

eventually there's nowhere

a soundscape installation

By

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Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the
Degree of Master of Arts in Music and Multimedia Composition at Brown University

PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND

April 2026

This thesis by James May is accepted in its present form
by the Department of Music as satisfying the
thesis requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

Date 4/28/26

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ed Osborn', written over a horizontal line.

Ed Osborn, Advisor

Approved by the Graduate Council

Date _____

David P. Lindstrom, Dean of the Graduate School

Acknowledgements

This project was the result of many years of artistic development and many vectors of support. It began in New Orleans when my friend, Annie Preaux, texted me that an apartment in the neighborhood was replacing all the windows and getting rid of hundreds of old double-hung frames with the glass intact. I managed to load 18 of those windows into my car and bring them to my apartment. They were living under a tarp in our backyard when I received a 2024 Ucross Artist Residency to do my earliest imaginings of this piece; 14 of them made it into our moving truck when my family relocated to Providence. Time, space, and encouragement over the past three years finally brought the piece to life—

To the Brown music department for facilitating a program that lets me take risks and push into new aesthetic areas, and for material support in executing this project.

To my committee—Ed Osborn, Jim Moses, and Ada Smailbegović—for your guidance and encouragement throughout the process of developing this piece.

To the Brown Arts Institute Production Team for facilitating my use of the Fishman Studio space, which brought *eventually there's nowhere* to life.

To my friend and collaborator, Cat Gambel, for showing me the beauty of the Gulf, and to John Clark for inviting us to Bayou La Terre in our first collaboration.

To my collaborators in New Orleans and Louisiana, for welcoming me into the music-making of your home and showcasing an indomitable drive for artistic wonder.

To my colleagues at Brown in the music department and beyond, for rigorously and joyfully imagining new ways of being in our world.

And to my wife, Sarah Van Oss, for your unfaltering support and love.

This project received additional support through a Brown Arts Institute 2025 Student Grant, a Brown Design Workshop 2025 Maker's Grant, and a workshop residency period with the Modern Culture and Media department at Brown.

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Introduction

09.03.2021

September 3, 2021 was a hot, hazy day in the Gulf South. Early September is when summer feels never-ending in the worst way, when any night that drops below 80°F is a dew-point-breaking blessing. I spent most of it on I-55, driving back to New Orleans from Jackson, Mississippi with my wife, Sarah, and our friend, Lauren. I felt like I had spent my whole life driving on the southern interstates. Sarah and I were married just a few weeks prior; too poor for a full wedding, we had small parties in Ohio and Pennsylvania over the course of two weeks, then returned to New Orleans in mid-August. Over the past month we had spent more than 50 hours driving.

The three of us started early from the farm. We planned to meet Ruben on arrival and make the four-hour trek back in the same day. In the first hour, Lauren noticed that one of the filled gas canisters wasn't sealed properly. The tangy smell was expanding through the cabin. We stopped the audiobook and opened the windows, a beating pressure sensation I generally hate. Air conditioning leaked a steady drip out of the car and into the Mississippi pines. As we neared Lake Pontchartrain the heavy heat of August pressed thoroughly into our seats; when we drove onto the 26-mile Causeway the

immensity jumped like a switch, sun and humidity and trepidation pressing against us as we reentered the city for the first time since Hurricane Ida.

Hurricane Ida was a Category 4 hurricane that made landfall in Louisiana on August 29th, 2021, the 16th anniversary of Hurricane Katrina. It was the second most damaging storm to hit Louisiana, after Katrina, and barreled up the country causing extensive flooding as far north as New York City. It was not the first hurricane that Sarah and I had endured while living in New Orleans; that was Hurricane Zeta in 2020, mild by comparison, a late-October respite from the ongoing disaster of the pre-vaccine COVID-19 pandemic. During Zeta we lost power for 60 hours but faced graciously cool weather, and so gathered with friends around coal grills to cook, temporarily forgetting viral precautions. Saidiya Hartman observes that W.E.B. Du Bois didn't include the 1918 influenza pandemic among the "inventory of violence" chronicled in *Darkwater*: after all, "for every year between 1906 and 1920, black folks in cities experienced a rate of death that equaled the white rate of death at the peak of the pandemic."¹ Competing tragedies rearrange severity, or highlight the different experiences of severity. Some folks' end of the world is others' daily life.

In contrast, Hurricane Ida was the first and only time we evacuated the city. On the morning of Saturday, August 28th, we loaded a week's worth of clothes, some essentials, and our dog into the car, and hauled to Tuscaloosa in a three-car caravan with five friends. That trip—normally a three-and-a-half-hour drive—took eight hours, during which our car's battery died and had to be replaced. We spent a few days (it's hard to parse the blur of that week) with Sarah's cousin in Tuscaloosa. The group slowly

¹ Saidiya Hartman, "The End of White Supremacy, An American Romance," *BOMB Magazine*, June 2020, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/2020/06/05/the-end-of-white-supremacy-an-american-romance/>.

dispersed through airports and return drives: Ruben flew back to his wife in Baton Rouge and we agreed to meet him in New Orleans on Friday; Sarah and I followed Lauren to her family friends' in Jackson; Annie and Travis joined us the next day (they had stayed during the storm and needed an escape from their sweltering, powerless house).

On the Saturday that we evacuated, as we gathered our belongings and put food in bags in the refrigerator and brought plants inside and tied down our trash cans, I was worried about our windows. They were large and old: leaded glass melted into itself over decades, gently refracting our vision of the neighborhood. Hurricane Zeta had eventually reached Category 3 winds, and until then I didn't realize how much of a neighborhood could so easily, violently fling elsewhere. So, now, something in my last-minute anxiety was convinced that, if Ida made it inside, the windows would be the point of failure. Warped single-panes in rotting wood didn't inspire confidence against winds or debris.

Of course, this was not their first hurricane, nor their last. Our neighbor—another who stayed—took a turn around our house the day after the storm and saw no visible cracks. He texted us to let us know all seemed fine. Whatever strength inhered from decades of witnessing the city held the windows intact.

The roof of the house did not fare so well. When Sarah, Lauren, and I arrived at the apartment, our street was thick with the smell of rot. Lauren went to check her place, the other first-floor apartment—we shared a central wall. Ruben had beaten us there and already checked his apartment, directly above ours in the two-story double shotgun. His face was grim: the hurricane had ripped a strip of roofing shingles off the house on our side. Rain and wind had poured into the attic and, quickly, into Ruben's ceiling. As I went up to help him clean, the stench of mold and loamy plaster flooded through the

stairwell. The sheetrock was drunkenly strewn down the stairs as though it had passed out and stumbled at the railing, grimy with black muck. The growth now stained the walls as it slid against the passage, and we shoved slabs away to gain access, one hand pressing shirt collar to nose. What we hoped would be a quick trip to grab extra clothes and throw out food turned into a multi-hour cleanup.

By the time we arrived, the water had mostly dissipated and left the apartment to bake in that pressure-cooker atmosphere for a week. And this was the worst of heat. This was that relentless pressing, that lethal combination of humidity and stillness and jewel-deep blue sky coming to rest on a city with trash strewn about, stinking under fly swarms. And there was Sal, overseeing the block as usual, as he had done for 40 (50?) years, and Blue panting at his ankles, then gladly limping up to us for a scratch against her lame hips. Sal's voice was rocks, gravelly tumbling out his warm "How ya' doin'?"s, as he sat in the shade of his patio, where I imagine he had been since Monday morning, his strong, scrawny frame against this oppressive weather that he had known his whole life. "There ain't nothing to do now but wait." We left him supplies that we no longer needed, some bags of charcoal and perishable food, some nourishment on this sixth hot day without electricity.

From first glance, it seemed as though the water didn't make it into our apartment at all. Splotchy mold stains made it clear that some had trickled behind the drywall of our closet and our bathroom, but we couldn't find any standing water to suggest further damage. Of course, this was not true. The water had slid through Ruben's floorboards and carried along electrical wire to drip through our ceiling fans like a faucet, which we realized when I lifted my stereo speakers from the dining room table and water poured

through the grill, having collected in the cone directly underneath the fan. The basket of clean laundry we had placed on the bed was damp and musty, inadvertently protecting our mattress from the bedroom fan. Before leaving, we shut our interior doors and turned off the electrical boxes and hoped that the eventual return of power wouldn't spark a fire in our absence.

There is something about leaving your home with a car's worth of belongings that forces an immediate reorientation. I had anchored myself in my books, the cycles of groceries, our walking patterns up and down the hallway and our neighborhood, our coffee table (the first piece of furniture we ever collected for our life, and which we still have), our screen door that had no top seal against mosquitoes. When we finished cleaning and began the return journey to Jackson, we were now leaving indefinitely. There was no timeline for the necessary repair work; the roofers had also fled and our landlord couldn't even corner insurance into paying for his damaged roof, let alone ours. It would be a full year before the upstairs apartment was restored and livable and tenanted again, and six weeks before we would return from Ohio so that I could resume teaching in-person, so that Sarah could resume her comprehensive exams, so that we could resume the cycle of groceries and porch parties and buckling streets and neighborhood cats.

And this was just our first storm. Sal had been living on this block for 40 years. In New Orleans East there were still houses with blue tarps from Katrina. Further west, Lake Charles had been hit with two equally devastating storms in a row in 2020. Further south, Isle de Jean Charles was slipping back into the Gulf, infrastructural intervention

and climate change conspiring to submerge that strip of land.² Compounding tragedies rearrange severity, or highlight the different experiences of severity. Some folks' end of the world is others' daily life.

eventually there's nowhere

I start with this long personal retelling because, more than anything, my piece *eventually there's nowhere* grapples with the overlapping, inextricable forces that shape life in New Orleans. The piece is not an accurate grappling, or an explicitly personal one. It is not about Hurricane Ida, or Hurricane Katrina, or the COVID-19 pandemic. It is not an activist document of coastal erosion, saltwater wedging its way up the Mississippi River and snaking through the bayous. It's my attempt to present the enmeshed realities of living in the Gulf South; to be in New Orleans is to be deeply entangled in that place, and to know New Orleans is to know it as a history of entanglement, and the life-making that occurs within it.

eventually there's nowhere is a gallery installation work that uses field recordings as a staging ground for these entanglements, an immersing media that simultaneously provokes situated affect and resists simple identification. While living in New Orleans I made regular field recordings of the city and surrounding regions, including a dedicated field recording trip to the Atchafalaya Basin in south Louisiana. Over five years I

² Elizabeth Rush, *Rising: Dispatches from the New American Shore*, First paperback edition (Milkweed Editions, 2019), 21.

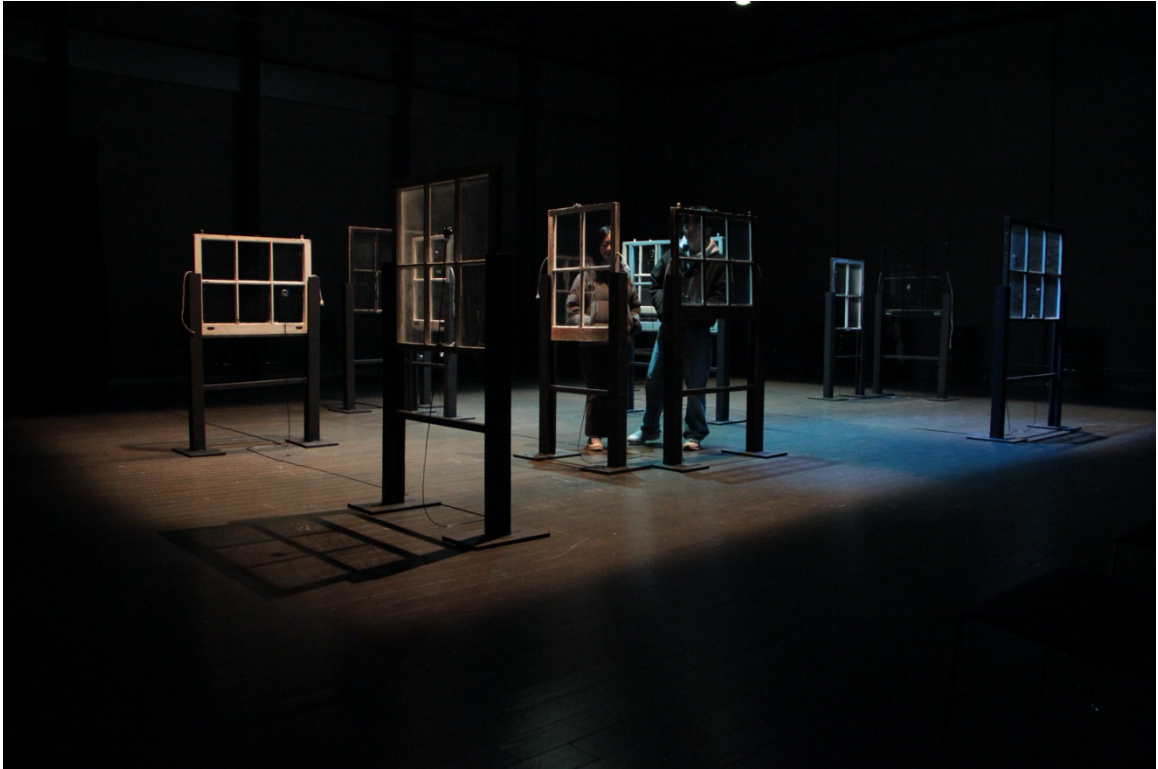


Figure 1: Listeners inside the eventually there's nowhere installation.

amassed over one hundred recordings—of the swamp, of my neighborhood, of parades and gatherings, of Lake Pontchartrain and the Mississippi River (the bodies that bound New Orleans in the north and south, respectively). In the piece I construct scenes from this archive that move between “unified” depictions of a single space and “speculative” scenes that generate impossible overlaps of sounding bodies. The scenes run automatically and non-linearly through a max/MSP patch, lasting for between two and six minutes each before moving onto the next scene.

These scenes play in a gallery space through a dozen old double-hung windows that were salvaged from my New Orleans neighborhood in 2023, frames separating and connecting life through the city, witnesses whose structural integrity I so fretted over during Hurricane Ida. I attach audio exciters to the glass panes, causing them to vibrate and “turn into” a speaker—the sounds literally play through the windows. I diffuse the

sound scenes using IRCAM's spat5 package for max/MSP, which allows me not just to send sound to each window but dynamically "move" sound across the room and create global stereo spreads in different quadrants of the space.³ In this way I leverage the locality of sounds and create multiple layers of spatial resolution; sometimes a sound clearly emerges from one window, and sometimes the listener feels enveloped by sound that surrounds from all sides.

The windows are arranged in the space at right angles and varying heights, mounted in wooden scaffolding across a roughly 20' x 30' area. They create not quite a sense of structure, but perhaps a sense of passage, inviting attendees to move through and among the windows, or pause at particular spots, or have a seat in a corner to attend to voices that catch their ear. The use of windows began with an interest in how different material filters and represents sound; however, as the piece developed, the windows revealed a larger concept of situated relationality.

The piece attempts to stage multiple levels of what I perceive as a gap, or an emergence, or an opacity, that itself operates at multiple levels of sonic, spatial, ecological, and cultural experience. I want listeners to experience a sense of "over there" through the recordings and spatial arrangement: What sound am I hearing next to me, and what sound am I hearing in the distance? Can I get to there from here? Do the windows facilitate or obstruct that, are they drawing me towards what lies on the other side, or are they serving as a barrier? What cultural technique are they facilitating, and how does that duality structure my relational orientation within the installation? This sense of "over

³ Thibaut Carpentier, "A New Implementation of Spat in Max," paper presented at SMC2018, *15th Sound and Music Computing Conference*, July 2018.

there”-ness permeates the installation, from the recordings to the diffusion to the physical setup, a tension that constantly pulls the listener toward elsewhere.

My driving creative questions, then, are about placemaking and orientations to space. How do people cultivate a spatial relationality, among other people or within and through certain spaces? How does this play out in New Orleans in particular—or, at least, how did it for me? How can sound provoke the tensions at play as folks negotiate this orientation? A core theme in *eventually there’s nowhere* is my sense that this placemaking is emergent, and it emerges amidst overlapping experiences and in certain gaps left when we quantify such experience.

Conceptually, this installation began with questions of field recording and soundscape. What is the soundscape? How do we (fail to) apprehend it, (fail to) interact with it, (fail to) construct it, and (fail to) document it? Tracing debates around the veracity of soundscape composition and its appeal to “reality,” I offer a reading that our sonic meaning-making occurs precisely in the incommensurable space between sound’s “fuzzy” indexicality of the world and the affective cultural relationships we nevertheless develop to the sounds around us.

In pursuing this question, I encountered many theoretical offerings about place and spatial relationality that similarly assert emergence orientations to the world around us. Tim Ingold’s wayfarer framework and Anne-Lise François’s landscape patterns offer readings of meaning-making-in-place that decenter goal-oriented manifestations of place. Critically for my questions about New Orleans, Black and Indigenous scholars also offer readings of earthly relationality that complicate assumptions about how different beings (get to) access such relationality: in particular, Dylan Robinson’s critique of a

consumptive “hungry listening”; Monique Allewaert’s analysis of maroon communities in the swamp; and Katherine McKittrick’s theorizing of black space. These are all buoyed by literature on biosemiotics, poetics, and more.

Finally, as I continued workshoping the piece, my understanding of the windows evolved. I originally came to them with material questions: How does a window warp and filter sound when activated as a speaker? Always hovering, though, was the window as a near-to-universal architectural moment that generates a relationship between inside and outside, not as a passageway but as a portal for apprehension. As the piece developed this infrastructural role came to the fore; Bernhard Seigert’s cultural techniques and Gaston Bachelard’s spatial poetics were invaluable for orienting my own sense of how these windows functioned culturally and sculpturally within the installation.

This paper traces those influences in a theoretical discussion that circulates through various approaches toward emergent meaning-making. What all these scholars and artists share is an assertion that knowledge is not just fixed, not solely defined by observation or demarcation, but an ongoing process of discovery and emergence. In New Orleans this is particularly the case, as residents navigate the inextricable forces that shape life. This emergence is also particularly the case in our orientations to sound, an immersing media that is ontologically at odds with a logocentric, ocular-centric construction of reality. In the final section of this paper, I describe how *eventually there’s nowhere* draws these forces together through the installation, compounding emergent relationality through sound, space, and object.

Emergence: Critical Contexts

Interstitial New Orleans

eventually there's nowhere evolved into a configuration through which I could parse questions about veracity of soundscape, emergence of place, and infrastructural relationality. But none of these questions began as purely theoretical: in some way, they all congealed around my experiences living in New Orleans between 2019 and 2024. So, before I unpack these thoughts, we must return to New Orleans.

New Orleans is a hot place. More than architecture or music or community, the heat sticks out in my mind. I'm writing this in March 2026 in Rhode Island, where we've had just two days above 60°F this year. By March in New Orleans days above 70°F are just as likely as days below 60°F; by April it's firmly in the 80's; by May, the heat and humidity begin accumulating in a vicious feedback loop such that, by July or August, the city rarely breaks beneath the dew point at night. This heat of summer presses, wetly pushes against your clothes and neck, resisting motion to errands or meetings, shutting you indoors at midday and squeezing you through nightly walks, lasting until the end of September. It conjures clouds of mosquitos and sagging vegetation. The famous live oak trees that line St. Charles Avenue and populate City Park seem loping behemoths, an immensity of time and heavy air pressing their thick limbs towards the earth. The region

is brutally air conditioned in most places (though not all), which recirculates more heat into the opaque air. The city is designed partially for the outdoors, so social gatherings, drinks and festivals and dinners, make their peace with this thick atmosphere.

Homes are also designed to manage this. The streets of New Orleans, from the tourist-trapped French Quarter to the Mid-City or Carrollton neighborhoods, are dotted with vibrant architecture, particularly the long shotgun house, one of the city's many famous features. The shotgun home is a cultural-infrastructural inheritance: "Early Louisiana home designs aimed to maximize ventilation mostly for the purposes of everyday comfort, especially in the summer."⁴ In addition to a proliferation of outdoor space like porches and galleries, the open-down-the-center design of a shotgun house helps move air amidst such heat. Drafts through floorboards are a feature, not a bug. These houses also have no basement, since the water table is so close to the earth that it's impossible to dig such a cavity and retain structural integrity. Wind scurries around these homes from all sides. In certain spots of our first-floor apartment, we could look through a hole in our floorboards to the dirt below our house.

This water table also causes massive infrastructural issues. Land subsidence, compounded by geoengineering interventions, means that the topography of the city is in constant, sinking flux.⁵ This is frustratingly observed through the city in massive roadway failures, residential streets that have literally disintegrated to gravel and sand, massive potholes that render roads unpassable, and a perpetual lag or disinvestment on part of

⁴ Andrew Nelson, "New Orleans' Historic Architecture Is Uniquely Suited to Pandemic Living | National Geographic," National Geographic, January 2021, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/travel/article/new-orleans-historic-architecture-uniquely-adapted-to-handle-pandemic>.

⁵ Simone Fiaschi et al., "Vertical Land Motion in Greater New Orleans: Insights into Underlying Drivers and Impact to Flood Protection Infrastructure," *Science Advances* 11, no. 26 (2025).

local governments to manage the problem.⁶ In our neighborhood, one upper-middle-class street was closed for repaving construction for over a year; within months of completion, potholes had reemerged. Never a culture to acquiesce to hardship, the state of New Orleans's roads is continuously skewered by the Instagram account @lookatthisfuckinstreet which has documented locals filling extreme potholes with water to host a pool party, warning cones decorated with Christmas decorations (an equal indictment of their ongoing neglect by officials), and weddings hosted in a pothole—among other antics. Far from a trite parody, this page makes visible how communities in New Orleans assert a sort of infrastructural creative reuse of their surroundings.

This geologic challenge is due to New Orleans's location. The city is famously built in the basin of a swamp, an infrastructural anomaly fighting against the ecosystem's habit. The swamps of the Gulf formed under the churning redirections of the Mississippi River, resulting in a series of waterways called bayous and shifting landmasses between them.⁷ Up until the engineered intervention of levees, the region was geologically unstable, quick to change, which Indigenous tribes like the Chitimacha, Choctaw, and Houma knew and adapted to: "For as long as the stalemate between river and ocean held firm, isolated and self-sufficient communities thrived in the bayou, developing their own cultures and even their own languages."⁸

These infrastructural problems are thus less an inheritance of the land as an inheritance of European colonization. Vittoria Di Palma, in *Wasteland*, traces the history

⁶ Scott Ploof, "Why New Orleans Streets Are in Such Bad Shape," *Big Easy Magazine*, April 2, 2025, <https://bigeasymagazine.com/2025/04/02/why-are-new-orleans-streets-so-bad-a-real-look-at-a-city-in-disrepair/>.

⁷ Lawrence N. Powell, *The Accidental City: Improvising New Orleans* (Harvard University Press, 2012), 6.

⁸ Jake Bittle, *The Great Displacement: Climate Change and the next American Migration* (Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2024), 56.

and depiction of such spaces in Western constructions of nature and the Human. A wasteland as historically understood is “defined not by what it is or what it has, but by what it lacks... [t]he emptiness that is the core characteristic of the wasteland is also what gives the term its malleability, its potential for abstraction; a vacant shell, it lies ready to include all those kinds of places that are defined in negative terms, identified primarily by what they are *not*.”⁹ The wasteland is variously unproductive, unmanageable, and unknown; it resists structured occupation and representation. In that way, it is a cultural lynchpin for understandings of nature. “Wasteland is an abstraction, its definition dependent on the assumptions and values of its beholders. But wasteland is also very real, a category of land circumscribed by precise customs of access and use” for those who did reside and make life in such places.¹⁰ The swamp warrants her particular consideration. Beyond simply resisting utility, the swamp is indeterminate, impenetrable and unstable. It is “neither earth nor water, solid nor liquid, and in its imprecision, its unsettling resistance to categorization, it harbors a particular charge,” a charge that flew in the face of both European productivity *and* morality.¹¹

As with the English draining of the fens, the “taming” of the Gulf South by European colonists relied on a return-on-investment extractivism that demanded the infusion of utility into this otherwise unmanageable region.¹² The founding of New Orleans was no exception. As Lawrence N. Powell documents, New Orleans was the result of French colonial anxiety about securing the all-important Mississippi River trade

⁹ Vittoria Di Palma, *Wasteland: A History* (Yale University Press, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.37862/aaeportal.00222>.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Macarena Gómez-Barris, *The Extractive Zone: Social Ecologies and Decolonial Perspectives*, Dissident Acts (Duke University Press, 2017).

route, particularly in the face of pressure from other colonial enemies. But this southerly deposit of the continent's largest watershed resisted easy manipulation:

Though the Mississippi is a prodigious land-producing machine, very little of what it deposited in New Orleans was fit for human habitation. This is partly because the new land was mud, and mud compacts. Away from the river the new land was little more than organic muck, and here it sank atop submerged peat and relict sand dunes to form the backswamp, some of it forested, most of it marshy.¹³

Of course, Powell betrays his historical bias in this framing. What deposited in New Orleans was not unfit for human habitation, evidenced by centuries (if not millennia) of Indigenous presence in the region. It was, however, resistant to the European colonial drive for boundary demarcation and use, a place that even production-hungry colonial architects were unhappy to wrangle. "It was bad enough living where fogbanks of mosquitoes regularly blackened the twilight. Was it really necessary to compound the misery by building on a floodplain?"¹⁴

Beyond simple material obstruction, the relationality among beings in and around a swamp is far from neutral. While official cartographers and public officials in England made efforts to drain the fens, residents already *in* the fens knew the area as "a resource whose unparalleled richness lay precisely in the marshland's resistance to rational control, in its indeterminacy, variability, and unpredictability."¹⁵ This was even more so the case in the American South, including New Orleans. The drive to cultivate productivity out of the swampy morass obscured, on one hand, histories of Indigenous nations who had lived and moved in the area for centuries and, on the other hand, the

¹³ Powell, *The Accidental City*, 6.

¹⁴ Ibid, 47.

¹⁵ Di Palma, *Wasteland*.

enslaved Black Americans subjected to monstrous labor to realize such productivity for white colonists.

The Gulf South region is thus a continuous site for the unfolding of the Racial Capitalocene. François Vergès proposes this term as an alternative to the widely adopted Anthropocene, because the “humanity” suggested by “Anthro-” has never been one of equal access, let alone equal ecological impact. Our contemporary climate catastrophe more specifically results from the inexorable drive of capitalism’s need for growth, the history of which is bound deeply to plantation capitalism, to slavery, and to the very designation of “Human”.¹⁶ Not only have marginalized communities not caused the climate crisis in equal measure as Western imperial powers, but these communities are purposefully dehumanized by precisely the colonial powers that *have* led us toward our current ecological brink.

I say, then, that the Gulf is a continuous site for the Racial Capitalocene because what began in New Orleans as an all-too-familiar story of colonial-era Indigenous displacement and enslavement of Africans has extended to particular modern-day climate crises that shape the region’s human life and more-than-human ecology. This region, particularly vulnerable to climate catastrophe, is partitioned by industrial interests which both exacerbate such catastrophes and disproportionately affect communities of color.

The Gulf South is a receiving basin for hurricanes that form in the Atlantic Ocean and regularly wreak havoc on the region, killing thousands in the 21st-century alone.

2020 was the most active year on record for the Atlantic hurricane season, with 30 named

¹⁶ Françoise Vergès, “Racial Capitalocene,” in *Futures of Black Radicalism*, ed. Gaye Theresa Johnson and Alex Lubin (Verso, 2017); Silvia Wynter, “1492: A New World View,” in *Race, Discourse, and the Origin of the Americas: A New World View*, by Vera Lawrence Hyatt et al. (Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995).

storms (both tropical storms and hurricanes). In a city like New Orleans, built on accumulated sediment at sea level, such disasters cause excessive infrastructural devastation, leveling buildings and gouging roadways. The risk of environmental catastrophe is so great in New Orleans and similar regions that rising homeowners insurance costs are just as likely to drive residents from the region as the destruction of their home. Further south in Louisiana, (largely Indigenous) communities like Isle de Jean Charles are in active consideration of assisted relocation as their land, literally, sinks underwater due to rising sea levels. Of course, such relocation schemes are always partially a calculation of cost and do little to assuage the suspicions of residents who have previously been victim to racist housing policy.¹⁷

Equally devastating, if not more so, is the emotional impact of such disasters. Eco-communitarian philosopher John Clark—a New Orleans native, and one of the first people to invite me to present thoughts on sound and environment, in 2021 at his Bayou La Terre institute—writes poignantly about his experience of Hurricane Katrina. He observed the storm from India while working with the Louisiana Himalaya Association, then frantically returned to the city via a four-leg flight and car ride past the mandatory evacuation order.¹⁸ While the “sublime horror of catastrophe” was somewhat televised, somewhat documented,

no news photos or video footage quite captured the awful reality of the devastation. The feeling of overwhelming destruction really sets in when one travels through street after street, neighborhood after neighborhood, and sees many thousands of houses and other buildings ruined and deserted... one is

¹⁷ Rush, *Rising*, 262–63.

¹⁸ John Philip Clark, *Between Earth and Empire: From the Necrocene to the Beloved Community*, 1st ed, with Peter Marshall (PM Press, 2019), 185.

overtaken by the nauseating and dispiriting feeling evoked by the decomposition, decay, and mortality that pervades the deserted neighborhoods.¹⁹

Given this environmental precarity, it's ironic that the region is home to an extreme concentration of oil and gas refineries and plants, industries key to accelerating such climate catastrophes. The Gulf of Mexico (renamed, officially, by the second Trump administration as the "Gulf of America") generates 97% of all U.S. oil and gas production through offshore refineries.²⁰ Most infamous among these refineries was Deepwater Horizon, which in 2010 experienced a catastrophic oil spill that resulted in the destruction of the refinery and massive pollution into the Gulf that eventually covered 1,000 miles of shoreline.²¹ New Orleans is also the end of Cancer Alley, an 85-mile stretch of the Mississippi River along which operate over 250 industrial sites registered on the EPA's Toxic Release Inventory (TRI). The toxic runoff and air pollution from these plants has turned the region into a "sacrifice zone," where residents face cancer rates more than seven times the national average.²² The communities along this stretch of the river are predominantly Black, the result of racist policies like redlining and geographic inheritances of the Jim Crow south.²³ Environmental impact of today's climate crisis thus telescopes from the grand "Acts of God" like hurricanes to the steady drip of pollution into local waterways and air. The Gulf South, and New Orleans, are not

¹⁹ Ibid, 186.

²⁰ "Oil and Gas - Gulf of America," Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, U.S. Department of the Interior, accessed March 30, 2026, <https://www.boem.gov/regions/gulf-america-ocs-region/oil-and-gas-gulf-america>.

²¹ "Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill," Gulf Oil Spill, Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, July 2012, <https://ocean.si.edu/conservation/pollution/gulf-oil-spill>.

²² Antonia Juhasz, "'We're Dying Here,'" *Human Rights Watch*, January 25, 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2024/01/25/were-dying-here/fight-life-louisiana-fossil-fuel-sacrifice-zone>.

²³ "Cancer Alley Map," ArcGIS, December 14, 2023, <https://www.arcgis.com/home/item.html?id=97e35ea7e3084cbbb0eaa5bf0d65005c>.

just the site of unique environmental challenges, but a flashpoint geography for human struggle, the struggle to be Human, and whose voices matter in such struggle.

And yet despite this, or perhaps because of this, New Orleans and the Gulf are sites of radical life-making and have been for thousands of years. Indigenous folk have known it for centuries and called it *Bulbancha*, a Choctaw word meaning “the place of many tongues.”²⁴ These were tongues of exchange and community—the area around New Orleans was a meeting place between tribes, a place of connection through gathering, emblematic of Tim Ingold’s “wayfarer” paradigm of place-making.²⁵

According to Boyce Upholt, during the early decades of European colonization, “the lower [Mississippi] river... had become a diverse place, home to the Quapaw and the Yazoo and Griga and Tiou and Natchez, the Koroa and Ofo, the Taensa and Tunica and Houma. The Choctaw knew one site in the delta... as Bulbancha... Wandering traders developed a lingua franca that mixed the varied sounds and words of these many different people.”²⁶

Later, the swamp served as refuge for others fleeing the violence of slavery while disturbing ontologies of settler selfhood. In *Ariel’s Ecology*, Monique Allewaert traces the site of the swamp as not just an impediment to colonists’ construction of an ideal self but a site for the activation of *marronage*, “a process through which human agents found ways to interact with nonhuman forces and in so doing resisted the order of the

²⁴ Jules Bentley, “Reviving Indigenous Histories with Bulbancha Is Still a Place,” *Antigravity Magazine*, September 2018, <https://antigravitymagazine.com/feature/reviving-indigenous-histories-with-bulbancha-is-still-a-place/>.

²⁵ Bentley, “Reviving Indigenous Histories”; Tim Ingold, *Lines: A Brief History* (Routledge, 2016), 83.

²⁶ Boyce Upholt, *The Great River: The Making and Unmaking of the Mississippi*, First edition (W.W. Norton & Company, 2024), 37–8.

plantation.”²⁷ Critical in her close-reading of white colonist texts is the transformation of self that occurs in the plantation zone, “a space that is tropical (or subtropical) and whose economy and political structures are shaped by the plantation form,” where nature shifts from a “landscape-focused concept” to an “ecological one.”²⁸ The ecology of these zones, Di Palma’s impenetrable swamp, directly interfered with Western strategies of knowledge-via-taxonomy, preventing the separation of subject and object and instead entwining the human body into “snakes, diseases, and vines.”²⁹ Simultaneously, maroons, or escaped slaves who took refuge in the swamps, were able to use this ecology to their advantage in protection from and subversion of whites. This *marronage* is thus an emergent lifeway for formerly enslaved people. “Remnants of slavery weave land into rivers but do not bind the tropics to the slave past, because the future Glissant offers is that of *marronage*, and maroons are ecological actors who cannot be bound by the history and artifacts of slavery.”³⁰ The swamp not only impedes the march of European colonization but offers alternative methods for living via ecological engagement.

Perhaps New Orleans’s most famous cultural export—jazz—is also the result of a radical life-making within this contested space. While there are myriad overlapping influences that formed the emergence of the style, one critical locus was Congo Square in New Orleans. This was an area north of the French Quarter reserved as a restricted space for free people of color and enslaved African Americans to gather and make music on Sundays. This rare gathering locale, a “space within” the dominant plantation zone,

²⁷ Monique Allewaert, *Ariel’s Ecology: Plantations, Personhood, and Colonialism in the American Tropics* (University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 31.

²⁸ Ibid, 30, 47.

²⁹ Ibid, 37.

³⁰ Ibid, 50.

facilitated musical communities that are considered one of the key influences on the gradual development of jazz.³¹

Those traditions of radical life-making through music are still alive in the city today. In Matt Sakakeeny's article on the soundscapes of New Orleans, he details how "African Americans who have been marginalized through various projects of urban planning, gentrification, and disaster profiteering have staked claims on the built environment through displays of expressive culture in which sound is a primary mode of expression."³² By examining the interaction of New Orleans brass bands with their urban geography, particularly the Claiborne Avenue I-10 Underpass (a damning example of infrastructural development designed to destroy a vibrant Black economic area), Sakakeeny documents layers of active identity negotiation that play out in these public performances and social displays.

Making public sounds in public spaces is, quite literally, a practice of being heard. How these sounds are interpreted by various listeners is dependent on their orientation towards them, which relates to history, culture, and biography in ways that are not always predictable. Soundscapes encompass multiple, sometimes opposing, subject positions, and this is precisely why they have been so critical to the production of locality in New Orleans.³³

Life, in its many forms, is and has always been an emergent property of living in the Gulf South and New Orleans, particularly for Indigenous and marginalized communities—and, following Allewaert, for white communities too, whether they liked it or not. As Sakakeeny observes in this ethnography, and as I will argue below, sound in particular is a medium within which these emergent negotiations take place.

³¹ Freddi Williams Evans, "Congo Square," 64 Parishes, September 2013, <https://64parishes.org/entry/congo-square>.

³² Matt Sakakeeny, "'Under the Bridge': An Orientation to Soundscapes in New Orleans," *Ethnomusicology* 54, no. 1 (2010): 3.

³³ *Ibid.*, 25.

I don't want to suggest that these myriad orientations to life are causally *produced* by the Gulf and its overlapping forces of environment, history, culture, and oppression. My own relationship to New Orleans led me to understand the place as a staging ground for such questions, such confluences, such disruptions, in a way that is impossible to avoid, a being-in-the-world that resists at every turn Western ontologies of separate realms, of Enlightenment observation-via-isolation. John Clark names this staging as *interstitiality*, "a kind of unruly disruptiveness" that emerges in New Orleanians due to such overlapping forces.³⁴ "To live mindfully in New Orleans is to dwell dialectically on the edge, to border borders ambiguously, and to inhabit interstices precariously... To be a New Orleanian who is fully awakened to our perspective of place gives one a certain 'double vision,' a certain privilege of parallax."³⁵ This interstitial space is not just the space of overlap that regional life is forced into, but a space of possible rupture, of the expansion of new modes of living—like *marronage*, like jazz or second-line bands, like decorating a pothole for the holidays.

This is where, I hope, *eventually there's nowhere* might direct a listener: the excessive meshworks of life-making forces, the gaps they create, and the negotiation that occurs there. At every level of the work—field recording as a practice, the fuzziness of soundscapes, ontologies and epistemologies of place, relationality to constructed environment—I stage these overlaps and gaps so that listeners might process their spatial and sonic relationality. And I hope that these gaps open further, that the interstice widens so we might peer into them and witness the emergence of living.

³⁴ Clark, *Between Earth and Empire*, 291.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 295.

Soundscape

In much of my work since 2019, environmental sound has been method and material for how I think through creative questions. When I first conceived of *eventually there's nowhere* I was specifically motivated by the propositions of soundscape composition. Emerging from the work of R. Murray Schafer—particularly his book *The Soundscape: The Tuning of the World* and his founding of the World Soundscape Project at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver—soundscape composition is a creative approach developed by his students that seeks to elevate reflective engagement with the natural world through compositional craft.

Schafer popularized the term “soundscape” in his multifaceted critique of the contemporary sounding world. He argued that society had lost intentional relationality to the sounds of everyday life. In a world of ceaseless, increasingly loud (so he claimed) noise, all sounds ceased to be meaningful to human listening, a general movement away from what he called hi-fi soundscapes (rich in *relational information*) to lo-fi soundscapes (dense with *meaningless* sound).³⁶ His was a particularly humanist project, dedicated to retraining our listening so that we might hear our world again and begin a program of conscious acoustic design to return to a hi-fi, harmonious soundscape. As Matt Sakakeeny points out, this did not necessarily mean a reversion to some pre-industrial tranquility; Schafer’s lengthy example about the sounding information of trains belies such assumptions.³⁷ On the other hand, his writings and subsequent projects

³⁶ R. Murray Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (Knopf, 1977; repr., Destiny Books, 1994), 78.

³⁷ Sakakeeny, “Under the Bridge”, 17; Schafer, *The Soundscape*.

begged the question of which humans, exactly, were included in his ideals of humanism, as has been clearly marked by Dylan Robinson.³⁸

Schafer's work as writer and pedagogue was hugely influential, spawning a series of funded projects, societies, and fields that variously took up this call for societal and environmental improvement via listening attention. Among other things, his World Soundscape Project (WSP) was the foundation for today's study of acoustic ecology, carried on by artists and scientists alike as a quantifiable method of ecosystem analysis through sound (the mission of the WSP carries on in the World Forum for Acoustic Ecology). The work of such artist-researchers ranges from community engagement art practices, such as soundwalks, to "hard science" bioacoustics, where researchers like Bernie Krause use field recordings to observe ecosystemic behavior and change.³⁹ This approach has variously documented environmental impact of human interference and analyzed sound in legal settings.

Creatively, one of Schafer's enduring legacies is soundscape composition. Schafer believed strongly that composers, as shapers of sound through time and space, had particular expertise that could be brought to bear on this project of eco-acoustic improvement. As the WSP developed further projects and practices, sculpting their field recording archive for public presentation through studio techniques became a key method for publicizing their work, the foundation for soundscape composition.⁴⁰ Composers such as Hildegard Westerkamp and Barry Truax use environmental sound (i.e. field

³⁸ Dylan Robinson, *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies*, Indigenous Americas (University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 1.

³⁹ Bernie Krause, "Bernie Krause: The Voice of the Natural World | TED Talk," accessed September 24, 2024, https://www.ted.com/talks/bernie_krause_the_voice_of_the_natural_world.

⁴⁰ Mitchell Akiyama, "Nothing Connects Us but Imagined Sound," in *Sound, Media, Ecology*, ed. Milena Droumeva and Randolph Jordan, Palgrave Studies in Audio-Visual Culture (Springer International Publishing, 2019), 114–15.

recordings) as their primary sonic material, transforming it through various processes to extend and manipulate its character.⁴¹ Critically, this transformation is not to the end of abstraction from source, never in service of what Pierre Schaeffer might call a reduced, acousmatic listening that attends only to the acoustic behavior of a sound.⁴² Instead, soundscape composers used the context of these sounds as guide and method, composing “within” the sounds (as Truax calls it) to create a musical experience that elevated contextual understanding of sonic environments.⁴³ Westerkamp asserts that “such work potentially creates a clearer sense of place and belonging for both composer and listener, since the essence of soundscape composition is the artistic, sonic transmission of meanings about place, time, environment and listening perception.”⁴⁴

This mode of composition manifests in different ways, depending on the artist. But the core principle is rooted in the composer’s experiential engagement with the acoustic environment (ideally through their own practice of listening and field recording), deep reflection on the meanings or information or questions found upon that experience, and rendering of that reflection via the compositional process. Whether this is towards the end of inspiring action or simply raising listening consciousness is not specified—Westerkamp, in her writing, does not make such commitments besides to hope that it is “precisely in the link between composer and audience that energy for change can be

⁴¹ Though an outgrowth of Schafer’s philosophies, he himself never composed in such a manner, instead focusing on notated ensemble works in the Western classical tradition (often requesting extraordinary performance circumstances, like setting trombone players in boats on a lake in *Music for Wilderness Lake*).

⁴² Pierre Schaeffer, “Acousmatics,” in *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, Revised edition, ed. Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner (Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 97.

⁴³ Barry Truax, “Soundscape, Acoustic Communication and Environmental Sound Composition,” *Contemporary Music Review* 15, no. 1 (1996): 60.

⁴⁴ Hildegard Westerkamp, “Soundscape Composition: Linking Inner and Outer Worlds,” Hildegard Westerkamp, accessed August 19, 2022, <http://www.hildegardwesterkamp.ca/writings/writingsby/index.php>.

created.”⁴⁵ A representative example of the genre is Westerkamp’s *Beneath the Forest Floor*, which she composed based on her experiences in old-growth forests in the Carmanah Valley. The work features both still-identifiable excerpts of her recording archive and versions of those same materials transformed with common studio effects like delay, reverb, pitch transposition and harmonization, gates, and equalizers.⁴⁶

Though formalized into methods and societies, soundscape composition was not the only realm where composers experimented—and continue to experiment with—field recording as material and practice. 10 years before Schafer published *The Soundscape*, Italian composer Luc Ferrari began composing what he called “postcard pieces” such as *Presque Rien no. 1*, a tape piece assembled with field recordings from a seaside town in Croatia, “the most faithful possible *reminiscence* possible of a fishing village at dawn.”⁴⁷ More contemporarily, sound artists like Toshiya Tsunoda and Éric La Casa have cultivated practices almost entirely based on field recording with minimal post-recording intervention, using their technologies to investigate vibrational contingency (Tsunoda) or the sonic everyday (La Casa).

These approaches to environmental sound, sincere in their drive for environmental improvement and ecological repair, are not without their critics. As has been observed by Jonathan Sterne and others, there are potential discrepancies in the Schaferian disavowal of schizophonic listening (which separates the listener from a sound’s context, thereby perpetuating its “meaninglessness”) while relying on the very

⁴⁵ Hildegard Westerkamp, “Linking Soundscape Composition and Acoustic Ecology,” *Organised Sound* 7, no. 1 (2002): 56.

⁴⁶ “Hildegard Westerkamp: Beneath the Forest Floor,” in *Inside Computer Music*, by Michael Clarke et al. (Oxford University Press, 2020).

⁴⁷ Luc Ferrari, *Presque rien n° 1: Le lever du jour au bord de la mer oeuvre sur support audio [du] cycle Presque rien*, Reproduction en fac-similé (Maison ONA, 2018).

technologies of sophisticated recording and playback to promote their mission.⁴⁸

Schafer's writing is also replete with value judgements about the possible ways humans might build relational meaning to sounds; trains, in his purview, were markers of connection to the outside world, but no such possible relationality could exist with snowmobiles.⁴⁹ These value judgements manifested, among other places, in the decisions of the WSP on what—or, more problematically, *who*—comprised Canada's "natural" soundscape and therefore were worthy of recorded representation and transmission.⁵⁰

Fundamentally undergirding all of this, and central in challenges to Schafer's legacy, is that theories of soundscape composition rely on a Western aesthetics of index, representation, and quantification. Schafer's terminology—like soundscape, earmark, or figure-ground—makes an etymological borrowing from depictions of landscape, of landmarks, of apprehending "the natural."⁵¹ If Schafer's intention in this borrowing was to highlight the visual bias of (Western, particularly White, particularly White-Canadian) society, it also inadvertently inherits the assumptions of constructed landscapes. As Denis Cosgrove articulates,

Landscape values denoted the aesthetic and environmental concerns of a largely urbanized population for rural spaces known chiefly through recreational visits, sometimes coinciding and sometimes colliding with exclusionary property interests. 'Scientific' attempts to measure such values foundered on the realization that to speak of 'the same scene' itself presupposed an ability to produce a

⁴⁸ Jonathan Sterne, "Soundscape, Landscape, Escape," in *Soundscape of the Urban Past*, ed. Karin Bijsterveld (transcript, 2013), 187. Westerkamp, in fairness, acknowledges this discrepancy, offering only her belief that such technology could be used to direct a reparative listening attention rather than unchecked passivity; Westerkamp, "Linking Soundscape Composition," 55.

⁴⁹ Schafer, *The Soundscape*, 85.

⁵⁰ Akiyama, "Nothing Connects Us but Imagined Sound," 118.

⁵¹ Mitchell Akiyama, "Transparent Listening: Soundscape Composition's Objects of Study," *RACAR : Revue d'art Canadienne* 35, no. 1 (2020), 56.

disinterested and objective visual image against which different perceptions of witnesses could be measured.⁵²

And this project is not simply an assumption of objectivity, but emblematic of the Western modernizing project that was eager to draw lines of objectivity throughout the world: “the discourse of landscape is a crucial means for enlisting ‘Nature’ in the legitimization of modernity.”⁵³ Schafer’s tendency to castigate Indigenous Canadians is perhaps then no surprise, if inadvertently so, since part of modernity’s project of knowledge creation was intimately tied to a project of defining the human and who falls outside such a category, as discussed above regarding swamps in the American south.⁵⁴

This manifests in a range of critiques of the WSP’s methods, which begins with the function of field recording and extends through artistic claims for soundscape composition. Paul Hegarty opens this critique at the source: a conception of nature that is somehow indexical with the real. Field recording and its inherited practices of listening insist that ecological, social, or spiritual improvement is largely a matter of attention,⁵⁵ an attention to the real facilitated by the recording, which “claims to simply grasp the real... maybe to hear it even better than unassisted human ears (though all human ears come prosthetically enhanced with cultures).”⁵⁶ But, even if such reality is there or accessible, a field recording is itself a mediated construction that offsets such logic of capture. “The moment field recording enters the field, it structures the field as a recursive product of its own activity. If there was a real there, safe from categorization as referent, it is displaced

⁵² Denis Cosgrove, “Landscape and the European Sense of Sight - Eyeing Nature,” in *Handbook of Cultural Geography*, by Kay Anderson et al. (SAGE Publications Ltd, 2003), 252.

⁵³ W. J. T. Mitchell, “Imperial Landscape,” in *Landscape and Power*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (1994; Second Edition, University of Chicago Press, 2002), 13.

⁵⁴ Wynter, “1492,” 36–37.

⁵⁵ Paul Hegarty, *Annihilating Noise* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 19.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 22.

by a new relational pattern that emanates from the recording, or even the decision to record.”⁵⁷ Field recording is thus caught as a quintessential mediant that attempts to obscure its technological position in order to draw a listener closer to “the real” via, simply, improved listening.

Constructions of the field inhere the values of construction. “Cultural-historical moments, both human and nonhuman,... matter in the formation of the field, as does the right to record and represent others. The practice of field recording is bound into the production of the field as a site of displacement.”⁵⁸ Beyond the ontological question in the WSP’s understanding of a field to be recorded, there is certainly an epistemological question of how such an orientation to environmental (or, simply, non-musical sound) perpetuates the taxonomizing of the world. This is a manifestation of what Dylan Robinson terms “hungry listening,” which “prioritizes the capture and certainty of information over the affective feel, timbre, touch, and texture of sound.”⁵⁹ This is not simply an indictment of listening for “knowing” rather than sonic qualities, but emblematic of a Western orientation to knowledge that requires fixity in opposition to relational, affective listening practices (such as the Indigenous practices Robinson presents).

In the context of soundscape composition as practiced by the WSP composers, these critiques pose significant aesthetic challenges. If the aim of these composers is a type of communication or awareness-raising, how can it rest on so constructed an ontological frame? Mitchell Akiyama has written particularly about this ideological-

⁵⁷ Ibid, 38–39.

⁵⁸ Mark Peter Wright, *Listening after Nature: Field Recording, Ecology, Critical Practice* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), 20.

⁵⁹ Robinson, *Hungry Listening*, 38.

methodological conflict, from documents of the WSP's early years to current articulations by Truax and Westerkamp.⁶⁰ In his own listening to Westerkamp's *Beneath the Forest Floor* Akiyama states:

It is debatable as to whether or not this piece disobeys Truax's mandate for the genre: the preservation of environmental context. Long sections of *Beneath the Forest Floor* are barely recognizable as environmental recordings, let alone as fragments of a specific locale. But in obscuring place, this blurring is exactly what produces the shadowy, mysterious quality that makes Westerkamp's piece so intriguing. Ironically, in obscuring place, Westerkamp invites the listener to enter more deeply into the piece and share her disquiet.⁶¹

If such compositional activity, which claims “an indexical link between recording and source,” relies on a mode of abstraction for its impact, fails to “communicate” such place-based reflection without explanatory intervention, then this “indexical relationship to place, to the extent that it can be said to still exist, becomes almost entirely nominal.”⁶²

While this debate orbits around deep onto-epistemological questions of sonic-spatial relationality, it is also a conversation about the capacities of art. Does art need to be self-contained? Can it elevate our lived, perceived experience of the world—and, in the case of sound, does non-sonic context undermine such efforts? Just as art depicting landscapes has been critiqued for its construction of nature (and had already been by the time Schafer wrote his book), soundscape composition relies on an aesthetics of reflective meditation that relies heavily on the representational veracity of field recordings. On the other hand, in pointing this out, Akiyama aligns to a similarly-critiqued demand of Western musical aesthetics akin to Adorno's “structural listening,” a mode of composition where aesthetic meaning inheres in the unfolding development of

⁶⁰ Akiyama, “Nothing Connects Us but Imagined Sound.”

⁶¹ Akiyama, “Transparent Listening,” 59.

⁶² Ibid, 59–60.

material with no recourse to external reference, dismissing non-sonic associative meaning-making.⁶³ Ironically, both the WSP in their disciplinary background and Akiyama in his critical background inherit aesthetic commitments that potentially obscure the generative possibilities of soundscape composition.

We might differently engage this aesthetic question by stepping outside the boundaries of particular artistic practice. For meaning-making through sound is *never* simply indexical or constructed, but relationally emergent. Listening is a combination of aural attention, spatial diffusion, and cultural orientation that asks us to repeatedly renegotiate our relationship to sound. Though in methodological disagreement with one another, this is something that everyone from Akiyama to Truax to soundscape ecologists like Almo Farina acknowledges.⁶⁴ This does not mean relationship to sound is unfettered and therefore universalizing, but that sound is a space through which meaning is *made* rather than *identified*. This making, what Barry Blesser and Linda-Ruth Salter call “aural architecture,” is an overlapping combination of acoustic arenas and cultural practices.⁶⁵

Parsing the relational, not-simply-indexical character of sound is a key feature in a wide variety of scholarship on the medium. Philosophies of sound identify it as a site for continual negotiation of self and relationality: “To be listening will always, then, to be

⁶³ Adorno, Theodor, *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, (Seabury Press), 5. This is not to mention that for many soundscape composers and acoustic ecologists the critique holds no water. The common-sense of field recording communication and statement-making art activism is justification enough in the face of environmental catastrophe. And, as Hegarty pithily remarks, “The demagogues of acoustic ecology are hardly the worst political scourge of today’s world, but their ideas can easily be seen as insisting on problematic bases.” Hegarty, *Annihilating Noise*, 21.

⁶⁴ Akiyama, “Nothing Connects Us but Imagined Sound,” 125; Barry Truax, “Sound, Listening and Place: The Aesthetic Dilemma,” *Organised Sound* 17, no. 3 (2012): 194; Almo Farina, *Soundscape Ecology* (Springer Netherlands, 2014), 4.

⁶⁵ Barry Blesser and Linda-Ruth Salter, *Spaces Speak, Are You Listening? Experiencing Aural Architecture* (MIT Press, 2007), 11–27.

straining toward or in an approach to the self.”⁶⁶ Listening makes us aware of ourselves through the articulation of an elsewhere, a process that David Wills describes as a technology, a method by which our body “feels itself by feeling itself moving... A similar ‘touching’... come[s] into effect by means of hearing oneself speak.”⁶⁷ For these philosophers, the self is not an object to identify, but an emergent property of relational listening. Sound facilitates our negotiation of the self.

Even measurable acoustic properties complicate any sense of one-to-one identification through sound. The propagation of sound is always intrinsically affected by the space through which it propagates, as Blesser and Salter so thoroughly demonstrate.⁶⁸ In any listening we are never attending just to a single sound source, but its interaction with the space around and between us (not to mention the multitude of other simultaneous soundings). Sonic propagation, especially outside of controlled settings like a studio, are interlocked chains of acoustic arenas that “do not respect” the spatial boundaries that “arise from visual appearances and social markers.”⁶⁹ The listening cultures we inherit and develop thus never simply delimit a sound source but engage with its behavior in space. Recognizing this is the core of social scientific methodologies like Stephen Feld’s acoustemology.⁷⁰

And, lastly, even if the mediating function of field recorders irreparably alters “the field” which has been recorded, the dislocation and reimagining of these recordings is not a loss, but the generation of a new negotiation. As Alexander Weheliye notes in his

⁶⁶ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*, (Fordham University Press, 2009).

⁶⁷ David Wills, “Positive Feedback: Listening Behind Hearing,” in *Thresholds of Listening: Sound, Technics, Space*, First edition, by Sander van Maas (Fordham university press, 2015), 79.

⁶⁸ Blesser and Salter, *Spaces Speak, Are You Listening?*, 11–27.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 26.

⁷⁰ Steven Feld, “A Rainforest Acoustemology,” in *The Auditory Culture Reader*, ed. Michael Bull and Les Back (Berg, 2003).

analysis of recording technologies' irruption of Black identity, "the radical reconstruction of the previous relation between sound and source [i.e. playing back a recording] create[s] fresh cultural spheres that would not have been possible without recording and reproduction technologies... The phonograph's recalibration of locality effect[s] changes in its relation to other vicinities rather than erasing the local altogether."⁷¹ While the "local" of original recording may not carry through this mediated form, recording playback proliferates *new* localities to which we acclimate.

Mindful that Weheliye's project speaks to a particular Black identity formation through sound, I believe this insight into the "circulatory tide" of sound recordings is a critical intervention into the debate on soundscape composition. Soundscape composition cannot be meaningful through its indexing of place, because the meaning-making relationships that soundscape composition provokes have *never* occurred in the site of "the field" but in precisely the newly constructed field their transmission generates. Not only is our sonic meaning-making emergent in the daily life, but works of soundscape composition provoke new emergent meaning, which have a potential valence for different generative relationships. This is a step outside of the art-as-(not)-representational debate that Akiyama, Westerkamp, and Truax engage, because it is leaving behind the conditions of musical "meaning" as somehow residing in music's capacity to speak outside itself, a debate largely tied to aesthetic inheritances of Western classical music. Rather than dismiss those terms as simply irrelevant, these conceptions of sound as a *place* of meaning making rather than a *carrier* of meaning allows for emergent relational formation to sound, particularly environmental sound—whether recorded or not.

⁷¹ Alexander G. Weheliye, "Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity," *Duke Backfile* (Durham), 2005, 20–21.

My own practices with field recordings shifted during the process of building *eventually there's nowhere* along these very lines. When I began testing sound through windows in 2023 it was with the idea that I would compose a fixed-media soundscape composition in the Westerkamp-Truax tradition. The piece would just-so-happen to be diffused through the windows. At core, though, I assumed to use methods rooted in the soundscape composition lineage of transformed recordings based on personal meditations of their origin place.

As I continued meditating on these recordings and on my relationship to the Gulf, I began to examine my motivations for using field recordings at all. Was it sufficient, *for me*, to assert a truth about my relationship to this place through audio manipulation? Instead of using the recordings to mark a stance, could the recordings be a situation of new questions, the material *through which* rather than *with which* I navigated my sense of placeness in the Gulf? I began exploring this positionality in my fixed media piece *given to be heard* (2025), a 3rd-order ambisonics soundscape composition that used the same Gulf South field recording archive as *eventually there's nowhere*. In practice, *given to be heard* absolutely sticks to the methods of soundscape composition: I make creative edits and augmentations that attempt to extend, rather than obscure, the source recordings without tipping fully into abstraction. The transformations I enacted—resonant feedback loops, impulse response reverberations, spatial motion—were always “in service” to the sonic behavior of the original recording, and were inspired by my research on Westerkamp’s methods. This resulted in a composed piece, with no performed or manipulated elements that would distinguish one instance of its playback from the next.

However, my underlying question was shifting. Rather than try to comment on ecological degradation or environmental racism via analogous processing, I wanted to explore that such forces and lived experiences were inextricably linked. This shift from a quasi-representational aesthetics to an aesthetics of questioning, of setting sounds alongside one another to provoke further questioning, was an enormous creative shift that set the groundwork for *eventually there's nowhere*. This shift was reinforced by engagement with the writings I described above. I came to value an attention to emergent listening and emergent relationality, which felt both creatively generative and more resonant with my lived experiences. Rather than commit to one side of the theoretical debate on field recording as representational, I could create into their very nature as fuzzy reference. A recording is a sensed symbol that pulls the listener towards something but never quite isolates it, because sound itself is always pulling us towards but never necessarily isolating its source.⁷² But this does not mean sound is meaningless. It means we are constantly making meaning *through* sounded relationship, that sonic meaning is never indexical but always emergent.

Emergent Knowledge, Relational Space

This focus on emergent meaning, the accumulation of material and positionality and affect that marks sonic relation, was not just creatively exciting but deeply resonant with my reflections of the Gulf South. The interstitial state of life-making in New Orleans

⁷² "...we can figure being-listening as pure stance, entirely *intending towards*. Such an approach implies a consciousness of being constantly *in* sound. Such an 'immersive' conception of the perception of the sonorous is also to be found in the contemporary notion of the *soundscape*." François J. Bonnet and Peter Szendy, *The Order of Sounds: A Sonorous Archipelago*, trans. Robin Mackay, Mono 2 (Urbanomic, 2016), 77.

and meaning-making through sound both emerge through analogous convergences of forces. If the swamp cannot be reduced to distinct formations, neither can sound apprehension; if intersecting cultural orientations stage positionality to infrastructure and ecology, so to do they stage listening positionality; if there is always a gap or opacity within which folks manage the trauma of natural disaster and the joy of parades, there are layered gaps of index in our taxonomy of sound. Rather than situating ourselves through discrete understanding, we situate ourselves through processes of engagement with these scenarios and move forward through emergent meanings.

This emergence became the central mode of inquiry for *eventually there's nowhere*. I thus looked to a range of disciplines—ecology, non-Western ontology, critical theory, poetics—for scholars and artists who were also theorizing non-indexical modes of relationality and knowledge. Just as there was resonance in my reflections on interstitial New Orleans and soundscapes, larger cross-disciplinary inquiries promote similar modes of meaning-making. This constellation of thought supported my creative work in different ways; while I did not build *eventually there's nowhere* in direct reflection of one or the other theory, certain models helped clarify my ongoing questions.

As with soundscape composition, many of these theories engage environmental concerns. Jakob von Uexküll's theory of biosemiotics proposes that a subject in nature locks into meaning-making relations with other objects (including other beings that contain their own subjecthood) in their environment, responding not to everything but to relevant perception marks. In his famous example of the tick, "[t]he whole rich world surrounding the tick is constricted and transformed into an impoverished structure that...

consists only of three features and three effect marks—the tick’s environment.”⁷³ A large-scale ecosystem is thus not a unified “composition” (as Schafer might have it) but an emergent totality of many “piece[s] cut out of [a subject’s] surroundings.”⁷⁴

Alice Eldridge uses this model to propose that, similarly, a soundscape cannot be understood as a totality to be addressed writ large. Instead, an ecosystemic soundscape is a never-bounded phenomenal trace of lower-level acoustic life-making, a series of perceived, emergent soundscapes around which we and other beings orient. “The soundscape is a set of vibrations in the environment that is generated by the ongoing activity to [sic] being alive by many organisms... the wind and the rain and the resonant structures of those physical environments, and those sounds come together to create this emergent complex soundscape which then influences other forms of life.”⁷⁵ This interestingly opens new directions in the very soundscape composition/acoustic ecology debates I traced above. Eldridge offers an orientation to these fields as not representational, but continual tracings of emergence, which has particularly influenced her work with machine learning and bioacoustics monitoring.

Not only are such totalities emergent through various signaled relations, but Anna-Lise François points out that even those signaled relations are diffuse. In reviewing the “landscape patterns” of flowers and pollinators, she observes that a Darwinian

⁷³ Jakob von Uexküll et al., *Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans: With a Theory of Meaning*, trans. Joseph D. O’Neil, Posthumanities (University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 51.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁷⁵ Alice Eldridge, “Ecolistening for Regenerative Futures,” Resonant Ecologies Seminar Series, Sydney, November 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pJwm_rA0A3M. These vibrations range from ancillary productions of other activity to critical communication strategies between species. One of Eldridge’s most fascinating examples is of co-evolution between a particular carnivorous plant species and bat species. The carnivorous plant has developed its shape to be a sound reflector that reflects bat clicks, attracting the bat to the plant, which is the proper shape for the bat to rest in. While the bat rests and defecates, the plant absorbs the guano as its primary nutritional source.

investment in one-to-one mutualism is inaccurate in “understanding” (perhaps better said, classifying) ecosystem behavior. She describes instead a *landscape pattern* in which various plants and animals may or may not interact, may or may not pollinate, and therefore may emerge into various configurations of literal productive engagement rather than an evolutionarily-optimized sequence. Landscape pattern “evokes... a stretchable but importantly finite range of neighboring possibilities; such capacity for context-specific variation and versatility seems least likely to survive under twenty-first century market-driven methods of industrial pollination.”⁷⁶ While her discussion here focuses on a critical-practical dialogue around practices of industrial pollination, the larger point stands: ecosystems emerge through vast contingencies of relational interaction, not any guaranteed mutualism.

Together, these theories usefully complicated my sense of soundscapes and environmental sound, even prior to their recording. They helpfully dislodge presumptions about sonic indexicality, that it is “enough” to apprehend the sounds of a space in that moment, and offer aural windows into a more complex navigation of listening. As I’ll discuss below, my own orientation to environmental sound then developed along lines of speculative interstitial investigation. Could I, for instance, listen for the “edge” of the soundscape where a discrete sound (signal) morphs into the background ambience of the space (noise)?

If these theories are based in observations of ecosystemic behavior, they echo non-Western epistemologies based in the primacy of relational existence. This is

⁷⁶ Anne-Lise François, “Flower Fisting,” *Postmodern Culture* 22, no. 1 (2011), <https://doi.org/10.1353/pmc.2012.0004>.

extensively asserted in Indigenous scholarship across many disciplines, as cogently stated by Leanne Betasamosake Simpson:

Meaning, then, is derived not through content or data or even theory in a Western context, which by nature is decontextualized knowledge, but through a compassionate web of interdependent relationships that are different and valuable because of difference. Individuals carry the responsibility for generating meaning within their own lives; they carry the responsibility for engaging their minds, bodies, and spirits in a practice of generating meaning.⁷⁷

Knowledge in these frameworks does not cohere around increasing information but is an emergent property of relational existence and attention, accreted through *practice* and *process*.

This is not simply a matter of epistemology; relational emergence is diametrically opposed to the Western colonial enterprise of segmentation, whether for study or extraction. “Through the process and structuring of settler colonialism, land is remade into property, and human relationships to land are redefined/reduced to the relationship of the owner to his property. When land is recast as property, place becomes exchangeable, saleable, and steal-able.”⁷⁸ These attentional assertions of process-as-epistemology, relational-engagement-as-epistemology, echo Matt Sakakeeny’s observations of parading in New Orleans, that sonic practice becomes not just an articulation of community but *is the place* in which identity and relationality is actively negotiated.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Leanne Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance*, Indigenous Americas (University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 156.

⁷⁸ Eve Tuck et al., “Land Education: Indigenous, Post-Colonial, and Decolonizing Perspectives on Place and Environmental Education Research,” *Environmental Education Research* 20, no. 1 (2014): 64.

⁷⁹ Critically, acknowledging these epistemologies is not a tacit encouragement of uncritically adopting them. Core to their value is the long-term process of relational exchange; it would be impossible to, like a switch, engage new relational epistemologies through decision alone. As Dylan Robinson notes, the “answer” to hungry listening is not a simple listening filter, that in fact “to apply a form of Indigenous listening would also constitute appropriation”; Robinson, *Hungry Listening*, 51.

Indeed, many scholars posit art itself as one practical manifestation of such process-based knowledge formation. Elizabeth Grosz, in her reading of Deleuze and Guattari, asserts art as “the art of affect more than representation, a system of dynamized and impacting forces rather than a system of unique images that function under the regime of signs.”⁸⁰ Art’s power is not in its indexing of other, but its deployment of material towards establishing “peculiar relations... [between] the universe and the creation of the future.”⁸¹ Art (potentially) presents an experience that not just does not or cannot index, but (potentially) expands our relational understanding beyond classification and into a more-than-representational aesthetic sensation.

This framework is useful for analysis of many types of art, not just sonic art. As Adam Dickinson writes of Lisa Robertson’s long poem “The Weather”, “A more environmentally literate writing is not necessarily one that simply traces a single form of thought, but instead remains actively (or ecologically) open to the potential becomings of other forms, or maps, and associated deterritorialized lines of inquiry.”⁸² The art of Robertson’s poem is not in a syntactic explanation of experience, but a replication through poetics of the ecological potential of becomings,

a materiality, an assemblage, a relational dynamic we can call ecological precisely because of its capacity to preserve difference in community, to preserve the particularities of things in their larger contextual, rhizomatic relationships. To be here is to be among others. This is not a sceptical [sic] materialism, but one open to the wilderness of its own composition.⁸³

⁸⁰ Elizabeth Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth*, The Wellek Library Lectures in Critical Theory (Columbia University Press, 2008), 3.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Adam Dickinson, “The Weather of Weeds: Lisa Robertson’s Rhizome Poetics,” *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge* Winter 2007, no. 15 (2007), <https://rhizomes.net/issue15/dickinson.html>.

⁸³ Ibid.

Rather than weave these disparate examples of emergent meaning into a cohesive model, I showcase the viability of such relational knowledge practices. I want to insist further that sound is a particular venue for such emergence. As explored above, sound is neither a neutral index of the world nor a wholly universalizing immersive medium. It is a throughline of complex interrelations between the material level (the inseparable parsing or collapsing of sound behavior and space), the representational level (empirical investigation into sound sources, if possible), and the cultural level (epistemological orientations toward the first two levels). As Brian Kane states in critique of certain sonic theories of ontology, “The arguments developed by proponents of the ‘ontological turn’ in sound studies neglect the role played by auditory cultures in shaping affective responses to sound and in ‘ontological’ claims about sound.”⁸⁴ We are always negotiating this nested set of considerations, and in that negotiation emerges auditory meaning. Sound is thus a *primary* medium for the exploration of relational meaning-making.

*We are studying the synthesis of sincerity, the synthetics of space, because they are irreducible and contingent. We are shirking the anxiety of origin because we can... Spatial synthetics irreparably exceed their own structure. For example: Looking west, looking west, looking east by northeast, looking northwest, looking northeast, looking west, loading wool, looking west, looking north, looking east, looking west, looking north, looking northeast, looking northeast, looking west, looking west, looking west, tracks are oldest, looking south, looking north, looking north, looking east, looking west, looking west by southwest; thus, space. And not by means other than the gestural. Pretty eyes. Winds.*⁸⁵ – Lisa Robertson

⁸⁴ Brian Kane, “Sound Studies without Auditory Culture: A Critique of the Ontological Turn,” *Sound Studies* 1, no. 1 (2015): 16.

⁸⁵ Lisa Robertson, *Occasional Work and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture*, 3rd ed, with Office for Soft Architecture (Coach House Books, 2011), 68.

If sound is an ideal relational medium, the space in which it occurs significantly shapes emergent capacity. Scholarship on relational space helped clarify my creative decision-making for *eventually there's nowhere*. Realizing that the windows operated as more than just speakers, as active shapers of the installation experience, I sought out literature that particularly spoke to the emergence of place and positionality. Particularly important were Bernhard Seigert's theory of cultural techniques; spatial relationality as explored by Gaston Bachelard, Gernot Böhme, Sarah Ahmed, and Katherine McKittrick; and Tim Ingold's wayfarer framework.

In my earliest conceptions of this installation, the windows were both speaker and material object. Inspired by Anna Maria Maiolino's ritual ceramics practices, the imprint of being into material (especially clay), I speculatively imagined the decades of presence inherited into my apartment's windows.⁸⁶ These old windows are marked by wavy glass, which I had been told resulted from the glass melting into itself over time, a constant state of deforming. I was drawn to this initial relationship between the material's decay and how it would filter sound.

I quickly shifted attention to an intuited analysis of the framing mechanism of windows, that the relationship they construct between inner and outer worlds had resonance with the multi-layered chains of influence I was tracing in the Gulf South and the multi-layered stages of sonic meaning-making in field recordings. Bernhard Steigert might label such a framing as a "cultural technique," a mechanism by which cultures "operationaliz[e] distinctions in the real."⁸⁷ Doors, for instance, "are not only formal

⁸⁶ With deep gratitude to Cat Gambel for teaching me about Maiolino's work.

⁸⁷ Bernhard Siegert, *Cultural Techniques: Grids, Filters, Doors, and Other Articulations of the Reel*, Meaning Systems (Fordham University Press, 2015), 14.

attributes of Western architecture, they are also architectural media that function as cultural techniques because they operate the primordial difference of architecture—that between inside and outside.”⁸⁸ Doors perform not simply their utility as an opening but an “operationalizing” of symbolic chains of political, legal, and religious orders.

Windows operationalize a similar, distinct chain of logic. They too separate interior and exterior, but with a visual or atmospheric connectivity. “The wall darkens, keeps out light and natural forces; the window selectively enframes them again to return them to the interior.”⁸⁹ Certainly, early “windows” were more physically connective than disruptive as they had no intervening material (like glass panes) for atmospheric separation. But this exception perhaps proves the rule of their valence as cultural technique; windows are a portal through which one perceives exterior/interior, marking separation through existential confirmation.

The French philosopher Gaston Bachelard took up these cultural suggestions of the built environment in his *The Poetics of Space*. Just as “forces are manifested in poems that do not pass through the circuits of knowledge,”⁹⁰ spatial configuration can evoke poetic (as in *poetics*) phenomenological sensation. In his speculative tracings of cellars, of shells, of furniture, he excavates an analysis of such felt phenomenal relationships to space. His descriptions of corners—“symbols of solitude”—directly influenced my decision to stage corners in my installation as a gathering of “solitude” with specific, quiet, “private” recording playback.⁹¹ Bachelard’s writing finds further resonance with

⁸⁸ Ibid, 193.

⁸⁹ Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art*, 14.

⁹⁰ Gaston Bachelard et al., *The Poetics of Space: The Classic Look at How We Experience Intimate Places*, Nachdr. (Beacon Press, 2009), xxi.

⁹¹ Ibid, 136.

Gernot Böhme's theorization of atmospheric aesthetics, where he proposes the atmosphere as an aesthetic mediator between subject and object into which all material expounds their *ecstasies* or modes of influence within their environment.⁹²

While Bachelard's writing is provocative and imaginative, it rests heavily on assumptions about social space and who gets access to the relational poetics he asserts. In the context of a project about New Orleans and the Gulf South, sites of such ongoing social, environmental, and infrastructural discrimination, it's critical to interrogate how socio-political forces regulate such positionalities. Sarah Ahmed insists that we "consider racism as an ongoing and unfinished history, which orientates bodies in specific directions, affecting how they 'take up' space."⁹³ In her conception of orientation as critical for the construction of space, which is "dependent on bodily inhabitation,"⁹⁴ a poetics of space is always a socially constructed one. "This world, too, is 'inherited' as a dwelling: it is a world shaped by colonial histories, which affect not simply how maps are drawn, but the kinds of orientations we have toward objects and others. Race becomes, in this model, a question of what is within reach, what is available to perceive and to do 'things' with."⁹⁵

Katherine McKittrick extends this by acknowledging not just the circumscribed limits of "what is within reach" but the means by which such racialized, subjugated bodies reinvent for themselves new spatial poetics outside the constructs of racial capital's dominating extraction.

⁹² Gernot Böhme, *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres*, ed. Jean-Paul Thibaud (Routledge, 2016), 2–4. In fact, Böhme makes explicit reference to sound installation as an art the experience of which requires "exposing oneself to the atmosphere they are radiating," an extension of his argument that art impacts us by way of affecting atmosphere rather than representational meaning (a clear resonance with Grosz); Ibid, 6.

⁹³ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Duke University Press, 2006), 111.

⁹⁴ Ibid, 6.

⁹⁵ Ibid, 126.

The conditions of bondage did not foreclose black geographies but rather incited alternative mapping practices during and after transatlantic slavery, many of which were/are produced outside the official tenets of cartography: fugitive and maroon maps, literacy maps, food-nourishment maps, family maps, music maps were assembled alongside ‘real’ maps... These ways of understanding and writing the world identify the significant racial contours of modernity... A black sense of place is not a steady, focused, and homogeneous way of seeing and being in place, but rather a set of changing and differential perspectives that are illustrative of, and therefore remark upon, legacies of normalized racial violence that calcify, but do not guarantee, the denigration of black geographies and their inhabitants.⁹⁶

A sense of place for racialized communities is not simply emergent from various strategies of relational negotiation, but is emergent in novel practices that bypass assumed structures of place for dominant groups. These practices *include* sonic practice, both as manifest in music (famously, mythically, erupting into jazz in New Orleans) and in auditory cultures with their own orientations to sonic life.

Of central concern for me in building *eventually there's nowhere* is the acknowledgement that these practices, these marginalized orientations to space, are not inherent in the sounds I recorded. I do not claim to depict the histories of environmental racism, on one hand, and vibrant cultures of marginalized communities—Black, Indigenous, Vietnamese, Latino—in New Orleans. Instead, they are inherent in the individual cultural listening practices that each listener brings to the installation experience. As Jon Wargo notes in reflection on a student audio project, such auditory stories present “an impossibility for readers, listeners, and viewers”:

Through these more sonic experiences, Zeke reflected how he used sound to deliver a more varied and nuanced understanding of the environs and cultural ecology he was a part. Viewers, yes, can read the StoryMap text as an artifact that details personal histories and shared experience with each of these places. We can read Zeke’s identity in the most simplistic of ways. There is, however, an impossibility that Zeke highlighted through his work with audio. We, as listeners,

⁹⁶ Katherine McKittrick, “On Plantations, Prisons, and a Black Sense of Place,” *Social & Cultural Geography* 12, no. 8 (2011): 949–50.

are never Zeke. I am not Black. I was not in the Gateway space that day. For Zeke, however, the text was never about describing reality (outside of his own), but rather the form, content, and experience that structured its sonic uptake. To present, amplify, and sound out, as Zeke argued earlier, “the other side.”⁹⁷

There is no amount of contextual information that can bring us to a fixed, universal auditory relation, though we often share auditory cultures that structure certain of these practices. In line with my reflections on soundscape composition, even with all requisite context for recordings (which, in *eventually there's nowhere*, I do not provide), a listener is still always listening through *their* negotiated sonic relationships. Thus, rather than “tell my story” with these recordings, or even telling others’ stories of the Gulf and the complex life-making pathways therein, I imagine my installation as telling *each listener* their story, the aural architectures that they’ve accumulated, back to them.

This accumulation is theorized by anthropologist Tim Ingold as the “wayfarer”.⁹⁸ Ingold parses the distinction between meaning generated by movement through versus meaning generated by targeted arrival. As opposed to a cartographic destination-oriented travel, where sites of activity are marked out as separated positions in space, wayfaring forges “the knowledge we have of our surroundings... in the very course of our moving through them, in the passage from place to place and the changing horizons along the way.”⁹⁹ This framework of the wayfarer, the person who moves through their world without goal, brings together theories of spatial relationality and emergent meaning making. Rather than traveling along grids of quantified disconnection (as in European cartographic methods), wayfaring describes a “current of life itself as it circles around a

⁹⁷ Jon M. Wargo, “Earwitnessing (In)Equity: Tracing the Intra-Active Encounters of ‘Being-in-Resonance-With’ Sound and the Social Contexts of Education,” *Educational Studies* 54, no. 4 (2018): 392.

⁹⁸ Ingold, *Lines*, 78.

⁹⁹ *Ibid*, 91.

focus.”¹⁰⁰ In opposition to common depictions of wayfarers or nomads as listless or wandering, their relational movement through the world *generates* the emergence of place. “Wayfaring... is neither placeless nor place-bound but place-*making*.”¹⁰¹

I want to assert sound as the place where compounding stories can be explored because it requires manifold orientations and cannot be resolved into a simple matter of quantified abstraction. No sonic relationship can be simply indexed, either *in situ* or in recorded transmission or gallery. Our sonic relationships require a returning presence with such sounds and space. It is this returning process—following Simpson, following Ingold—through which meaning emerges in and with and through sound. In the development of *eventually there’s nowhere*, this manifested equally in the use of field recordings, how I chose to deploy them, and in the construction of the installation space, which I discuss in the following section.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 102.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 104, emphasis in original.

eventually there's nowhere

Installation Description and Analysis

eventually there's nowhere makes a serious attempt at drawing out these relational sonic and spatial architectures. At every level—the use of field recordings, my reflections on lived experience in New Orleans, the suggestions of the windows in their constructed installation, and the spatial diffusion of sound—the installation suggests new physical and aural positionalities that the audience navigates.

Developing this piece *as an installation* and not a score or performance was a new method in my practice that critically facilitates these priorities. Nearly all my previous creative work manifested in a performance or timed-presentation of some kind, most often as an improviser with electronic systems or in collaboration with contemporary classical music ensembles for whom I prepared a score. And even my early conceptions of this work imagined it as essentially a performance, a timed fixed-media soundscape composition that relied on musical constructions of form and transformation. However, as stated, continued work with the windows and key workshopping periods helped me realize that the piece emerges precisely in one's free movement through the space, and the non-repetitive movement of the space around one in turn. The structural experience of

navigating a gallery promotes different levels of emergence than a presented performance can and was critical to the success of the work.

In building this immersive audio installation I'm in dialogue with other sound artists who have explored the literal and figurative construction of space in their work. Notable among these is Bernhard Leitner, whose creative research in spatial audio drove towards an "architecture without physical walls," a manifestation of structure via sound alone.¹⁰² This was most famously theorized in his Soundcube, a space delimited by 64-speaker grids on six sides where space was marked by the position and contrasting movements of sound.¹⁰³

A huge personal inspiration was the piece *Opera for a Small Room* by Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller. In this piece the audience approaches a large, room-sized box in a gallery, with a single galley-window-sized opening in one side. Inside the box is a staging of a room with record players, radios, chairs, books, and other scattered items. A scene of sorts plays out: the record players turn on and off, as do the radios, while the lights in the room shift and cast new shadows. The sense is of a phantom person moving in this space, listening to the music, and us witnessing this listening. The construction of the room as a space we can only peer into, only gaze upon rather than immerse ourselves in, is essential to its relational aesthetics. It positions the audience as *observing* a listening, listening-into a listening but themselves experiencing a distended version of it.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² Sven Sterken, "Architecture Without Walls: Bernhard Leitner's Soundcube," in *Sound, Music and Architecture*, ed. Roberto Illiano, Music, Science & Technology, volume 7 (Brepols, 2024), 267.

¹⁰³ Ibid, 269.

¹⁰⁴ Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller, *Opera for a Small Room*, 2005, Installation, 2.6m x 3m x 4.5m, <https://cardiffmiller.com/installations/opera-for-a-small-room/>.



Figure 2: Opera for a Small Room by Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller (from the artists' website).

Leitner's work enacts different modes of "spatial audio" through architectural arrangements, where the sounds move around the listener and in doing so articulate a space around them. There are numerous protocols for this approach to immersive spatial audio in both gallery and concert formats, which composers like Natasha Barrett have explored extensively through artistic-technical research.¹⁰⁵ In a limited sense, my installation does this too; as I describe below, there are a series of diffusion methods that spatialize the recordings in various ways. But what intrigues me about *Opera for a Small*

¹⁰⁵ Natasha Barrett, "Deepening Presence: Probing the Hidden Artefacts of Everyday Soundscapes," *Proceedings of the 15th International Audio Mostly Conference*, September 15, 2020, 77–84.

Room is the relationship of audience to the space of the work. The forced perspective and exclusion from the presented “place of listening” conjures a specific positionality to the piece that is intrinsic to experiencing it.

In *eventually there's nowhere*, the audience negotiates their positionality to both the virtual sound sources and the spatial arrangement of the windows. All recording playback diffuses by one of four methods. First is direct-to-window playback of the same recording from different playback points, where a recording (like rain) suffuses the entire installation. Second is diffusion to one of three “stereo fields” (one spanning the length of the installation, and two on either half positioned parallel to the middle window) where a stereo file plays through three windows per channel via a nearest-neighbor panning algorithm. This allows for apprehension of spatial information in the recording itself, like a car passing from left to right. Third is the placement of four “local stereo” fields, which mostly align to corner arrangements of the windows (described below). Finally, a dozen virtual channels randomly move through the installation space, creating the sensed experience of a ghostly shifting around the listener as the algorithm pans between closest window assignments.

These diffusion methods couple with the physical position of windows and the audience members' locations amidst them, whether they are in motion or at rest, how they literally see the rest of the installation through and around nearby windows. As discussed above, the windows present a cultural technique of framing, of dialectical dis/connection, which their visual overlap in the space accentuates. There is a constant awareness of what is “outside” of the window, though the porous movement around each window constantly oscillates this positionality. Decisions like what direction the window



Figure 3: Visitors in the installation space. In the middle-right a woman stands under blue light, facing right; she is standing in one of the staged corners in the space.

faces had enormous impact on this relationality, as the weathering on either side of every window created two distinct positionalities. The installation arrangement further creates different suggested spaces within the piece: long windows serving as “walls” or “passages”, corners creating an “inside” that another window beyond the corner maybe “outside” of, bifurcations of space from the whole to halves to pockets.

The location of the sounds via the windows often maps onto these physical arrangements. Certain recordings play at low volume through just two windows that create a corner with one another. This creates multiple types of local (to the installation) listening experiences, one of which suggests a sound far away (in relational listening space) from the other side of the window, another of which generates the sense of an intimate “private” space within the installation. For instance, recordings of quiet room

tones are difficult to hear when generally walking through the installation, but when you “enter” the corner it immediately envelops you, audible only when in that position.

Because the windows are activated as the speakers, the “source” of the sounds is itself caught in this dialectic, occurring both as interior and exterior sound. This is especially pronounced in a recording I made by placing contact microphones on my bedroom window during a thunderstorm. These microphones pick up physical vibration through touch (rather than air pressure disturbance) so the recording carries the tactile sensation of rain hitting glass. When played back through the installation windows via the audio exciters, that tactile sensation carries—it sounds like it is raining on the other side of the window, from either side of any window.

This structural relationality serves as the baseline for the emergent soundscapes that audiences are immersed in. The piece comprises seventeen different scenes, each of which combines the simultaneous playback of four-to-ten recordings from my Gulf South field recording archive. I constructed each scene spatially to create a range of listening positionalities using the diffusion methods described above. Materially, I built them to evoke a variety of soundscape combinations, as described in the introduction. In considering these overlapping forces of the Gulf South I wanted to stage impossible overlaps of sounding material in the installation that force either listening reconciliation or emergent association. I did not, however, perform any creative editing or processing to the recordings, except to remove audio slates and manage disparate levels.

For me, this is a distinct methodological departure from the priorities of soundscape composition while perhaps retaining the genre’s motivation as a mode of reflection. As explored above, composers like Westerkamp and Truax use compositional

transformations to reflect their relationship to or knowledge of “real” places. There is a hands-on manipulation of material that is core to their creative practice. While *eventually there’s nowhere* posits a similar reflection on my relationship to the Gulf South through sound, it reflects on the very nature of entangled, emergent meaning we build through continuous sonic relationality. It operates at a meta-level, so to speak, of sonic onto-epistemology that maps directly onto the life-making negotiations in New Orleans. Rather than posit a commentary via musical commitments, it posits a commentary via the opacity of my collected recordings, their simultaneous situatedness and indexical resistance.

Through this, the piece posits the emergent life-making pathways that arise amidst such inextricable forces as climate change and industry and histories of racist exploitation. My reflection, echoed by John Clark and Matt Sakakeeny, is that positionality in New Orleans is constantly negotiated and irreducible to causality (and, perhaps, that life in any place is like that—New Orleans just showcases it particularly well). In that way, the emergent “fuzzy relationality” of sound resonates precisely because of this negotiation. My recordings do not “mean” because of what or where I recorded, but because of their suggestion, because they demand emergent negotiations of relationship from a listener.

To evoke these negotiations in a variety of ways I loosely classify my scene-building strategies as *full speculative*, *full unified*, and *ghostly*. Across all scene types, the audience experience changes depending on their position in the installation and their relative motion/stillness: they can either remain in one place and negotiate how the sounds nearby relate to sounds on the other side of the installation, or they can move

through the space and in so doing transform their sonic surroundings, quite quickly leaving behind one soundworld for another.

Full speculative scenes use the entirety of the installation space and play back recordings whose sources are in apparent originating conflict. Scene 6, for instance, uses recordings of a crowd outside Café du Monde in New Orleans City Park, a streetcar passing through the Uptown neighborhood, a train rolling past the Mississippi River towards the Port of New Orleans, a Mardi Gras parade, walking through Bayou La Terre (a forested preserve in Mississippi managed by John Clark), and interior recordings from the Nature Conservancy Atchafalaya Research Center and an apartment in Monroe, Louisiana. This combination loosely combines recordings “of” community, industry, and nature. Their arrangement pulls listening attention between them: a listener may be primarily in the stereo field of a swamp, then sense a parade walking on the other side of the installation or hear a voice quietly out of a nearby window, staging an emergent relationship between the difference.

Full unified scenes are artificial constructions of roughly similar sound sources. Scene 11, for instance, uses recordings of the shore of my collaborator Cat Gambel’s family house in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, the backyard of the same house, the edge of Lake Pontchartrain (north of New Orleans), close-mic’d recordings of waves, and multiple hydrophone recordings. This “water” scene is designed so that individual elements do not draw attention to difference but deepen a speculative resolution. Additionally, the sounds are static in space—no motion occurs through the installation, except for positional information as rendered in the stereo recordings themselves.

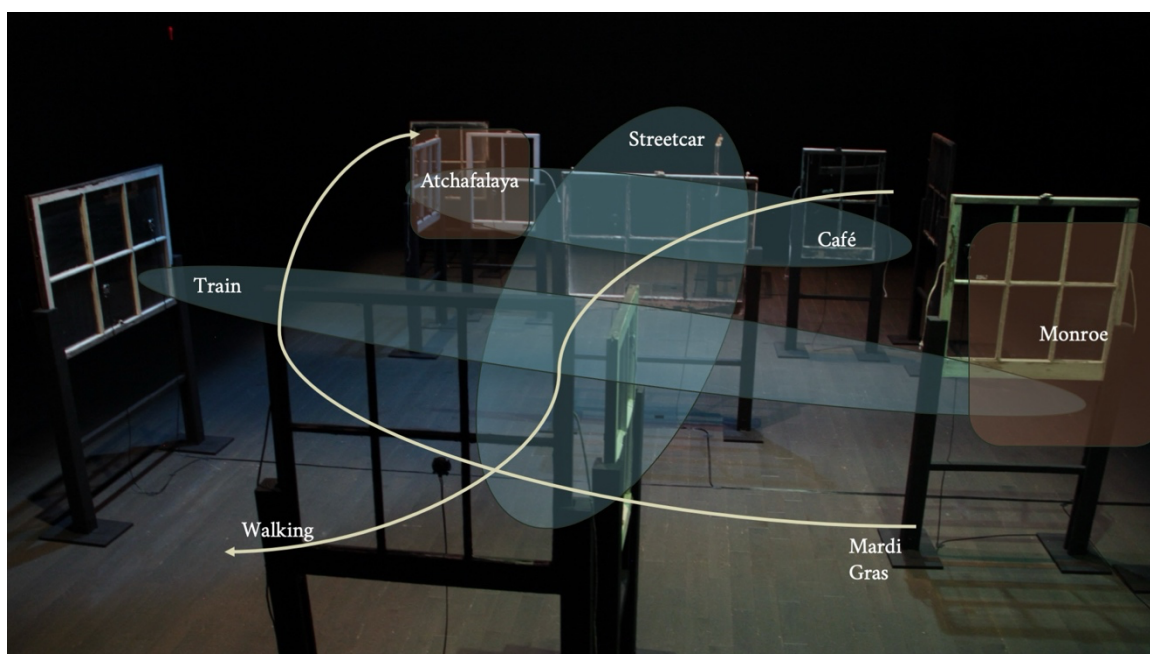


Figure 4: A diagram of Scene 6 in eventually there's nowhere.

Ghostly scenes focus on more abstract sounds and motion. Scene 4, for instance, uses recordings of a thunderstorm recording via contact mics on a window (mentioned above), contact mics on pinecones in the wind, contact mics on metal poles connected to a barge in the bayou, hydrophone recordings of a bayou, and one recording of myself and my wife talking on our porch during the 2024 partial solar eclipse (playing very quietly in a corner). These sounds are not just abstract, as in difficult to indexically assign, but are in motion; there is little sense of a constructed space around the listener and instead a sense of flickering materials.

One of my major creative discoveries during workshoping was that motion across the windows creates a spectral (as in haunting) sense of movement. As opposed to highly engineered surround-sound arrays that position speakers and decode spatial movement to achieve a continuous, smooth sense of sonic motion, the arrangement and fidelity of the windows create obvious dips in volume and spatial jumps. This unexpected behavior conjures an uncanny aural trace. Sounds in motion are decoded by the spat5

algorithm to always play out of the three windows nearest to the virtual position of the sound. This discrete jumping between outputs creates a soundfield that is simultaneously continuous and disconnected. Listening to a sound in motion draws attention to its lack of location, as its diffusion misbehaves according to our expectations of acoustic movement.

Movement—in time—between scenes is triggered by a clock sequence I built in the max/MSP patch. I trained a first-order Markov chain to decide which scene will play next based on the current scene, with an additional filtering mechanism to avoid scene repeats within seven changes to prevent feedback loops. The Markov weights were designed to variously create “smooth” changes (similar scene to similar scene) or contrasting changes: an “anchor” recording from one scene might continue playing while all other recordings shift around it, or the whole space might move from a tangible unity to abstract spectrality. The change is triggered by a clocking mechanism that randomly allows a scene to play for between 2’30” and 8’00”. Once the scene change is triggered, each sound fades in or out at individually delayed moments so that the full shift occurs over a bit more than one minute. This system allows for the installation to avoid both a cyclical “composed” form (where the same order repeats on a loop) and a random juxtaposition form (where there is no intention behind which scenes play in sequence). Over the course of the listening experience, then, a visitor will always encounter a novel sequence of scenes that never last for the same amount of time; feasibly, in the two-hour evening sessions, certain scenes may never play at all.

For the opening exhibit at Brown University in April 2026 I additionally prepared a short “activation” of the installation. This activation featured me reciting found and original texts through the max/MSP patch, which diffused my voice through the

windows; you can read these texts in Appendix 1. In this I attempted to draw out multiple of my *own* positionalities to New Orleans. This included text message alerts I continue to receive from the city about infrastructural damage, my grandmother Shirley May's obituary (she was born and raised in New Orleans, which I did not fully realize until moving there myself), and stories from my time there. These were each assigned a number and read in the order given by the installation Markov chain, meaning that the structure of the activation shifted and fragmented in each iteration. I recorded my recitations and further processed the recordings into the space, sending their playback through an impulse response reverb engine, a separate spectrally-filtered reverb engine to generate resonant tones, and random gated movement algorithms.

While I anticipated as much as possible in preparing the piece, there were beautiful surprises in the installation exhibit that extended my aesthetic goals. My friend and collaborator Cat Gambel (mentioned above) joined for final set up and documentation. Cat is from New Orleans and was the first member of my artistic community when I moved there. When she first entered the installation, she saw my cable lines from the transducers to the monitoring table in a corner and remarked, "Oh my gosh it's the bayou!" For her, the tendrilling lines of the cables perfectly drew out the



Figure 5: Cables running from each window and joining the flow towards the monitoring station.

interweaving threads of the Gulf South swamps, which do indeed spin out in meandering lines of accumulation and separation.

The other wonderful surprise was the extraordinarily social nature of the installation experience. Audience members were often listening to either side of the same window, and others could witness this listening through the transparent panes. Social groups formed and moved depending on current sound playback. I set a perimeter of chairs around the room for rest; these became an important additional relational space in the piece, permitting listeners to witness the installation “as a whole” from the outside. While, on one hand, this temporarily removed them from the immersive experience, it also highlighted some of the creative spatial decisions, like the streetcar recording



Figure 6: Visitors listening to the windows.

passing across the entire installation space from left-to-right. This particular movement shocked a friend while I was sitting with her outside the space; before then she hadn't realized there was such global spatialization in the work. This element of group negotiation brought out, for me, another fundamental element to my thinking with emergent relationality: these emergences are rarely, if ever, done in isolation. The life-making pathways forged by New Orleanians are not necessarily done so through some universal collective mind, but they are almost always negotiated with others.

The audience experience of *eventually there's nowhere*, then, is negotiating relational emergence at multiple levels: the indexicality (or not) of each field recording; their listening navigation that generates meaning in these sounds; the recordings' relationships between each other, the total cohesion or irreconcilable simultaneity; the

listener's positional relation to the recordings' location in the installation, and how those shift; their positional relation to the installation materials, as conjured and accentuated by the windows; their emergent associations between scenes over time; and their relationships with one another. In this way I stage the emergence of life in interstitial New Orleans by way of questioning the onto-epistemological nature of field recordings, and the new emergent relations they create when recontextualized in a space like an installation piece.

Conclusion: Life-Making in the Gap

In the summer of 2025 I had been gone from New Orleans for a full year. I was field recording in Tiverton, Rhode Island, a 30-minute drive from my new home in Providence. I hadn't planned this trip very extensively, and so was driving between sites like nature reserves and hidden beach alcoves tucked into the many bends and folds of the Sakonnet River. I made some recordings by the shore at Audubon Emilie Ruecker Wildlife Refuge and of intertidal pools at Sapowet Point. It felt very hot—though, I suppose, nothing in comparison to New Orleans.

I could not shake the feeling that what I was doing was arbitrary. New to the state, to the region, I was in the midst of forging relationship to this place, of learning its histories and geographies and ecologies and communities. It was a place I was growing to love. But in comparison to my pointed investment in my recording practice in New Orleans I found myself struggling to justify this day trip. What was I recording for?

I was trying to articulate my motivations for engaging place through sound, through field recording, in the absence of such overwhelming context as I had accumulated in New Orleans. After packing up for the day I wrote through these doubts

and eventually came to the following: “I think, for me, ‘the’ thing [about field recording] is similar to improv pieces, this thing about simultaneous and splintering depths.”

Whether I meant it at the time, I think “depths” is precisely the sensation that field recording and environmental sound offers. I was immediately reacting to the sense of a field recording as presenting an impenetrable yet continuously returning space of inquiry. How can I pick apart the tactile, fragile, haptic sounds from a hydrophone as acoustic phenomena? How do I parse the provocation of imagined space that field recordings present, of sounds receding continuously into a depth of field until they are one with the background hum of any recording? How do those depths deepen further, or complicate or open up or harden, as “context” filters into my knowledge?

I was hovering at the edges of the ideas I’ve presented here, of process as the core of field recording practice—not just the practice of making recordings, but of continually attending to newly emergent meanings that spring forth when those recordings establish new fields between listener and transmitter. And a lack of knowledge, or burgeoning relationship to the (imagined) source, does not actually preempt this process of emergent positionality. It is a gap that is constantly, continuously resounded. The gap is the meaning, it is where the stories are told and negotiated. It is the irreconcilable complexity of life in New Orleans, the entanglements of the swamp. But it is also the marshes of Providence, RI; wind pouring down the valley in Cork, Ireland; a chorus of creatures in my in-laws’ backyard in Ohio; a coffee shop in Pittsburgh, PA. I am continually making meaning through these recordings in my archive, and these places are constantly emerging in new meaning.

The situated life of New Orleans was my lynchpin for recognizing this process, which I'll illustrate in a final anecdote. One of the last recordings I made before leaving the city was near the Port of New Orleans, 1.5 miles straight down my street, against the Mississippi River. For the five years we lived in our apartment we would hear distant, thunderous booms in the evening. New Orleans, among other things, is flat, and thus relatively easy to parse where sounds are coming from. This was clearly from the river, the giant cranes looming over Tchoupitoulas Avenue. I assumed this sound came from the shipping containers being loaded onto and unloaded from the massive ships.

I was almost correct. When I got to the Winn-Dixie parking lot that abuts the port, I set my microphones up along the fence separating shoppers from the trains. This was about as close as I thought I could manage to the cranes a few hundred yards past the fence. And then I heard the gradual clacking of a train car rolling towards the port, in front of and past my microphones, briefly dissipating until a thunderous crash sounded to my left. Those booming impacts were trains connecting.

Did it matter that I had misidentified this sound for five years? I think not. My relationship, in this and other instances, was not to the fact of vibrational cause, but to the place-making intonation of the booming sound in the evening. The booms were not encroaching, but as I grew to know the region I understood more and more that they themselves indicated industry, the Mississippi's history as both ecological and economic highway. But there is no limit to apprehending that knowledge, that context. There is just the life my wife and I and thousands of others lived and negotiated and made sound into, as we accumulated from the space of the Gulf the continuing place of New Orleans.

Appendix 1: Activation Texts

eventually there's nowhere was presented as an open installation on April 9th and 10th, 2026, in the Fishman Studio of the Granoff Center, Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island. On the evening of the 10th I offered a brief activation of the installation which featured me reading the below texts through a max/MSP patch that diffused my recitation through the windows. It simultaneously recorded my speech for later processing with various reverb engines and spatial movement. The patch had been running the installation for about an hour when I began; I chose which texts to read based on the last 10 scenes that the patch had played.

1. Text received Monday, February 23rd, 2026: Precautionary boil water advisory in effect for portion of Uptown. Boil water before consuming. Map of affected area here: swbno.org/news/boilwater
2. Text received Tuesday, March 10th, 2026: Precautionary boil water advisory canceled for Uptown, CBD, French Quarter, 9th Ward, Mid City, Gentilly & the East Bank. swbno.org/news/boilwater
3. Text received Thursday, March 12th, 2026: Water main break reported at Audubon and Willow St. avoid area and follow instructions from public safety responders. www.sbno.org
4. She was born Shirley Elizabeth Eagan on August 1, 1923 in New Orleans, Louisiana. Her grandparents were John Costello Eagan, Elizabeth Fanning, Henry C. Balster, and Mary Ellen Pulley, all of New Orleans, Louisiana. Her father was Walter Bernard Eagan, and her mother Helen Elizabeth Balster, who died in 1936. Her father later remarried, to Beatrice Arthus, and their daughter is Carolyn Eagan of New Orleans. She received her Bachelor of Science degree in Chemistry from Centenary College in Shreveport, Louisiana. While at Centenary College, she was the secretary of Au Fait, the French club, and secretary of Alpha Sigma Chi, the honorary chemistry fraternity, and her fiancée, Alex May, was the vice president. She then married Alexander May of Shreveport, Louisiana in St Patrick's Cathedral in New

Orleans, on December 28, 1943. She is predeceased by her husband, Alexander May, who died September 23, 2006. She has nine children, 23 grandchildren, and 10 great-grandchildren. She is also survived by her sister, Carolyn Eagan, of New Orleans, Louisiana. Her children are: Dorothy Anne Dagan, of Glendora, California; Dr Helen Elizabeth May of Yonkers, New York; Dr Lloyd Alexander May of Mobile, Alabama; Dr Michael Eagan May of Nashville, Tennessee; Marie Theresa Saxon of Douglas, Isle of Man; Walter Joseph May of Charlottesville, Virginia; Joseph Anthony May of Helena, Alabama; Shirley Marie Savino of Pomona, California; and Edward Thomas May of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

5. Jeffery U. Darensbourg, PhD, gives the land acknowledgement for the 2022 Society for Ethnomusicology conference. Darensbourg is a Louisiana Creole and member of the Atakapa-Ishak Nation. Among his many scholarly and artistic projects is the zine “Bulbancha is still a place!” Bulbancha is a Choctaw word meaning “the place of many tongues.” Bulbancha is New Orleans. New Orleans is Bulbancha. During his acknowledgment, he remarks (and I paraphrase): “Native folk have been coming to Bulbancha for centuries. There are a lot of stereotypes about the ‘dumb Indian,’ but we were never stupid enough to try and build a city here.”
6. According to Sal, Monique had been on the block the longest. She grew up there and stayed in that house, two down from us. He and his brother—his brother lived next door, directly across from our porch—grew up around the corner, but Sal had been in this house for decades, at least 40 years. Dave, down on the corner, wasn’t too far behind. Sal is a fixture: he stands on his lawn or saunters to and from his backyard, cleaning or fixing, Blue limping happily at his feet. “He follows me everywhere I go!”
7. If you leave the apartment by 7:30, you can bike to Jackson and Oretha Castle Haley to catch the front of Zulu. It’s packed in already, but you’re just going to hover for an hour. Because by 9 you should be heading into the CBD—all the roads are closed so there’s no traffic. You have to cross the route again on Canal, and then through the Quarter. Biking through the Quarter on that morning is exhilarating. There are no cars, just folks sitting on their stoops, costumes walking or biking towards their friends. It’s good to linger here. The

tourism site says the parade rolls at 8am, but it never moves before 10:30. You have time.

8. When Sarah Broom's memoir, *The Yellow House*, made it to bookstores, they realized the dust jacket had misprinted the book as "fiction". That's how you know it's a first print.
9. I don't know what happened to the recording by the window—perhaps I listened to it months later and, hearing mostly bands of noise, deleted it. But I feel that can't be right. Perhaps it was a voice memo on an old phone, crackling memory circuits accidentally discarded when I replaced the device. It's a phantom coursing through my field recording archive.
10. This was obvious in New Orleans, but the first time I noticed it was in Cork. The music department sat atop a steep hill overlooking the valley, an old seminary of impressive stone grandeur jutting out from the north road. The windows were large and old: leaded glass melted into itself over decades, refracting our vision of the river below and hills beyond. From our classrooms on the top floor we could peer down the valley and watch bands of rain announce themselves in a drab gray obfuscation. The gusts that carried them set the windows rattling, intermittent flurries of sound. These frames trace age and wear and can't help but speak of it during a storm. So something in my last-minute preparation anxiety was convinced that, if Ida made it inside, the windows would be the point of failure. Warped single-panes in rotting wood didn't inspire confidence against winds or flying debris. Of course, this was not their first hurricane, nor their last; whatever strength inhered from decades of witnessing the city held intact.
11. Pardon Our Progress: Hurricane Ida in 2021 damaged some of the Barataria Preserve trails. Beginning on February 2, 2026, the Visitor Center and most trails in the Preserve will be closed to accommodate the demolition and construction to fix the damage. Work is expected to take two years. Visitor services will be temporarily relocated to the Town of Lafitte's temporary Town Hall (at the Lafitte Barataria Museum location) and Wetland Trace (just six miles away), 4917 City Park Drive, Jean Lafitte, LA 70067, Lafitte's Barataria Museum and Wetland Trace on Wednesdays and Thursdays 10:00

am - 2:00 pm, until work at the visitor center is complete. The Twin Canals parking lot, trail, and canoe launch will remain open for visitor access. For current trail status and updates, continue to check our Current Conditions webpage and social media sites. To learn more about our Hurricane Ida and other current projects in the Preserve, visit our Park Projects webpage. Thank you for your patience as we work to rebuild our park.

12. Even with my neck wrap and long pants the small yellow bugs found every nook of skin. I yanked my equipment off when I got back to the car and shut the door against the 85° morning sun, and this front guard. Standing still for a recording would have been impossible, perhaps dangerous. It was a shame, since the preserve sounded extraordinary. A beautiful heron had just flown over my head into the swamp.
13. Dominique turns her body back to us, “It was like six months I think?” — Derrick, nodding, “I think my whole year nobody was in school, we all wound up doing eighth grade in Jackson or Memphis.” — A year, slow treading return, waiting for the water to clear and power to be restored, scoping out roofs. A year—no elementary school craft hour to build floats from shoeboxes, no second lines, though those would follow—how many things happened in my fifth grade year? I can dip in with ease, call to mind sitting at the back table because there were too few desks, soccer in the fall, Erin’s grandmother dying, realizing Kevin needed glasses, padding soft as possible up creaking wooden steps to the choir loft to ring for the morning mass, and New Year’s at Joe’s, and a good season for snow, seeing nobody showed up to serve and darting to the sacristy to don a robe and step quietly into the part, and egg hunts above the baseball diamond before summer and onto sixth grade—and that, just a year? Or, a year only, incredibly?
14. We bought kitschy decorations in Ohio for the sickly orange, naked walls of the parlor. My equipment was at home, I had been too busy cleaning Ruben’s apartment to consider what I’d need, and I had no clothes for the wedding. A piecemeal department store combo—black turtleneck, black jacket (one size small), brown checkered trousers. Sarah borrowed a black dress from Lauren, wide bands resting on her shoulders, cinching in ripples to a split skirt. The photos on the stone veranda from before the reception could have been a funeral, but for our bright laughter and self-conscious sexy stance—and why

not combat trauma with excess? All the dispersed who reconvened in St. Louis dressed for joy and surged to dance when the floor opened, a displaced festival. Ruben had made it up, and we needed to coordinate so he could retrieve items from our apartment, but all in good time after this party, after these weeks. The staff told Brad that theirs was the most alive of that night's weddings.

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