

# Listening after nature? Field recording in flux

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**Resumo:** Quais são os desafios éticos, políticos e conceituais existentes na prática de gravação de campo? A resposta a estas questões guia a escrita do livro *Listening after nature: field recording, ecology, critical practice*, de Mark Peter Wright. A seguinte resenha para além de detalhar algumas das temáticas principais do texto, exalta a inerente componente pedagógica do livro. Nomeadamente, a forma como este oferece outras abordagens criativas ao processo de gravar som no exterior.

**Palavras-chave:** gravação, presença, pós-humano, processo, ecologia.

**Abstract:** What are the inherent ethical, political, and conceptual challenges in field recording? The answer to these questions guides *Listening after nature: field recording, ecology, critical practice* by Mark Peter Wright. The following review, in addition to detailing some of the text's main themes, exalts the book's inherent pedagogical ethos. Particularly, its offering of other creative approaches to the process of recording sound in the field.

**Keywords:** recording, presence, post-human, process, ecology.

Mark Peter Wright reflects upon the ethical, political and artistic challenges in field recording. These underlying issues (in *Listening After Nature*) portray Mark Peter Wrights' on-going critical and creative relationship<sup>1</sup> with the aforementioned praxis. In a wider scope, field recording is understood as recording audio outdoors in connexion with the wider realm of the creative industries, biology and the social sciences. For the context of this review, and Wrights' own book, this also entails an expansive body of contemporary sound work and associated art-world that follows a number of unsaid rules. To name a few: the heard audio recording should not be processed in significant ways! The body of the field recordist is best left unheard! Nature should be idealized! Less information is more, more and more! *Listening After Nature: Field Recording, Ecology and Critical Practice* tackles these tropes with a sense of urgency to it. Understandably so, as we live in times of deep ecological crisis across the globe, on-going labour exploitation, famine and political partisanship.

The book starts by entering in 'The Field' (Chapter 1: *Recoding the Field*), not only as a spatial reference but also as a conceptual metaphor. It denotes the disciplinary and epistemological framework that has naturalized some of our attitudes regarding field recording. Namely, anthropology, ethnomusicology and ornithology. These disciplines erased the researching subject as a necessary condition for objectivity in scientific research (WRIGHT, 2022, pp.11-42). Wrights' work is a reminder that only the arrogance of the fellow white man could ever think of himself as capable of achieving some sort of equidistance/transcendent overlook of what it is researching. Field recording has unwillingly or willingly continued this tradition. Nowadays, we see a much more nuanced approach in ethnography that reflects how this effacing was a matter of historical privilege in the colonial setting: the structural issue of what/who is actually human or sentient.

In this regard, Chapter 2: *Constructing Nature* expresses how this latent colonialism contaminates field recording parlance with words such as 'capturing', 'hunting' and 'preserving'. As a counterpoint, Wrights' asks us to re-equate the human as the centre stage (WRIGHT, 2022, pp. 43-78). In this regard, we might think about the polar diagram of the microphone as an omnidirectional tool to hear-in multiple speaking standpoints: human or non-human. To eavesdrop on cultures

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<sup>1</sup> See *Decoys* (2018); *The Noisy-Nonselself or, I, the Thing in the Margins* (2015); and *The Thing about Microphones or, Humanimental Prototypes* (2015) <http://markpeterwright.net/decoys> <http://markpeterwright.net/the-noisynonselself-or-i-the-thing-in-the-margins> <http://markpeterwright.net/the-thing-about-microphones-or-humanimental-prototypes>

where the sensorial or disciplinary divide make no sense. It is a reminder that we need not to be calling everything we hear as a simile of music or use verbiage that gives an unnecessary significance to the sonic world. Whereby the potential for field recording seems to lie in approaching the world of exotic places or drones produced by everyday machines through a sort of aesthetic aether or observational neutrality.

Chapter 3: *Stretching the Site* thinks otherwise. In discussing *Oil field Soundwalk 1*, a binaural recording made by Peter Cusack in 2004 at the Bibi Heybat oilfield in Azerbaijan, he hears himself walking with Cusack. The spatial and technical marker of the recording creates a sort of experiential wormhole that transforms the observing-ear into a participating-ear: a temporary cohabitation between field recordist, listener and place: “Cusack performs the Noisy-Nonselself as a (dis)embodied and perhaps critical version of objective observation” (WRIGHT, 2022, p. 87).

The ‘Noisy-Nonselself’ remembers what we tend to forget or what was edited out. Looking for these is a worthwhile pedagogical endeavour. This is the central tenet of Chapter 4: *Following the Flow*. As teachers, we are dealing with students that are facing untold challenges in terms of climate change, economic instability, mental health issues and the rise of the far-right. Can a non-essentialist listening to field recording tentatively aid in the reworking of dominant ideologies that bring about suffering. Can it offer hope? This attempt is exemplified by Wrights’ work with his students in examining *Cu* (chemical sign for copper) by Fernando Godoy (2015) at the El Teniente mine in Chile (WRIGHT, 2022, pp.121-130). Copper is an essential element in our contemporary sonic technologies. This mineral, alongside other geological resources, is part of an extractive endeavour leveraged in most cases on precarious labour and severe ecological damage. In listening-with-reading Godoy’s *Cu* with his students, different questions pop-up. What really do the miners listen to daily? Does *Cu* and its clear influences of ambient music and spectralism represent the hazardous environment (high amplitude sounds) that often undermine miners’ health?

To conclude, perhaps Mark Peter Wright asks too much of what can be done with field recording. But in these trying times, one can and should continue to ask the hard questions while looking for other ideas that might bring about hope, empathy, and the good life between sentient and non-sentient beings. Entering ‘The Field’ usually entails a series of questions regarding the creative and technical process. Why this location? What time and/or weather? How do we frame our chosen scene? What microphone(s) to use? What to record? How do I share this to other listeners? There is

plenty to do before and after pressing the recording button. There is a unique playfulness in hearing our sonic world through a mediated apparatus. *Listening After Nature: Field Recording, Ecology and Critical Practice*, not only takes these questions seriously, but does so through a careful critique that tries to extend the above joyfulness into a collective endeavour. This, alongside the carefully selected repertoire and bibliography should be of interest to both newcomers, teachers, scholars, and artists in the field of sonic creativity. A useful reminder that there is no necessary aesthetic opposition between beauty and horror. Between nature, man, and culture.

FIGURE 1 – The Noisy-Nonsel or, I, the Thing in the Margins, Mark Peter Wright, 2015.



Source: Mark Peter Wright.

The monster (field recordist) can be testified. A bodily and sometimes humorous appearance that dreams up of forms of co-existence between recordist-listener and listener-recordist. Extending the moment of recoding/recording to an everlasting generative event encompassing entropy, agency, and intimacy. Pointing the fluffy thing out there can be a part of this. Unless we are hoping for our DNA to be found millions of years from now in an amber preserved mosquito, where scientists (my money is on evolved cucarachas) will create the Anthropocene Park.

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<http://markpeterwright.net/the-noisynonself-or-i-the-thing-in-the-margins>

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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