the term 'interface':

‘...this conception of matter as “intra-active becoming” may infuse a posthumanist environmentalist ethics that refuses to see the delineated shape of the human as distinct from the background of nature, and instead focuses on interfaces, interchanges and transformative material/discursive practices.’
[Alaimo, Stacy, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment and Material Self*, Indiana University Press, 2010, p.142]

3. Some bees are known to use a technique called ‘buzz pollination’, or ‘sonication’, to dislodge pollen that may have become inaccessible due to being stuck firmly onto a plant’s anthers.
4. Certain plant species, for example *Ecballium*, may have its explosive seed dispersal technique triggered by vibration.
5. Manavis, Sarah, ‘Eco-fascism: The ideology marrying environmentalism and white supremacy thriving online’, *The New Statesman*, 21st September, 2018.
6. Caillois, Roger, ‘A New Plea For Diagonal Science’, in *The Edge Of Surrealism*, edited by Claudine Frank, translated by Claudine Frank and Camille Nash, Duke University Press, 2003, p.344.