

'A balance that you can hear': deep ecology, 'serious listening' and the soundscape recordings of David Dunn

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Abstract

The phonographic recordings of the American composer David Dunn combine conservationist advocacy with philosophical speculations on the relationship between ecology and music informed by the systems philosophy of Gregory Bateson, and the avant-garde experimentalism of composer John Cage. His album Why Do Whales and Children Sing? A Guide to Listening in Nature (1999) risks reducing the natural world to easily consumable sound bites, and thereby contributing to the commodification of nature that Dunn opposes. He counters this risk with a self-reflexive critique of his own methodology; that is, he actively encourages his listeners to question the very act of listening to nature sound recordings. Dunn wants his listeners to be intellectually active and informed, and therefore to be more than merely passive consumers of his work. 'Serious listening' is a way of finding interrelationships of what Gregory Bateson called 'mind' in the natural world.

Keywords

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In *Silent Spring* (1962), the book that inspired the modern environmental movement in the 1960s, the silencing of the 'voices of spring in countless towns in America' was for Rachel Carson the central indicator of the impending environmental apocalypse (Carson 1991: 21–22). Later in the same decade, R. Murray Schafer launched the Acoustic Ecology movement at Simon Fraser University, British Columbia, to investigate the sounds produced in both natural and built spaces as phenomena to be conserved in their own right. Schafer coined the term 'soundscape' to refer to 'any acoustic field of study', including musical compositions, radio programmes and acoustic environments themselves. Like the term 'landscape', then, the word refers ambiguously to both real environments and to the cultural artefacts that represent them (Schafer 1994).

Since the 1960s, a growing number of sonic artists worldwide, among them Douglas Quin, Hildegaard Westerkamp and Francisco Selva, have been explicitly addressing the role of sound in fostering ecological awareness. The EarthEar recording label and website, run by Jim Cummings from New Mexico, has become the prime resource for the distribution of environmental sound recordings, as well as a useful resource for critical writings on the subject.¹ This article focuses on the American composer David Dunn,

1 Earth Ear website, <http://www.earthear.com>. For nature sounds websites, see <http://www.phonography.org>.

whose audio art or phonography combines conservationist advocacy with philosophical speculations on the relationship between ecology and music informed by two main sources: the systems philosophy of Gregory Bateson, and the avant-garde experimentalism of composer John Cage.

Philosopher John Andrew Fisher distinguishes between the aesthetic appreciation of soundscape recordings and that of real soundscapes. Recordings of nature sounds differ from the experience of actual soundscapes, he points out, in that 'they give us one take, one set of balances, excluding much and focusing on selected sounds, much as a photograph frames and organizes a scene visually in a very specific way'. In contrast, real natural sound events are unique, ephemeral and non-repeatable. Indeed, Fisher argues, it is 'plausible to hold that a certain amount of aesthetic value and pleasure derives from the very non-repeatability of the sound events we hear in nature' (Fisher 1998: 173–74). Recording, on the other hand, commits such lost sounds to a form of technological memory. In a manner of speaking, it preserves the sounds of the dead.

It may be tempting to succumb at this point to postmodernist hyperbole about the death of nature. In 1981, Jean Baudrillard wrote:

If one speaks of the environment, it is because it has already ceased to exist.
To speak of ecology is to attest to the death and total abstraction of nature.
Everywhere the 'right' (to nature, to the environment) countersigns the
'demise of'.

(Baudrillard 1981: 202)

A decade later, Fredric Jameson pessimistically asserted that, in the post-modern era, 'the modernization process is complete and nature is gone for good' (Jameson 1991: ix). However, while it is true that many of the species featured in soundscape recordings are endangered, and that the Mexican wolves recorded in the Sonoran Desert by Jack Loeffler, for example, are no longer found in that region, a less glib and complacent view than that found in postmodernist theory may consider these sounds as not only a commemoration of lost animal species, but also an act of conservationist advocacy for species that may be vanishing and under imminent threat of extinction, but are definitely not yet 'gone for good' (Dunn 1999a: 67).

For the listener, the appreciation of nature recordings depends on the relative quietness of indoor living and the sound-differentiating qualities of hi-fi technology. Do listeners to nature sound recordings thus feel a complacent thrill of technological mastery over nature as the exotic variety of the world's natural soundscapes is revealed to them? Are soundscape recordings merely an opportunity for what Jacques Attali dismisses as the 'stockpiling of "beauty" for solvent consumers' (Attali 1985: 32) that characterizes the modern era of mechanical sound reproduction? Are they an extension to wild nature of what sonic artist and critic Douglas Kahn (1999: 170–71) calls the 'detached, touristic, imperialistic and appropriative' gaze which has

typified many American engagements with other cultures since World War Two? It is precisely with these questions that the work of composer and phonographer David Dunn concerns himself, and which we will explore in this article.

Dunn has gone further than other soundscape artists in explicitly theorizing about the putative role of sound in environmental awareness. Since 1992, he has explored his ecophilosophical concerns through what he calls 'hybrid soundscape compositions' (Dunn 1997: 67). The first of these was 'Chaos and the Emergent Mind of the Pond', a 24-minute piece on the album *Angels and Insects* (1992). This was followed by the albums *The Lion in Which the Spirits of the Royal Ancestors Make Their Home* (1995) and *Why Do Whales and Children Sing? A Guide to Listening in Nature* (1999). The latter is accompanied by a 96-page booklet that summarizes Dunn's philosophy of sound and nature, and is a convenient place to begin a discussion of his ecophilosophical sonic art.

Consisting of 40 tracks, each with an average length of about two minutes, *Why Do Whales and Children Sing?* is an aural travelogue, epic in its inclusiveness and yet intimate in its evocation of specific geographical spaces. The global scope and variety of the disc evoke the abundance of the world's wildlife and its acoustic spaces, from the sound of cows in the Swiss Alps, to humpback whales off Hawaii, howler monkeys in Costa Rica, bats in New Mexico, to an amusement arcade in Santa Monica, ending with children singing in a Zimbabwean village.

A sense of urgent conservationist advocacy animates Dunn's work. In the EarthEar catalogue, he describes his 'mixed feelings' about nature soundscape recordings. He writes:

Part of this is the idea of being able to expand access to the non-human world in a way that is non-destructive; the other side of it ends up being another level of exploitation and commodotizing the environment, in the same way we've commodotized every other aspect of it.

(Dunn 2000: 4)

Dunn's concern that his soundscape recordings should not be complicit with the forces of environmental destruction is a constant feature of his work. Yet the very form he has chosen for *Why Do Whales and Children Sing?* risks reducing the natural world to easily consumable sound bites, and thereby contributing to, rather than challenging, the commodification of nature that he opposes. Dunn attempts to counter such negative interpretations of his work by a self-reflexive critique of his own methodology. In other words, he actively encourages his listeners to question the very act of listening to nature sound recordings, and by explicitly discussing the problems and contradictions involved in trying to avoid an exploitative attitude to his material, whether that includes the sounds of non-human organisms or of people from indigenous, non-western cultures. By providing nuanced, intellectually challenging

2 See 'Tabula Angelorum Bonorum', on *Angels and Insects*.

written commentaries on the environmental contexts of the sounds he presents, Dunn wants his listeners to be intellectually active and informed, and therefore to be more than merely passive consumers of his work.

In order to achieve this, Dunn explicitly positions his art within an avant-garde tradition that opposes the more deliberately commercial, New Age soundscape recordings produced for a mass audience, which use natural sounds for what he sees as the superficial purposes of relaxation and entertainment. Indeed, Dunn takes care to distance himself from the New Age movement, even though his interests, from Gregory Bateson to the Renaissance astrologer John Dee and psychic medium Edward Kelly, are identical with some aspects of it.² His disagreements with the New Age movement, as we shall see, are more aesthetic than philosophical.

Dunn's concept of 'serious listening' is central to his oppositional strategy. The opening track of *Why Do Whales and Children Sing?*, entitled 'Chama, New Mexico: Mountain Stream and Approaching Thunder', has been carefully chosen in this respect. A bubbling stream can be heard with birds tweeting in the background. These sounds last for over a minute and a half, until they are interrupted by a clap of thunder in the distance, after which the track fades out. Dunn begins his commentary by distancing his own representations of nature from the pastoral ideal suggested by this particular recording, and perpetuated by popular culture in general:

What do these sounds tell us? Mostly they seem grossly familiar and clichéd because of their use in movies, cartoons, new-age music, therapeutic sessions, and other contexts where they have been used to invoke 'states of relaxation'. They are the quintessential 'sounds of nature' as if the immensity of the Earth and its inhabitants could be reduced to such an abstraction or singular state of mind. Part of what 'serious listening' demands is the willingness to unload such projections from the saturation of popular media and commercial hype. I do not mean to imply that our projections aren't valid or that there aren't some profound reasons for associating these sounds with specific psychological or emotional states. I'm just arguing for the necessity to hear beneath the surface of our most familiar projections to what might be a more intrinsic understanding.

(Dunn 1999a: 27–28)

'Serious listening' is an active, questioning process, based on a theory of listening which aligns Dunn with John Cage's pioneering use of 'found' environmental sounds in musical composition. In the early 1950s, Cage began to advocate listening to environmental sounds as if they were music, and to incorporate such ambient sounds into his musical compositions. In his Julliard Lecture (1952), he spoke of his interest in 'sounds in themselves', free from a concern with meaning. The referential link between a particular sound and a specific object was irrelevant to him. Instead, he wanted, he said,

to more and more completely liberate sounds from abstract ideas about them and more and more exactly to let them be physically, uniquely, themselves. This means for me: knowing more and more not what I think a sound is, but what it actually is in all of its acoustical details and then letting this sound exist, itself, changing in a changing sonorous environment.

(Cage 1968: 100)

Dunn responds directly to Cage by insisting upon a greater concern for referentiality than that shown by his precursor. That is, while Dunn shares with Cage a lack of concern for the associative aspects of listening, he departs from him by intending the sounds he presents to refer to their sources in the real world. In particular, Dunn wants to make his listeners aware of the ecological contexts of the sounds he records; his written notes play a vital role in bringing these to their attention. Dunn thereby rejects what he sees as Cage's aestheticism: he does not intend that every sound in his soundscape recordings should be listened to 'just as it is', as Cage put it, but rather as a sound in relation to its environment. He writes of Cage and his followers:

Through the 'musical' manipulation of the noises of everyday life they achieved an understanding of the meaning of these sounds as aesthetic phenomena, opportunities for a deepened awareness of the world we live in. Perhaps because of this contribution to art we now can understand the need to extend it further. The sounds of living things are not just a resource for manipulation – they are evidence of mind in nature and patterns of communication with which we share a common bond and meaning.

(Dunn 1999a: 89)

Unlike Cage, then, Dunn does not want the sounds of non-human nature to be listened to simply for their intrinsic sonic qualities, such as interesting or pleasurable timbres or rhythms. Instead, he has a more didactic intention, wanting to encourage his listeners to think ecologically about sound and nature. In particular, 'serious listening' involves a framework of interpretation derived from the holistic systems theory of the British anthropologist Gregory Bateson, to which we will now turn.

Bateson argued that many systems (by which he meant living organisms, social structures and entire ecosystems) are capable of complex behaviours, such as self-regulation and learning, which are the product of the interaction of their different parts. In calling the behaviour of such complex systems 'mind', Bateson was expanding the meaning of the word beyond its usual one (that is, the capacity for sentience in living organisms) to make it a fundamental property shared by all living systems (Bateson 1979: 102). As he put it, '*any* [own emphasis] ongoing ensemble of events and objects which has the appropriate complexity of causal circuits and the appropriate energy relations will . . . show mental characteristics' (Bateson 1979: 315). At the heart of the environmentalist implications of Bateson's theory is the critique of ontological dualism

3 See, for example, M. McLuhan, 'Visual and Acoustic Space', in Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner (eds.), *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, New York and London: Continuum, 2004, pp. 69–72; Neil Evernden, *The Natural Alien*, Toronto, Buffalo and London: University of Toronto Press, 1985, pp. 84–95.

familiar in radical ecophilosophy. According to Bateson's argument, dualism leads to environmental degradation because,

as you arrogate all mind to yourself, you will see the world around you as mindless and therefore not entitled to moral and ethical consideration. The environment will seem to be yours to exploit. Your survival unit will be you and your folks or conspecifics against the environment of other social units, other races and the brutes and vegetables.

(Bateson 1972: 462)

David Dunn interprets Bateson's theory of mind in the context of the idea that the dominance of the sense of sight has produced in human beings an experience of separation from the natural world.³ For Dunn, 'serious listening' will help to renew our sense of hearing, and thereby reverse the damaging trends inherent in our primarily visual ways of apprehending the world. Music thus plays a vital role in healing our alienated relationship with nature by connecting with the Batesonian universal 'mind'. As Dunn puts it, music 'may be our species' way of retaining a mode of consciousness that is similar to how mind is organized in the nonhuman world'. Music is therefore not simply a form of entertainment, but 'may be a conservation strategy for keeping something alive that we may now need to make more conscious. A way of making sense of the world from which we might refashion our relationship to nonhuman living systems.' Music is therefore 'not just something that we do to amuse ourselves – it is a different way of thinking about the world. A way of thinking that we probably share with dolphins and wolves' (Dunn 1999a: 86–87).

Despite the monolithic use of the term 'music' here, Dunn does not believe that all music acts as a 'conservation strategy' in this way. Rather, he places himself within the modernist tradition, rejecting the idea of music as popular entertainment played 'just . . . to amuse ourselves'. In his essay 'Wilderness as Reentrant Form: Thoughts on the Future of Electronic Art and Nature' (1988), he distinguishes between the products of what he calls the 'recorded entertainment industry', concerned with 'intentionally controlled novelty', and the work of experimental artists like himself, who explore 'radical discontinuities' within that system (Dunn 1993: 75). For Dunn, the latter artists hold the key to the ecological reintegration he seeks. In addition, and again typical of modernist artists, he finds healing potential in traditional folk music, in his case that of Zimbabwe, as we will see later in this article.

'New Mexico: Pond Insects' on *Why Do Whales and Children Sing?* is a key illustration of what Dunn sees as the presence of the Batesonian 'mind' in nature. In the notes to this track, he comments that the 'intelligence of life forms' should not only be associated with 'how big they are, or with their proximity to us on the evolutionary tree' (Dunn 1999a: 73). Insects, for example, when considered from the holistic perspective of systems theory, exhibit complex and intelligent behaviour, different from,

but comparable to, that of human beings. Dunn cites the late twentieth-century scientific concept of 'emergence', according to which, he writes,

patterns can arise from a complex process that appears to transcend the agents that bring that process into being. When viewed from this perspective, individual bees probably can be understood as parts of a collective mind. The hive is an intelligent organism emergent from the total activities of its cellular bee members.

Referring to his recording of pond insects, he continues:

I have finally reconciled myself to the gut feeling that these sounds are an emergent property of the pond. Something that speaks as a collective voice for a mind that is beyond my grasp. I know that this is not a scientific way of thinking, but I can't help myself. Now when I see a pond, I think of the water's surface as a membrane enclosing something deep in thought.

(Dunn 1999a: 74–76)

Dunn here consciously speculates beyond science into mysticism. His ambivalence towards science – at first citing the authority of the scientific theory of emergence, and then emphasizing that his conclusions are 'not a scientific way of thinking' – is characteristic of deep ecology. A further influence of deep ecology may be seen when Dunn speculates on the question of where human beings fit into his conception of the universal mind. It is in Africa that he finds a model of harmonious relations between human beings and their environment. In the track that follows 'New Mexico: Pond Insects', entitled 'Besa Village, Zimbabwe: Night Sounds', he returns to a piece he first released on his previous album *The Lion in Which the Spirits of the Royal Ancestors Make Their Home*. The track features the sounds of insects, frogs and a braying donkey, interspersed with human voices talking and laughing. The recording, Dunn writes,

reinforces one of the most powerful impressions I had of the relationship between African culture and environment: an overwhelming sense of the persistence of spirit as an intrinsic component of the African ecology. For many African people the sounds of animals are not merely the calls of separate organisms. They are the voice of a spirit form resident in that individual but also present in all the members of its species. That spirit is like a persistent and collective intelligence that defies geographic separation.

(Dunn 1999a: 76–77)

Dunn thus interprets the sounds of a Zimbabwean village as evidence of the mutual, ecosystemic interconnectedness between living organisms, human and non-human, akin to the 'collective voice' of the New Mexico pond insects in the previous track. That he refers in this passage to 'the African ecology' suggests a monolithic conception of a continent which,

of course, contains many different ecologies. Elsewhere in his writings, however, Dunn shows a more nuanced attitude to Africa, as we shall now see.

Dunn's artistic and philosophical interest in Africa may be placed within a long tradition of Euro-American encounters with that continent. Under western colonialism, these have tended to produce racially prejudiced images of Africa as either an uncivilized and savage place, or an idealized Garden of Eden. As art historian Marianna Torgovnick observes, in the Romantic imagination, so-called 'primitives' are 'by turns gentle, in tune with nature, paradisaical, ideal – or violent, in need of control; what we should emulate or, alternately, what we should fear; noble savages or cannibals' (Torgovnick 1990: 3). In popular environmentalism, this Romantic cult of the primitive has informed a view of African farmers and herdsmen as exemplars of a closeness to nature that the urbanized West has lost. Geographer Martyn W. Lewis is critical of those radical environmentalists who believe

that we afford respect to primal peoples by elevating them to the status of nonalienated humanity in its essence, at one with earth and nature. In reality, this procedure denies them their own existence, making them instead a dumping ground for our own fears and longings . . .

(Lewis 1992: 243–44)

Dunn's work is well meaning but ambiguous on this issue. In his writings, he explicitly questions the Romantic idealization of traditional African cultures. However, despite these good intentions, a residual Romanticism may still be detected in the representation of Africa in his work. In the liner notes to *The Lion in Which the Spirits of the Royal Ancestors Make Their Home*, he recognizes the contradictions and complexities of postcolonial land use in Zimbabwe, and of his own position as an artist in relation to the colonial exploitation of non-western cultures. He writes,

This collage is not an attempt to document the natural world of Africa, its tribal remnants nor its modern counterparts. It is simply an aural description of the network of sound that communicates between these components that an outside traveler might be fortunate to hear.

Such an activity is at best problematic and at worst an act of exploitation. Just as the photographer cannot escape the patina of voyeurism neither can the phonographer. My only defense is to be as 'up front' as possible. I offer these sounds as evidence of something worth listening to, not as just another digitally displaced entertainment nor as another highly dubious example of global cultural consciousness-raising. My interest has been in composing an articulation of those patterns of the sacred which emerge or persist within (and despite) the contradictions and conundrums of rapid cultural change. By use of the word sacred I am specifically invoking a definition posited by Gregory Bateson: 'the integrated fabric of mind which envelops us'.

(Dunn 1995: n.p.)

As already mentioned, Dunn's strategy for being 'as "up front" as possible' is to provide written commentaries that explore the conceptual context within which he intends his phonographic works to be interpreted. An example of this can be found in his commentary on the second track of *The Lion in Which the Spirits of the Royal Ancestors Make Their Home*, a piece which he later re-released as 'Zimbabwe: Morning Sounds' on *Why Do Whales and Children Sing?* Dunn informs his listener that the sounds of a kerosene-driven water pump can be heard in the recording, adding: 'At first I found their presence to be a real disturbance to my wild safari fantasy. Later I understood that Africa is no different from the rest of the Earth's fast transition of wilderness into global park' (Dunn 1999a: 45–46). By drawing his listener's attention to the kerosene pump, and thereby to the prevalence of modern technology in rural Zimbabwe, Dunn's written text makes the contradiction between modernity and tradition audible, and thereby prevents the sound recording from being consumed as a simple pastoral idyll.

A second aspect of Dunn's self-reflexive technique is his strategy of drawing attention in his notes to the processes of technological mediation involved in his soundscape recordings. As he told René van Peer:

'when you're making a sound recording, you're not preserving anything except an illusion. It's a technological projection, a construction that is no more real than if I was to make a drawing of that location. There's nothing real being preserved. It's a flattening out of the complexity of an acoustic environment. It's just sounds that ultimately are energy patterns that have been put onto a storage medium, so that we can later make a loudspeaker cone move in space . . . Most of the time, what you hear in these recordings is someone who sat long enough between periods of airplanes and cars passing that they can get something that appears to be a pristine recording. To put that forth as the reality is a lie.

(van Peer 1999: 63–68).

The track 'Besa Village, Zimbabwe: Night Sounds' on *Why Do Whales and Children Sing?* is a good example of Dunn's desire to be 'up front' about the processes of mediation out of which his work is constructed. In the text that accompanies this track, Dunn notes that he edited out the traffic noise. 'Now we hear a human habitation wedged between the African wilderness and a two-lane paved highway that serves as a major trucking route,' he writes. 'The length of this example is just about the average time between passing vehicles' (Dunn 1999a: 76). Dunn's decision to edit out the traffic noise from this recording is important, given his stated intentions to reveal the contradictions between tradition and modernity in the environment, rather than to present the recording as evidence of a pristine, pre-modern community outside of the processes of historical change. If he had kept the motor sounds in the final edit, he would have made this point actually audible in the track itself, instead of one that the listener can only ascertain from reading the accompanying notes.

The Besa village recording, writes Dunn,

places the human world in a larger frame. The sounds of human speech and laughter, or the noise of domestic life, can be heard as something within a bigger pattern of life. They are part of the mix and not something that dominates the fabric. Many traditional cultures have maintained a balance that you can hear. You can physically stand between the human community on one side and the communities of nonhuman intelligence on the other.

(Dunn 1999a: 78)

This assertion raises two important questions. First, can the ecological health of a biotic community really be diagnosed from the sounds it makes, or, more accurately, from a recording of those sounds? The second question goes to the heart of the deep ecological assumptions that frame Dunn's attitude towards the environment: is life in Besa really characterized by ecological 'balance', as he asserts, or does he romanticize this agrarian community?

Dunn presents 'Besa Village, Zimbabwe: Night Sounds' as evidence of a 'balance that you can hear' in the ecological relationship between the Zimbabwean farming community and its non-human environment. However, that the written word is necessary to provide the interpretative context within which his work can be understood according to his intentions raises a doubt about the adequacy of hearing in itself as a privileged mode of understanding the world. In human beings, empirical knowledge is provided by all of the senses, not just hearing alone.

Moreover, the ecological harmony that Dunn claims is audible in the sounds made in this Zimbabwean village is created through the processes of studio editing, the unobtrusiveness of which fabricates the sounds as pristine. While Dunn's writings acknowledge these processes of technological mediation, he has excluded the sounds of traffic from this track, perhaps because their presence may have weakened his assertions about the ecological harmony of the culture in question. His decision to edit out the sounds of the motor vehicles from his recording of Besa village thus suggests that, despite his stated intention to dramatize the contradictions of modern Zimbabwe rather than to romanticize its past, there is nevertheless a latent Romanticism in his work that manifests itself in his preference for apparently pre-modern soundscapes over those of modernity.

Indeed, this critical attitude towards modernity is evident in the recordings of other human communities in the latter part of *Why Do Whales and Children Sing?* Before we explore these in detail, Dunn's deep ecological assumptions about pre-modern cultures need to be examined further. He posits the spiritual outlook of the Shona farming community in Zimbabwe as a possible antidote to the dominant environmental attitudes in the West, which, he argues, are based on a destructively materialist and commodifying attitude to nature. But his deep ecological belief that the spiritual world-views of traditional cultures hold the key to a balanced relationship with

nature is questionable. That a culture shows a religious or spiritual attitude to nature does not necessarily guarantee the ecological beneficence of its practices, as recent anthropology on the 'ecological Indian' shows. For example, the work of Robert Brightman on the Rock Cree concluded that their religious belief in animal spirits led not to a conservationist ethic, but to overhunting, and consequently the excessive destruction of wildlife. Shepard Krech III reaches a similar conclusion about many other American Indian tribes (Lewis 1992: 63; Krech 1999).

In the liner notes to *The Lion in Which the Spirits of the Royal Ancestors Make Their Home*, Dunn cites, in support of his environmental advocacy of the Shona people, the book *Guns and Rain* (1985) by the anthropologist David Lan, which discusses the role that spirit mediums played in the guerrilla war against the British out of which modern Zimbabwe was founded in 1980. Lan summarizes Shona religious beliefs as follows:

When a chief dies he is transformed into a *mhondoro* (spirit medium) and becomes the source of the fertility of the land itself. He provides rain for the fields and protects the crops as they grow. Rain will only be withheld if the *mhondoro*'s laws are disobeyed. If incest, murder or witchcraft take place, drought follows and the crops will fail. But if the descendants of the *mhondoro* obey his laws and perform his ceremonies in due time, they will live in peace and plenty.

(Lan 1985: 32)

Claims about the ecological beneficence of such religious beliefs are doubtful, however, because historical analysis shows that advocates of the Shona religion have not necessarily favoured one form of agricultural or economic practice over another. Indeed, historian Terence Ranger points out that spirit mediums in contemporary Zimbabwe have taken up a variety of positions regarding the question of how best to manage the rural economy. He writes:

Some have argued that the avoidance of white technology which was necessary while political power rested with aliens is now no longer appropriate: so long as the *chisi* (sacred) days are observed and due veneration paid to the ancestors, peasants should use fertilizers and seek the advice of extension workers. Others have continued to be suspicious of 'modernizing' techniques. Yet others have endorsed cooperative forms of production.

(Ranger 1985: 340)

In this light, Dunn's contention that Shona religion represents a balanced relationship with non-human nature is debatable, in that spirit mediums have just as readily evoked it to endorse the very forms of modern, western-derived agriculture which he opposes and to which he sees it as an antidote.

Further evidence that Dunn's deep ecological convictions may have led him to idealize traditional communities, despite his stated intentions to

question Romantic projections onto nature, is provided by his eulogy to the English Cotswolds. Of 'The Cotswolds (*sic*), England: Birds', he writes:

Wildlife and song birds have adapted long ago to this intensely 'humanized' environment. Despite there being over four thousand years of visible history in this landscape, there is also a deep concern for what remains of the non-human. The Cotswolds is an extraordinary example of how human habitation can be harmoniously merged into the natural world.

(Dunn 1999a: 48)

This is another example of the selectiveness of Dunn's deep ecological speculations. Although there certainly is a 'deep concern for what remains of the nonhuman' amongst some people who live in the Cotswolds, the landscape is also marked by social and political factors, such as the role of ecologically destructive industrial agriculture, unequal labour relations and exclusionary property prices, that make a more convincing history one of conflict, both between human beings, and between human beings and other organisms, rather than of harmonious relations. Typical of the American deep ecologist, however, Dunn tends to interpret environmental issues as the problem of a generalized humanity, rather than as a conflict between human groups differentiated by factors such as class, race, gender, region or nation. In so doing, his philosophical speculations have little to say about how ecological and spiritual factors relate to political and economic ones.

At the heart of Dunn's vision of both Zimbabwe and the English Cotswolds is his conflation of an aesthetic appreciation of a 'balanced' soundscape with the deep ecological notion of ecological 'balance'. When he asserts that the 'balance' audible in his soundscape recordings (that is, the way in which the different sonic elements have an equal emphasis in the mix) is evidence of 'balance' in the ecosystem itself, he is thinking analogically, bringing together two different senses of the same word. However, it is unlikely that the aesthetically beautiful sounds of the dawn chorus in the Cotswolds, or of night-time in a Zimbabwean village, provide sufficient evidence for his speculations about the relationship between human beings and nature in those regions, harmonious or otherwise.

What the Cotswolds and Besa Village tracks do have in common, however, is a celebration of pre-modern soundscapes, from which the sounds of industrial modernity have been deliberately excluded. Indeed, Dunn's attitude to modern, industrial technology becomes clear in the sequence of tracks that follows 'Besa Village, Zimbabwe: Night Sounds'. 'Chimayo, New Mexico: Frogs, Insects, and Traffic', recorded in Dunn's own backyard, is made up of the *ostinato* rhythms of insects and the loud screech of a frog. The track ends with a motor vehicle, the very sound Dunn deliberately edited out of the Besa village track. He comments: 'Eventually the calm is disturbed by another neighbor's ornately painted "low rider" car, wending its way through the village' (Dunn 1999a: 79).

Significantly, then, Dunn describes the noise made by the vehicle as disruptive of the 'calm' of the earlier sounds, even though the screech of the frog is arguably more discordant than the smooth, low hum of the motor vehicle. But the frog, of course, is natural, whereas the car is an emblem of modern technology apparently out of keeping with the natural environment. That the car is 'ornately painted' and a 'low rider' model compounds the sense of urban, consumer culture as decadent and superficial.

The next two tracks contrast the intrusive sound of the low-rider car with the sounds of bicycles, presented in a positive light as a small-scale, 'convivial' technology, in Ivan Illich's sense (Illich 1973). Dunn values the sounds of the bicycle, 'delicate and almost fragile', more highly than those of 'other human mechanical technologies', to the point where he can cease to think of it as a machine (Dunn 1999a: 81). While Dunn's advocacy of small-scale, 'green' technologies may be admirable, his argument also includes the more questionable assumption that machines that make what to him are aesthetically displeasing sounds are bad machines. This is further suggested by the next track, which is placed in the sequence to contrast sharply with the benign urban spaces of the previous two tracks. In 'Santa Monica Pier Arcade and Street Sounds', Dunn confronts the sounds of modernity head-on. He writes:

In contrast to the sonic tapestries of the nonhuman world, this free-for-all of video games, pinball machines, and street commotion sounds as if hardly any component is listening to another. What emerges from this uniquely human aggregate of noise-making are sonic patterns of disintegrated mind that seem peculiar to our species. What an odd contradiction that so much intelligence, in the form of people and technology, is harnessed to produce a soundscape that is so without apparent integration. However, despite the negative sentiments that I'm expressing, I must admit that I made this recording because of the pure exhilaration that these sounds evoke.

(Dunn 1999a: 82)

Dunn's attitude to modernity is ambivalent. On the one hand, he associates the sounds of this particular urban space with a fall into the chaotic and meretricious values of capitalist culture. Indeed, he fades the track just after a woman's voice can be heard asking, 'How much are these?' followed by a snippet of popular music. The recording thus teaches the listener a deep ecological lesson on the disharmonies of a commercially debased modernity. However, Dunn's closing remark contradicts this response, as he admits to taking pleasure in the 'pure exhilaration' of the discordant sounds of Santa Monica.

In the history of twentieth-century music, the use of machine sounds for their exhilarating timbres and rhythms can be seen in modernist composers as diverse as Luigi Russolo, George Antheil, Edgard Varèse and Pierre Schaefer. Although Dunn admits to finding such sounds exhilarating, he

nevertheless distances himself from these modernist celebrations of the machine. His position thus contrasts sharply with that of John Cage, who wrote that he had ‘never heard a sound that made me think of decadence or putrefaction!’ (Cage 1981: 232). Ultimately, Dunn’s concern for the ecological repercussions of industrialism makes it difficult for him to evaluate the sounds of Santa Monica as anything other than ‘disintegrative’.

Significantly, *Why Do Whales and Children Sing?* ends with a return to the comparatively low-tech environment of rural Zimbabwe, the site of practices that are for Dunn more harmonious and ecologically sound (in both senses of the word) than those found in Santa Monica, California. The final track of the album, ‘Besa Village, Zimbabwe: Children Singing’ includes music for the first time, in the form of children singing to the accompaniment of thumb pianos. ‘Their joy is both individual and collective,’ writes Dunn, ‘a joy that emanates from the soil that they cultivate, the air they breathe, and the voices of other life that surrounds them.’ By introducing music at the very end of the disc, Dunn suggests that it is an evolutionary development from the sounds of non-human nature heard previously, thereby reaffirming his belief that music, in this case the traditional folk music of Zimbabwe, can be a means of expressing the integration of human beings with nature. However, the perils of Romanticization are again present in his association of African children with the ‘joy that emanates from the soil’.

Dunn’s soundscape recordings can be listened to as pure sound, a continuation of the project begun by *musique concrète* of exploring new, interesting and pleasurable timbres, and expanding the range of sounds that can be considered music. Yet the social dimension of his work adds to its interest. Soundscape recordings are a simulation of nature that artificially isolate a single sense. Dunn’s sonic art shows that this act of decontextualization can be artistically productive, working as what Marshall McLuhan called a ‘counterenvironment’ to defamiliarize our habitual, mainly visual, ways of perceiving the world. As McLuhan put it, the ‘counterenvironments created by the artist serve to raise these hidden environments to the level of conscious appreciation’ (McLuhan 1971: 77). In *Noise*, Jacques Attali describes Brueghel’s painting *Carnival’s Quarrel With Lent* as a record of ‘natural noises’ that have ‘virtually disappeared from our everyday life’. The painting, he writes, is an ‘archaeology of resonances but also of marginalities . . .’ (Attali 1985: 22). In a world in which many animal species are being violently silenced by the encroachments of modern development, phonographers and soundscape artists such as David Dunn are rescuing such sonic marginalities and bringing them to their listeners’ attention.

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