

Taking and Making Place Through Sound: From the Phonotope to the Phonocene

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Abstract

Although the spatiality of *sounding* and *listening* practices has been broadly and deeply discussed within humanities in general and sound studies in particular, the implications of such “place-taking” and “place-making” characteristics remain highly relevant nowadays. Starting from Peter Sloterdijk’s concept of the *phonotope*, through which sound and space are closely related in the production of social, it will be argued, following philosopher and ethologist Vinciane Despret, that the importance of sound for “making place” matters far beyond human-centered thought. In what she calls the *Phonocene*, Despret invites us not only to listen to others, humans and nonhumans, but also to *compose* with multiple modes of existence, through the sonic. In short, the *Phonocene* addresses the importance of *sonic thinking*, which, for instance in sociology, challenges hegemonic and anthropocentric practices of knowledge production. Experimenting with “thinking-with sounds” within social sciences and philosophy thus implies not only to understand the spatiality inherent to the practices of *sounding* and *listening*, but to engage with those practices critically, as they are also always “situated,” in the sense of Donna Haraway, and therefore, in the midst of multiple “interests,” as understood in Actor-Network Theory, including a multiplicity of human, nonhuman, and more-than-human actors.

Keywords

sonic thinking, research-creation, phonotope, phonocene

Phonotope as Sonic *Vergemeinschaftung*

“Der Ort klingt nach seinen Bewohnern” (Sloterdijk, 2004, p. 377). A place sounds like its inhabitants. In the third volume of his *Spheres*,¹ the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk proposes a way to understand the production of the social through the auditory. Every group or community exists within a “phonotope,” which Sloterdijk understands as a sonic “bubble” or bell glass, defining that particular community. In this understanding, the phonotope is a territorialized acoustic space, a soundscape defined by the members of a given collective. It reminds the Schaferian definition of the soundscape as an acoustic environment (1977), but read through processes of *Vergemeinschaftung*. For Sloterdijk, *Vergemeinschaftung* partially happens through the auditory, through the sonic existence of human collectives. A phonotope (like a “biotope”) is

¹Katholische Universität Eichstatt-Ingolstadt, Germany

Corresponding Author:

Rémy Bocquillon, Katholische Universität Eichstatt-Ingolstadt, Kapuzinergasse 2, 85072 Eichstatt, Germany.

Email: RBocquillon@ku.de

therefore tied to a place, it delimits it even, beyond the geographical properties of that place. Accents and pronunciations become topological markers. This is where the phonotope might differ from Schafer's own understanding of the soundscape however. For Schafer, the whole soundscape as an acoustic or auditory environment is composed of the geographical and topological particularities of a place as ground "tonality" whereas the "sound of the community" is being understood as a "sonic footprint." It is only in their combination, and adding various other defining signals that they build a soundscape (Schafer, 1977). For Sloterdijk, it is the community, and how the community sounds, that matters most and constitutes the phonotope. Nevertheless, in both cases, the production of the social appears to be closely related to the sonic, to the definition of space (in the case of Schafer), and of territories (in the case of Sloterdijk).

Moreover, because the third volume of *Spheres*—focusing on foam rather than bubbles—attempts to depict contemporary societies rather than isolated and historical communities, it almost seems logical that a *Vergesellschaftung* of the phonotope would mirror the *Vergemeinschaftung* evoked above.² And it does, through processes of individualization (Antonioli, 2019), produce the individual against or beyond the community. From the Walkman we cherish to our ubiquitous smartphones, we carry devices producing "individual" phonotopes, isolating the listener not paying attention, or retreating within a self-made acoustic world, where apparent control is being maintained. But, echoing what we already know from Adorno's critique of cultural industries (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1988), it is only an illusion of choice, those phonotopes being actually standardized and "synchronized" to globalized rhythms (Antonioli, 2019; Sloterdijk, 2004). Playlists are curated by algorithms, always fitting the mood itself defining the audience, wallpapers of sound tuned to the self (Pelly, 2019), and the individual phonotope "maintained" by the platform.

If the spatiality of sounding and listening practices seems evident (LaBelle, 2010; Schulze, 2018), the issue with Sloterdijk's own topology is manifold. On one hand, Sloterdijk conceives it through a limited and binary relationality, the dyad, the pair, the couple of (it seems always) human actors, to which he adds the metaphorical bubble on top, as expressions of communities of sameness, processes of *Vergemeinschaftung* co-present but isolated from each other. A constitutive duality is only defined through similarity which actually doesn't leave much room for the relation itself. It is not only expressed as what separates individuals or communities, as relatively discrete and homogeneous entities but also being reproduced in a dualism between the individual as a constituted subject and the group, or even "society" as a whole. On the other hand, those bubbles becoming the undefined foam, and thus exceeding the duality expressed above, seem to build so many singular "islands" as "world models in the world,"³ almost reminding of Luhman's autopoietic systems in their isolation from each other. Within this topological cosmology, the anthropogene island plays a major role for Sloterdijk, it becomes a particular and isolated incubator where humans become humans.

Even if the attempt was to propose a multifocal understanding of human history, Sloterdijk here fatally ratifies human particularism. Can such a history and consequently such phonotopes still be expressed without taking nonhumans into account? If the spheres, bubbles, and resulting foam are metaphorical manifestations of co-isolation and multiplicity, they still seem to produce a universal grand narrative of "the human" as a master "atmospherical" subject, which as a result becomes itself "hors-sol," soilless (Morizot, 2020), possibly forgetting its own situatedness and neglecting its relation to the living.⁴ The phonotope itself, being a dimension of this anthropogene island, is therefore only defined through the human community as exclusive (if those ever exist), revolving around meaning and sense, around language. To put it differently, the sound of the phonotope is reduced to logos, even without words. As the author himself argues: "Die 'Gesellschaft' ist die Summe ihrer Sprechgesänge" (Sloterdijk, 2004, p. 381). Society is the sum of its spoken songs. The inhabitants of a particular place, of a particular phonotope are reduced to the human subject as a central figure, neglecting the multiplicity of actors actually involved in

its production. One could argue that this is quite different from what Schafer proposed with his soundscapes, which always include relations to a “natural environment.” However, even in Schafer’s case, nature remains an objectified other the humans populate, a romantic canvas destroyed by the noise of Modernity.

At this point, one could probably adapt Marie Thompson’s critique of Schafer in *Beyond Unwanted Noise* (Thompson, 2017) to the phonotope itself. Indeed, both notions, through their exclusive definitions are variants of an *aesthetic moralism*, separating nature and culture, humans and nonhumans, building outsiders solely based on the aesthetic value of sound over noise, of globalized unauthentic rhythms as the drive of modern society versus the particular and lively phonotopes of the community. The outsider becomes unable to “understand,” grasp, adapt, or integrate, because the singular phonotope, unknown, remains “noise” (as redundancy), never generative in itself. The observer, as a phenomenological subject desperately wishing to make sense of what he experiences, thus reduces the observed phonotope to an exotic object of inquiry never attainable, never truly knowable, except maybe by “going native” all the way, by becoming part of such a cybernetic society where his role will be defined anew and where noise will always remain disturbance as a lack of order.

The issue with the phonotope therefore does not stop at the human/nonhuman dichotomy. Limitations occur even in the definition of the subject itself, or rather, in who is allowed to be considered as such, beyond the status of the outsider presented above. Indeed, for Sloterdijk, “a reasonable/proper I is not available without acoustic isolation.”⁵ Noise-canceling headphones “shutting out society” and thus creating subjects. But what about those unable to isolate themselves? In this impossibility to reach an apparent proper “I,” are they relegated to being objects, alienated, denied agency? What about those physiologically impaired, for instance with tinnitus (Thompson & Hagood, 2021), even those among them who could “isolate” from others, but who, through this isolation, are never experiencing silence or quietness? Are those “vernünftige Ichs”? And what does it mean to actually isolate acoustically? Does the proper subject only exist in perfect silence as a transcendental “music of the spheres” (to remind Schafer; Thompson, 2017)? Does a sounding body, a beating heart, cracking knuckles, and growling guts hinder one from being a proper “I”? Does living in a “noisy” city condemn invisibility as it ratifies inaudibility? Where does sound start, and when does it become noise? Where does another sound, another Phonotope, begin? It even becomes a question of housing, urban planning, and politics of silence as Thompson notes. Either Sloterdijk is here acknowledging the impossibility for a being to be fully individuated, the perfected subject existing in a “bodyless” void or he is reproducing a Cartesian/Kantian bias subject/object—mind/body, by also neglecting who is in position to be that perfected subject.

The Ritournelle and the Sonic Flux

Nevertheless, through its unfolding as multiplicity and repetition, the phonotope also reminds us of Deleuze and Guattari’s *ritournelle*, itself repetition and difference, and territorialization through the sonic (like the child singing in the dark to keep monsters and ghosts at bay or the birds singing-making their territories; Deleuze & Guattari, 1980). However, in contrast to the phonotope, the *ritournelle* actually exceeds the presumed “co-isolation” of Sloterdijk’s bubbles or honeycombed foam reserved to humans⁶ (McCormack, 2013). It is certainly true that in particular cases, the *ritournelle* acts as self-reference (through the folk song for instance) and thus, more or less isolated *Vergemeinschaftung*. It nonetheless remains “radically open” as Dereck McCormack argues: “always potentially generative of difference, producing lines of thinking, feeling, and perceiving that may allow one to wander beyond the familiar” (McCormack, 2013, p. 8). Therefore, a *ritournelle* is never only pure “territorialization” nor redundancy in defining an acoustic landscape but constitutes a form of (re-)configuration of that produced territory. In

other words, territorialization is also de- and re-territorialization (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980). A possible actualization of spaces beyond fixated purposes.⁷ It is transductive, in philosopher Gilbert Simondon's (2005) terms: each individuation, through the *ritournelle* co-produces its milieu/territory, distinguishing itself from it but never in isolation, always bound to that milieu, which changes through each individuation as well (Bocquillon, 2022). It is a process of crystallization, growing out of the edges, rather than (atmo-)spherical entities, all-encompassing but separated, and thus remains much more dynamic both in relation to "the other" (exceeding Sloterdijk's dyad), as well as within a particular "phonotope." If the phonotope describes the state of a system, of a community (Sloterdijk, 2004), the *ritournelle* is all about "becoming" rather than "being," and the "other" becomes necessary in its production rather than a mere outsider excluded from participating and understanding.

In other words, if the *ritournelle* indeed has to do with processes of territorialization, about the making of space, it may be even more importantly concerned with rhythm, and the rhythmic taking place (McCormack, 2013). Deleuze and Guattari differentiate between *rhythm* and the "rythmé," where the *rythmé* is a particular individuation, bound to a milieu, and "the rhythm, as what cadences, sequences, and co-produces the individuation, is an in-between, always a becoming" (Bocquillon, 2022, p. 163). It deals with events rather than subjects, tensions, and relations beyond human perception and particularism. As Eleni Ikoniadou notes, it "can uncover heterogeneous encounters between space, time, and the body, affective processes that are irreducible to units and hierarchies" (Ikoniadou, 2014, p. 7). One sees how the phonotope, although inspired by the *ritournelle* (Antonioli, 2019), never completes nor really expands it. It rather represents quite a descriptive approach, maybe more a state of things, an auditory snapshot, not unlike the soundscape it only seemingly refers to. It produces sonic maps, put together by an outside observer over a defined "object of inquiry," a cartographer delimiting the boundaries of a community; a (very visual) indexicality, a definition, a discrimination (Awan, 2016). On the contrary, thinking through the *ritournelle* is thinking in movement, rhythmic thinking where repetition exceeds redundancy through difference. As mentioned elsewhere: "The *ritournelle* as territorial assemblage can fixate, but it can displace, it can move and reconfigure as well as mark a territory, a boundary" (Bocquillon, 2022, p. 164).

The *ritournelle* therefore requires to reconsider the sonic beyond being a simple object with "representative" value, a posture that departs from the idea of a *soundscape* or phonotope as mapping to focus on processes of becoming and movement. This way of working with sound takes its materiality and fluidity as defining components, where "sounds are not punctual or static objects but temporal, durational flows" (Cox, 2018, p. 34). Often named sonic materialism, this approach, as proposed for instance by Christoph Cox and Bernd Herzogenrath, considers particular sonic events as what is "rythmé," where sound is being individuated from an undefined *sonic flux*, reminding Manuel DeLanda's own understanding of history as flows and fluxes, a sort of ever-moving magma (Cox, 2017, 2018; Herzogenrath, 2017b). In this understanding, sound becomes itself an event, an actual occasion: immanent and differential, expressed in terms of matter-energy-information, thus escaping its definition as an object only, or as an undefined glue defining an isolated community (Cox, 2018). This challenges not only the way one has to think about, or rather *with* sound as an object of inquiry but how one practices sociology and philosophy (through sound) as well. Beyond representation, it becomes performative.

Sonic Thinking as Place-Making

The *ritournelle* as *rhythmic* thinking can therefore also be understood as *sonic thinking* (Schulze, 2018) or *thinking-with sounds* (Bocquillon, 2022), which in addition to considering the materiality of the sonic takes every practice of sounding and listening as generative and possibly producing knowledge differently. Therefore not as an external observer deciphering the sonic, but as

ways of working “*with, through and beyond sounds*” (Schulze, 2017, p. 218). “*Sonic thinking* starts here: where knowledge is not mainly gained by academic reading, by discussing, falsifying or confirming, by rejecting or redefining propositions on some object called sound” (Schulze, 2020, p. 19).

In referring to Kodwo Eshun’s (1998) book *More Brilliant than the Sun* as well as his work with Anjelika Sagar in the Otolith Group, Schulze’s *sonic thinking* is already taking and making place: a *spatial* and *located* thinking with and through sound, not necessarily where sound has to be made sense of, as Vallee (2020) notes, but where sounding becomes itself theory-making, (re-) producing space, activating it in the production of new narratives. A corporeal practice therefore is not only locating but also necessarily situating and situated. It matters “which thoughts think thoughts. It matters which knowledges know knowledges” (Haraway, 2016, p. 35) because those knowledges are situated (Haraway, 1988). Moving from a study of sound toward thinking-with sounds implies being careful and not too hasty in considering ontologies, definitions, and biases, in order not to repeat already existing hegemonies, hereby reproducing the predominance of a white, male, Western knowledge production as the only valid and respectable one (Schulze, 2020).

Sonic thinking is therefore more than mapping, more than only representing soundscapes, but co-producing them to a certain extent. Again, this is a performative and generative practice. As an example, one could mention the ongoing project *Black Quantum Futurism* in their multiple inception, led by Camae Ayewa and Rasheedah Philipps.⁸ In their creative and speculative work rooted in sound, they propose another storytelling—a *story-retelling* as fabulation—of the black communities living in Philadelphia, as a particular *sampling* of the sonic flux making place anew, in a combination of rhythms overlapping past/present/future narrations, reviving Sun Ra’s own projection: “Space is the Place” (Schulze, 2020). In this, *Black Quantum Futurism* presents another *ritournelle*, an “afrofuturist, feminist queer practice challenging the hegemony of knowledge production” through sound (Bocquillon, 2022, pp. 103, 104). A thinking *out of sound* which, as it is making place, focuses on “the Auditory Dispositive and the Aural Architecture as the historically, culturally, and materially determined, and thus highly situated and immersive, conditions of any sonic experience” (Schulze, 2017, p. 224).

However, it is important to repeat that those modes of *thinking-with sounds* as territorializations of rhythms and milieux (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980) are also bound to “the forces of deterritorialization, and of becoming” (Herzogenrath, 2017a, p. 112). Space is here therefore not an empty container ready to be filled up by sound, not a defined territory over which a sonic bell delimits its borders. It rather comes closer to what Dereck McCormack (2008) understands as a practice of *thinking-space* rather than thinking *about* space. In this concept (and practice) of “thinking-space,” McCormack attempts to link Henri Lefebvre’s *rhythmanalysis* and Félix Guattari’s understanding of the *ritournelle* in the context of research-creation practices. On one hand, “thinking-space” is about “inflecting thinking through affective encounters of different degrees of intensity,” and on the other hand, “it is about producing facilitating contexts—sites of experience and experiment for thinking relations between bodies, concepts, and materials of various kinds” (McCormack, 2008, p. 7). Less *in* space than activating space, or place-making, those practices exceed the topographical (LaBelle, 2010) to become topological as a pursuit of multiplicity and an account for the complexity of *sounding* and *listening* (Shields, 2013), therefore actually less a *phonotope* than networks of sonic territorialities (Bocquillon, 2022; Despret, 2019).

From the Phonotope to the Phonocene

What I believe this approach of *sonic thinking* could contribute to is not only to document and map sonic territories, where soundscapes and phonotopes almost fatally lead to, but rather to include practices of *sounding* and *listening* in aesthetic and artistic situations (which are not

necessarily the same), as methods to produce knowledge differently, and thus, to participate to a particular *making place* through sound. In the words of Vinciane Despret and Stéphane Galetic, and as Mickey Vallee shows in *Sounding Bodies Sounding Worlds* (Vallee, 2020), it is maybe less about explaining the world, than multiplying its versions, producing a multiplicity of narratives, engaging in various ways with other entities, humans, nonhumans, and more-than-humans (Despret, 2019; Despret & Galetic, 2008), through sound. It shifts gears. Less a methodology than a posture of how to engage, how to relate, how to become “response-able” (Haraway, 2016). A move from the Anthropo-, Capitalo-, Chthulucene, to the Phonocene.

The term sounds problematic. Almost like a universalizing buzzword, neglecting its geological origin. Different names, same ruins (Tsing, 2017)? But it is for Vinciane Despret (2019), and for Donna Haraway,⁹ not so much the categorization of a geological age rather than a call to listen and pay attention to the songs of blackbirds and buntings, and how those songs, among the multispecific clamors and murmurs,¹⁰ produce so many modes of inhabiting the Earth. *Thinking-with sounds* as thinking *within* the Phonocene therefore implies considering and actively taking part in the plurality of practices of taking and making place. Where the phonotope is human co-isolation, and thus mutual exclusion, a sonic testimony of how humans become humans, consequently producing an anthropocentric (if not eurocentric) way to conceive the community, the territory, and the border, thinking from the Phonocene means to shift our understanding of what a territory is, beyond a defended place. As Despret puts it, and which can be read against the *Phonotope*, it means “to leave the sphere where the logos of the anthropos has all privileges” (Despret, 2020, trad. by the author), in a move toward the song, the chant, buzzing, droning, sounding altogether, rather than the word. What Vinciane Despret’s work shows is that through this engagement with how birds are sonically taking and making place, there is a possibility, for us, inside as well as outside academia, to reflect, to think-with others and toward different modes, in short: a possibility for enriching the real.¹¹ Back to the ritournelle as territorializations, sung interspecifically, where the territory becomes expressive matter, a place for the emergence of art (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980), a possibility for interspecific compositions (Despret, 2020).

Taking the Phonocene as a serious *proposition* to listen to, to think-with sounds, in short, to be *lured in* the sonic flux (Cox, 2018), leads to reconsidering what it means to produce knowledge as well as to reflect on the modes in which this production (and distribution) is being carried away. As Holger Schulze notes in describing sonic thinking:

Research on sound is happening *in* sound. The repressed forms of knowledge and epistemic, the sensory and the material, the visceral, and the dynamically plastic can be included in research. Sound theories can be listened to. Sound theories are sounding. (Schulze, 2019, p. 13)

What Schulze here means is that *thinking-with sounds*—or what is here presented as working within the Phonocene—is necessarily an aesthetic venture. Not as judgment and categorization, not as analysis, but as engagement, response-ability and experimentation. “You are not censors but sensors”, as Kodwo Eshun (1998, p. 7) reminds us. Sonic thinking becomes “aesthetic thought” as a viable access to knowledge production, rather than mere deception of the senses. It is a situated practice, itself a process of becoming/individuation (Michaud, 2013). Not necessarily including the phenomenological subject of “making sense of,” but considering experience and feeling in nonanthropocentric ways (Goodman, 2012; Shaviro, 2014; Vallee, 2020).

Considering the territory as a place for the emergence of art, and even more so through *sonic thinking*, implies redefining what is being included in this understanding of “art,” and who might even be considered an artist. For Despret, again inspired by Deleuze and Guattari’s *ritournelles*, art constitutes the aesthetic experience as *expressive matter*, and the aesthetic practice becomes the manifestation of “spectacular intentions,” as Despret says, quoting Étienne Souriau (Despret, 2020). The artist, then, evades the anthropos to become anything and anyone producing those

spectacles. Here, Despret is quite speculative, referring to Ursula LeGuin's *Therolinguistics* as the study of animal literary productions (Despret, 2021). But it is more than a simple interest in science fiction; it becomes—even through those speculative fabulations and narrations—an invitation to move off-center the human subject as a producer of art. Artistic practices, in networks of humans, nonhumans, and more-than-humans thus become propositional in the sense of Alfred North Whitehead, so many *lure for feelings* (Whitehead, 1978), requiring to *think-with* others, and to reflect on the speculative “could have been,” the possible worlds those practices are luring us in.

Conclusion

Practices of *thinking-with sounds* might therefore be just this: a doing of sociology and philosophy within the Phonocene, rather than about the phonotope. Neither mapping nor universalizing, neither explaining nor subliming, but inviting, luring, in producing knowledge differently, in making place according to different modes. To a certain extent, it is what is being done in *research-creation* (Loveless, 2019; Manning, 2013; Manning et al., 2018). Not as a gimmick however, not positioned against other methods and theories, but as a possible, speculative venture, a kind of “what if”? In other words, taking the *Phonocene* seriously, not simply as the simulacrum of the Anthropocene, not as a state of things, but as a proposition to move toward, invites a certain *response-ability* (Haraway, 2016) and “awareness,” almost echoing Félix Guattari's own *ethico-aesthetic* paradigm (Guattari, 1992). Or to put it differently, such a posture “involves an ethical commitment to learning to become affected” (McCormack, 2008, p. 9). It is an ethical and critical practice. Probably best shown throughout the work of sound philosopher Salomé Voegelin, thinking within the Phonocene could be understood as the production of knowledge following a plurality of modes, a multiplicity of narratives, a possibility to “make the inaudible audible” (Deleuze, 2003):

The universe I want to draw on is not centered around and constructed from one world only, but is constituted of a plurality of actual, possible, and impossible sonic worlds that we can all inhabit in listening and through whose plurality music loses its hegemony and discipline and the landscape gains its dimensions (Voegelin, 2014, p. 14).

Sound's mobile and ephemeral constitution enables and motivates the echographic practice of inclusion: including the formless, the invisible and the barely audible, the unfamiliar and the affective in the generation of knowledge and the knowable. Knowledge is a fundamental engine of political change and transformation. Sonic knowledge, the knowledge of the invisible and what remains unheard, opens politics, political actions, decisions and institutions to the plural slices of the world. [. . .] Knowledge is refracted in the invisible light of sound: more voices come to be heard as barer of information, insight and facts. (Voegelin, 2019, pp. 37, 38)

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ORCID iD

Rémy Bocquillon  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2875-7040>

Notes

1. A demanding and massive rewriting of human history in three volumes, read through the metaphorical figure of the sphere (i.e., “spherology”), either as bubbles (micro level), globes (macro level) and foam (“plural spherology”).
2. The duality *Gemeinschaft* (community)—*Gesellschaft* (society) reminding at once the classical sociology of Ferdinand Tönnies as well as Max Weber’s own differentiation between *Vergemeinschaftung* and *Vergesellschaftung* in *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*.
3. “Inseln sind Weltmodelle in der Welt” (Sloterdijk, 2004, p. 311).
4. This definition of a universal human subject is problematic as it tends to reproduce forms of alienation of those not included in this definition, as it will become clearer later in the article, through the link between individual phonotopes and silence.
5. “Ein vernünftiges Ich ist ohne akustische Isolation nicht zu haben” (Sloterdijk, 2004, p. 384).
6. The posture defended here, therefore, contrasts with Manola Antonioli’s main argument quoted above, which sees the phonotope itself as an extension of the *ritournelle* (Antonioli, 2019).
7. A concrete example would be the work and concept of *Activating Space*, initiated by Rob Shields and Jim Morrow. See for instance their field guide: http://www.spaceandculture.com/2020/04/28/activating-space/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=activating-space.
8. See <https://www.blackquantumfuturism.com/>
9. See their discussion after Despret’s performative lecture introducing the term: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=87HzPIEiF78>
10. Despret refers for instance to the work of sound specialist and ecologist Bernie Krause, and how species living in the same territory over time also share speaking time (Despret, 2020).
11. A similar, and as important, engagement with the real can be found in Baptiste Morizot’s own work (Morizot, 2020), with whom Despret often dialogues.

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Author Biography

Dr. Rémy Bocquillon is a researcher and lecturer in sociology at the Catholic University Eichstätt-Ingolstadt, Germany. His research interests revolve around epistemic practices bridging the gap between arts, science, and philosophy, which he explores through his own creative work as a sound artist and musician. Some of his latest projects include the publication of his book “Sound Formations. Towards a sociological thinking-with sounds” and the sound installation “in_between”, realised during an artistic residency for the 2023 SpokenWeb Symposium at the University of Alberta, Canada.