ARTICLE

The Soundscape of Nothing: Raven Chacon's Silence Against Settler Colonialism

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Orientation

In 2022 the Diné (Navajo Nation) composer Raven Chacon received the Pulitzer Prize for *Voiceless Mass* (2021), a triumphant synthesis of Chacon's decades-long project of unsettling listeners through dramatic uses of silence and noise. Throughout his career as an experimental musician, composer, sound artist and activist, Chacon has used the surprising juxtaposition of these two sonic extremes to command listeners attention that they might attend to the historical conditions that constitute our world. A radical conceptualist and student of modern music, many of his works respond to and challenge the unavoidable legacy of John Cage whose use of graphic notation, aleatory processes, and readymade soundscapes likewise had invited audiences to listen otherwise.[1] Both an impish provocateur and austerely serious, Cage staged quotidian noise as concert music such that his audience might hear a soundworld in which melody and harmony were only one organized part among a multitude. With characteristic matter-of-factness Chacon describes his compositions as "some action lining up with another action," a Cageian phrase if there ever was one.[2] These encounters with

1 The literature by and about Cage is extensive. Works that contributed to this essay include: John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1961); James Pritchett, *The Music of John Cage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Kyle Gann, *No Such Thing as Silence: John Cage's 4′33″* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010); Benjamin Piekut, *Experimentalism Otherwise: The New York Avant-Garde and Its Limits* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Rob Haskins, *John Cage* (London: Reaktion Books, 2012).

2 "An Instrument That Had No History: Raven Chacon in Conversation with Pablo José Ramírez," *Mousse Magazine*, June 4, 2024, https://www.moussemagazine.it/magazine/raven-chacon-pablo-jose-ramirez-2024/.

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noise would go on to inspire extreme experiments in concrete music and free improvisation that in time would coalesce into the American noise music underground that also shaped Chacon's musical sensibility.[3] Chacon's work demands something more than the aesthetic reorientation applied to Cage's interventions, something other than the metaphysical anarchy of hearing the everyday as musical, or the rejection of music itself. Chacon's project restructures our ontological presuppositions. In his work we hear ghosts, winds, birds, the land speaking for itself, and the movement of these sounds in time. Listening through Chacon's work invites us to be in relation to a world that is animated and alive with a chorus of voices that are treated as unintelligible noise yet constitute a continual cosmological whole.

In the pages that follow I contextualize Chacon's work with silence and noise as an ongoing critique of settler colonialism. He accomplishes this task by challenging the systems of non-relational listening and musicking that have structured the contemporary artistic worlds in which he works.[4] His work challenges inherited European traditions of depicting the landscape as a place devoid of inhabitation, emptied of human and other-than-human life, lying in wait of proper use, or else for preservation to protect from prior improper use. These traditions are shaped by a *terra nullian ontology* that is legible in the Western cultural traditions of landscape painting and land art, as well the development of the soundscape as a compositional and documentary sonic object. Even as these practices aspire at times to being a tool of ecological defense, such modes of representing the land depend on orienting itself to the world through a settler relation. Chacon's contribution then is not merely to represent Diné, Native American, or Indigenous concerns in contemporary art and music, but to reorient his audiences towards ways of relating that are rooted in the knowledge and practices of those identities. This generous invitation to inhabit the world differently necessitates truth-telling and conscious listening in order to reconcile with the past, alive as it is in the present.

My own personal encounter with Chacon's work originated in our mutual participation in the loose networks of mostly American musicians who performed noise and other experimental genres in obscure venues such as Il Corral in West Hollywood where Chacon worked as a door person shortly after graduating from the California Institute of Arts. He had studied

3 Paul Hegarty, *Noise/Music: A History* (New York: Continuum, 2007).

4 Lawrence English, "Relational Listening: A Politics of Perception," *Contemporary Music Review* 36, no. 3 (2017): 127–42.

there with James Tenney whose connections to John Cage and the post-War American musical avant garde directed Chacon towards compositional work comprised of graphic notations and instructional scores. This mix of both vernacular and academic approaches to experimental sound work continues to shape the diverse modes of presentation and performance that we hear in Chacon's work today. It was more than a decade after crossing paths in the demimonde of the Los Angeles noise scene that I discovered Chacon's burgeoning body of conceptual compositions. I invited him to exhibit works that included *Field Recordings* (1999) and *American Ledger No. 1* (2018) as part of *Landscape & Life*, an exhibition and performance series I curated at Indexical in Santa Cruz, California in 2023.[5] A year later Chacon returned to Santa Cruz to perform *Voiceless Mass* at a Peace United Church of Christ, and it was there as an audience member that I first experienced the piece.[6] Collectively these works weave together different avant modernisms, including high and low strata of experimental music, in ways that also make uniquely audible Diné cultural knowledge.

Chacon's intervention into Western avant garde traditions, and in particular the noise/silence binary that since John Cage has come to define an outer limit for sonic arts, demands recognition of a multiplicity of relations to listening. In his 2020 monograph, *Hungry Listening*, *xwélmexw* (Stó:lō/Skwah) scholar Dylan Robinson invites his readers to examine their critical listening positionality through "a self-reflexive questioning of how race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, and cultural background intersect and influence the way we are able to hear sound, music, and the world around us".[7] This certainly speaks to distinctions between Indigenous relations to sound and settler habits of listening but, as Diné musician and scholar Renata Yazzie reminds us, the Dinetah perspective is itself distinct from other Indigenous positionalities, including Robinson's, despite shared experiences and world views.[8] Which is to say that there is a perspective audible in works such as *Field Recording* or *Voiceless Mass* which doesn't necessarily

5 *Landscape & Life: Raven Chacon*, curated by Gabriel Saloman Mindel, Indexical, Santa Cruz, USA, January 28, 2023–March 13, 2023, https://www.indexical.org/exhibitions/landscape-life-raven-chacon (accessed November 13, 2025).

6 *Voiceless Mass*, music by Raven Chacon, conducted by Michael McGushin, Peace United Church of Christ, Santa Cruz, CA, March 11, 2023.

7 Dylan Robinson, *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 10.

8 Renata Yazzie, "Review of Dylan Robinson, *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies*," *MUSICultures* 48 (February 2022): 396–9.

preclude understanding for settler listeners but that none-the-less exceeds that understanding. In these ways Chacon's work's own internal multi-perspectivism, drawing as it does from heavy metal, noise music, Western avant garde classical music, and traditional forms of Native American music cultures, creates both access and resistance to understanding. As the child of European Jewish immigrants, my own familiarity with Chacon's influences reach their limit as I encounter what Dena'ina musicologist Jessica Bissett Perea calls "the density of Indigeneity," the deep mixture of references to "aural and visual tropes of place (rural/urban), time (ancient/modern), genre (Native/non-Native), technology (manual/mechanized), and belonging (tribal or national/intertribal or transnational)."[9] In effect, there is a conceptual and epistemological opacity given to my status as non-Diné that in many ways this article attempts to navigate but not avoid.

My own family came to the United States as diasporic refugees, first in the late 19th century and then again following the end of World War II. My ancestors and relatives have something in common with those same European Jews who are so overrepresented in the European and North American Avant Garde as practitioners and critics. Arguably this familiarity has overdetermined my intellectual and artistic interests, contributing to a long period of relative ignorance to the ways I, my ancestors, and our cultures have participated in settler erasures and extracting material benefit from colonialism, especially as American Jews gained contingent access to structural whiteness in the latter half of the twentieth century. My turn to Indigenous art and theory is a response to personal ethical obligations as a scholar and artist arising from my position within the settler/Indigenous binary.[10] At the same time, my work as an activist alongside and in solidarity with various Indigenous communities—in particular səl̓ilwətaʔɬ təməxʷ (Tsleil-Waututh), Amah Mutsun, and Kānaka Maoli land defenders—has taught me new sensibilities and modes of thought that in turn have shaped my ways of engaging with art, music and critical scholarship.[11]

9 Jessica Bissett Perea, *Sound Relations: Native Ways of Doing Music History in Alaska* (Oxford University Press, 2021), 4.

10 I want to be clear that I consider this to be a structural and historically constituted binary that produces ethical obligations, but not an absolute, immutable, or uncomplicated relationship or set of identities.

11 To the extent possible I have tried conforming my use of Indigenous language, place names, names of people, and First Nations to contemporary norms. Preferences vary significantly among different Indigenous groups such that a word or term considered inappropriate in one context (for example "Indian" or "Band") is the preferred language in another (for

What follows is an attempt to listen otherwise with Raven Chacon by listening to Raven Chacon and the lands invoked through his work. I position his work in relation to Western modernism's varied approaches to listening to the environment as a sonic field, an artistic tradition that Chacon is both indebted to and deeply critical of.[12] I pay particular attention to John Cage's four minutes and thirty-three seconds of composed silence, a paradigmatic work of ecological sound art and twentieth-century conceptualism. In many interpretations of Cage's silence, and in ecological approaches to sound broadly, silence is a stand-in for the same *terra nullian* nothingness that haunts landscape painting. It is the sound of a world without people. Cage's silence, though unquestionably conditioned by Anglo-settler sensibilities, was intended to be a spiritual experience of transcendence, influenced by the metaphysics and phenomenological poetics of Thoreau's libertarianism, Japanese and Chinese philosophy, and friend Robert Rauchenberg's notorious all-white paintings. The nothingness described by these sources was not an evacuated emptiness but the experience of absolute immersion in being.[13] Such non-alienated presence sought a relief from the impositions of the material world on the spirit, a line of flight out of the catastrophes and suffering of existence in a man-made world. Chacon's work veers from such a pursuit by directly confronting the material histories that constitute such conditions of struggle and mourning.

In the pages that follow I endeavor to place Chacon's work within those material histories and cultural conditions that his compositions and artworks trouble and unsettle. I begin with considerations of how the Western

example, the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band who publicly identify as California Indians). I have tried to adjust my usage according to the specificity of who, where, and in what context I am speaking of. To this end I have relied on sources drawn from the specific Indigenous places and peoples I refer to, including Indigenous scholarship, the webpages of tribal governing bodies, the crowdsourced *Native Lands* app, as well as my own personal relationships. I have also referred to Opaskwayak Cree scholar Gregory Younging's *Elements of Indigenous Style: A Guide for Writing By and About Indigenous Peoples*, 2nd ed., ed. Warren Cariou (Edmonton: Brush Education, 2025).

12 Esi Eshun, "On Land," *The Wire* 494, April 2025, 40–5.

13 "They are large white (I white as I GOD) canvases organized and selected with the experience of time and presented with the innocence of a virgin. Dealing with the suspense, excitement, and body of an organic silence, the restriction and freedom of absence, *the plastic fullness of nothing*, the point a circle begins and ends." Robert Raucheenberg quoted in Gann, *No Such Thing as Silence*, 157. See also Karen Barad, "What is the Measure of Nothingness: Infinity, Virtuality, Justice," in *100 Notes – 100 Thoughts* (Berlin: dOCUMENTA 13–Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2012).

tradition of landscape painting produces and is produced by a *terra nullian* imaginary that is inextricable from a settler colonial framework for relating to land. I discuss the ways that phonography, sound art, and acoustic ecology emerge from within this same framework, and how silence as a cultural concept plays a role in reproducing these conditions. This conception of silence within sonic arts and ecology has its own history of which John Cage has played an outsized role, though often through misapprehending the purpose of his famous work of silent listening, *4′33″* (1952). I then turn my attention to the enduring role of deep listening and silence in the oeuvre of Raven Chacon, at first focusing on earlier works that explicitly are in dialog with Cage and the concepts of acoustic ecology, all of which trouble fundamental assumptions of who is listening and to what end. I follow with a detailed study of *Voiceless Mass*, a work that is not itself silent but forcefully addresses fundamental questions of who is made silent and how silence and listening, voice, and ceremony are all contingent on historical justice and injustice. Finally, I discuss another phonographic work by Chacon, *Silent Choir* (2017) which emerged out of the #NoDAPL movement and the unprecedented gathering of water protectors at Standing Rock, events which preceded and directly influenced the creation of *Voiceless Mass*. Throughout this study I am seeking to be in dialog with the poetic and political implications of Chacon's work, the insistence that listening to music and to the land are acts of relation that we cannot extract ourselves from, that there is never nothing there, that silence is noisy, and that our long histories of unresolved violence and ongoing acts of survival are emergent in the soundworlds that surround us.

Ways of Listening

The landscapes depicted in the great North American paintings of the nineteenth century are pictures of a *terra nullius* imaginary.[14] This is true of the romantic pastoralism of the Hudson River School, in the operatic vistas of painters like Thomas Moran and Albert Bierstadt, even in the lonely isola-

14 "Derived from Latin, [*terra nullius*] literally means 'land that belongs to no one'. The term comes from the *Papal Bull Terra Nullius* issued by Pope Urban II in 1095, at the beginning of the Crusades. The *Bull* allowed Europeans' princes and kings to 'discover' or claim any land occupied by non-Christian peoples in any part of the then known and to-be-known world. […] This *Bull* led to what came to be known as the *Doctrine of Discovery*." Pramod K. Nayar, "*Terra nullius*," in *The Postcolonial Dictionary* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 153.

tion of the Group of Seven's modern invention of Canadianism. With rare exception these paintings depict vast depopulated expanses of wild earth, water, and weather, exemplars of "the dominant cultural project of Euro-North Americans [that would] articulate itself aesthetico-theologically in terms of the emptying of the wilderness."[15] These paintings capture *a world without people*—a people whose labors had helped to shape that landscape, a people who had to be removed to make that landscape empty, and a people who now stand behind the vanishing point of the picture plane. In this way these paintings also depict *a world without history*—a world whose transformations are obscured by the painting, whose attendant violence is literally painted over.

What's more, despite their apparent content these paintings portray *a world without life*—the animacy, dynamism, agency, and fecundity of the land flattened, abstracted, objectified, and made alienable by the very means of its depiction. Through these paintings, all the world before the settler is a property waiting to be claimed. This is the strange antinomy of what gets called "landscape" and "life" in a world shaped by liberalism's transformation of things held in common into property appropriate to the possessive individualism that would come to define American values.[16] Landscape painting, as W. J. T. Mitchell reminds us, is a doubled representation, not only a picture of what the artist sees but also how they see. "The landscape is itself a physical and multisensory medium … in which cultural meanings and values are encoded."[17] An idea about land inscribes itself into landscape painting even as these artworks inscribe an idea about land into the mind of those who encounter them. Thus prior to the removal of people, of history, and a deeper conceptualization of vitality from the painting of landscape, a *terra nullian* ontology has already removed these very things from the artist's perception of the land itself.

This critique of nineteenth century landscape painting developed out of a burgeoning examination of visuality that would become institutionalized as *visual studies*, a field whose aspirations include an interdisciplinary revision of naturalized assumptions about what and how we see. To look upon a landscape could no longer be a neutral act but instead needed to be

15 Jonathan Bordo, "Picture and Witness at the Site of Wilderness," *Critical Inquiry* 26, no. 2 (Winter, 2000): 246.

16 C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962).

17 W. J. T. Mitchell, "Imperial Landscapes," *Landscape and Power*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 14.

understood as mediated by colonialism, capitalism, and imperialism.[18] It was argued that visuality itself represented a modernist transformation in perception connected to the development of rational humanism, one characterized by masculinist and white supremacist values that designate who has "the right to look."[19] Depictions of landscape came to represent a "way of seeing" that privileged an identification with ownership, mastery, and a singular epistemic subject position, an approach to painting from and for the perspective of one who could imagine themselves holding these privileges.[20] This subject was someone who could imagine himself as distinct from the world, individuated from the entanglements of human sociality and the deeper matrices of ecological systems. This severing of the self and the world is intrinsic to landscape as an idea and as a mode of representation: to see a landscape, to picture a landscape, is to be outside it. The museum display case, the zoo cage, the safari boat, and the botanical garden are among a coterie of spatial technologies that emerged in the age of Imperialism as a means by which some could exercise their right to look upon things. Our contemporary practice of looking has only become more alienated, exponentially overdetermined by technologies that enclose our phenomenological capacities, disciplined through architectures of observation that reinforce categories of non-relationality.[21] Our smartphones and the promises of AI, AR, VR, and the Metaverse hardly suggest a return to a more holistic sensorium.

Even as late-twentieth-century critics interrogated the limits and capacities of seeing, other sense abilities were lauded as a means of intervening in the problems assumed to be fundamental to vision. In strong contrast to the alleged distance of sight, other senses, hearing in particular, were valorized as an immediate and immersive form of being in the world.[22] Such essen-

18 See Svetlana Albers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

19 Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); Simone Brown, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

20 John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 1972).

21 Jonathan Crary, *Scorched Earth: Beyond the Digital Age to a Post-Capitalist World* (New York: Verso, 2022).

22 Don Ihde, *Listening and Voice: Phenomenologies of Sound*, 2nd ed. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007); Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literature: The Technologizing of*

tialist oppositions merely obscure our sensorial affordances. As enumerated in Jonathan Sterne's "audiovisual litany," hearing's alleged subjectivity is often juxtaposed with vision's alleged objectivity, hearing's activation of affect with vision's activation of intellect, and hearing's capacity to immerse us in the world with vision's tendency to remove us from it.[23] Yet as Sterne points out, there is nothing given to listening, or for that matter looking, that adheres to a normative or universal explanation of its psychic, emotional, or embodied character. Such allegedly sense-specific features are instead filters through which we assess our epistemological possibilities and justify those limits that we place upon them. So, while it is easy to condemn visuality for its practices of *intromission*, of capturing whatever it can surveil, this critique no less applies to audio-veillance or other acts of listening that can be every bit as extractive, possessive, and complicit in the reproduction of existing structures of power as any mode of visual observation.

It should be no surprise then that even as acts of looking and making visible have contributed to the production of settler colonialism, so too have acts of listening and making audible. Veit Erlmann describes an "ethnographic ear" that listens, records, transcribes, and imitates the colonized subject's soundworld as an example of auditory complicity. Such ethnographic ways of listening and recording were often an attempt to preserve, understand, document, archive, or transduce sounds, songs and voices that might otherwise be lost to the same colonial forces of which they were a part.[24] Such directed and specialized audile techniques couldn't help but enact a system of non-relational listening that is endemic to settler–Indigenous relations. Dylan Robinson describes this phenomenon in the Halq'eméylem language as *shxwelítemelh xwélalà*:m, roughly translated into the phrase "hungry listening."[25] A compound concept, *shxwelítemelh* refers to "a settler's starving orientation," while *xwélalà*:m refers to an Indigenous-specific mode of sensory perception. This phrase is a paradox, conjoining two ontologically distinct ways of hearing the world. Hungry listening is a disorientating suspended space of relation, a phenomenological effect produced and reproduced by settler colonialism that does not resolve and instead remains

the Word, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2002).

23 Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 16.

24 Veit Erlmann, "But What of the Ethnographic Ear? Anthropology, Sound, and the Senses," in *Hearing Cultures: Essays on Sound, Listening, and Modernity*, ed. Veit Erlmann (Oxford: Berg, 2004), 1–20.

25 Robinson, *Hungry Listening*, 3.

persistently unstable.[26] Such irresolution offers an opening for something else to emerge, a different orientation to the world, but for that otherwise way of relating to landscape and life to take hold the listening subject must first be unsettled. If the recursive act of looking, painting, and relating to land through the medium of landscape painting justified and strengthened a *terra nullian* ontology, the same has been true of listening, recording, and producing the phonographic depictions of the world we call field recordings. It's for these reasons that modern ways of seeing and hearing must both be problematized, troubled by a critique of orientation.

Pursuing Silence

If, as Robinson suggests, ethically listening as part of forming a broader ecological relationality is nothing new for Indigenous cultures, in the modern Anglophone world a comparable attention to the ecosocial dimension of sound is relatively recent. While a nascent modern environmental consciousness first became legible in nineteenth century American transcendentalism, it was made audible through the import of romantic and impressionistic movements in European classical music. Composers such as Claude Debussy, Bedřich Smetana, Antonín Dvořák, and Jean Sibelius forged connections between landscape and music, though often as an expression of nationalistic rather than ecological priorities.[27] It wasn't until the mid-twentieth century that the influence of Margaret Fuller, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Thoreau, and the like found its musical equivalent in the techniques of American composer John Cage. His work had an immeasurable effect on Anglo traditions of music making, opening the way for stochastic processes of composition meant to be akin to a natural process, and nominating noise—nonrhythmic, dissonant, and polymorphous—as its own genre of musicking. Yet Cage's most profound contribution to modern music was centering listening in the work of composer and audience. Cage conjoined the concert hall and the open field into a "complex of overlapping musical and extra-musical elements, traces and influences."[28] In

26 Sarah Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

27 George Revill, "Landscape, Music and the Cartography of Sound" *The Routledge Companion to Landscape Studies*, ed. Peter Howard, Ian Thompson, and Emma Watson (London: Routledge, 2013), 231–40.

28 Revill, 235.

doing so Cage pushed the listener out of their position of rational distance and into the role of participant, self-consciously entangled in the sonic and social phenomena around them.

Cage's work inspired an explicitly ecological turn in compositional practices, exemplified by the acoustic ecology of Canadian composer R. Murray Schafer. As co-founder of the *World Soundscape Project*, Schafer attempted to record the world as humans apprehended it, both preserving and archiving sounds of environments that were in the process of transforming and perhaps disappearing. Schafer appropriated a vocabulary from visual culture to describe auditory phenomena in the terms of landscape, including "soundmarks" and, most famously, "soundscapes," this latter in direct parallel to its painterly equivalent.[29] Schafer even attributes a figure-ground relationship to the audible world, denoting the former as "signals" and the latter as an environment's "keynote." Schafer has rightly been criticized for his Eurocentric biases and racial blindspots (including his appropriative approach to the music of Native North Americans), yet his commitments to listening to the world, and by doing so championing the sonic environment as a space of contestation and one worthy of conservation, opened up one possible pathway towards transforming settler relations to space.[30] The practice of "acoustic ecology" inspired by his work has been used by environmentalist tactically for designating sites as worthy of protection, intervening in destructive military and industrial acoustic practices, even supporting the defense of sovereign Indigenous claims.[31] Broadly speaking, attention to the soundscape as an aesthetic practice has facilitated ways of

29 R. Murray Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (Rochester: Destiny Books, 1994); Mitchell Akiyama, "Transparent Listening: Soundscape Composition's Objects of Study," *Revue d'art canadienne/Canadian Art Review* 35, no. 1, (2010): 54–62.

30 For critiques of Schafer see Mitchell Akiyama, "Unsettling the World Soundscape Project: Soundscapes of Canada and the Politics of Self-Recognition," *Sounding Out!*, August 20, 2015, https://soundstudiesblog.com/2015/08/20/unsettling-the-world-soundscape-project-soundscapes-of-canada-and-the-politics-of-self-recognition/; Robinson, *Hungry Listening*, 1–5,155–6.

31 Sonic geographer Max Ritts collaborated with Indigenous youth in Gitga'at territory around Hartley Bay to document their traditional territories through phonography as a defense against regional resource extraction: see Ritts, *A Resonant Ecology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2024); Shayne Morrow, "Soundscape Recorded in Marine Territory Threatened by Tanker Traffic," *Windspeaker* 34, no. 5 (2016), archive accessed October 1, 2025, at https://ammsa.com/publications/windspeaker/soundscape-recorded-marine-territory-threatened-tanker-traffic.

listening that reorient listeners alienated from the world towards a cultivated sensitivity and awareness.[32] Through intentional listening practices and experiments in composition, artists have followed sound ecologists in pursuit of this phenomenology of presence, immersion, and integration into the multi-species web of life.

Perhaps owing to Cage's historical role in highlighting "non-musical sound," many contemporary artists use him as a starting point for their own investigations into the nature of sound and the sound of nature. Much of this work attempts to make audible a kind of emptiness, a soundscape of nothing misconstrued as an idealized silence. In the European Middle Ages the pursuit of silence was a retreat into an internal spiritual world, the cultivation of a quiet within, but in modern times it has become directed at systemic control of the external world, constructing and enforcing the quiet without.[33] This desire for a conditional quieting of external environments was synchronous with the tumultuous emergence of industrialization and urbanization. The modern pursuit of silence transformed the built environment and urban policing in service of bourgeoise desires to exclude the noise of the street, while simultaneously transforming rural land and wilderness areas into sanctuaries for those privileged few who owned property or who could escape the city for recreation.[34] These ideals of luxurious silence and solitude, on the one hand cultivated in English gardens and excursions into alpine wilderness, and on the other enforced by regimes of noise policing in the cities, were shipped from European metropoles to the settler colony.[35] In North America, the lands beyond the city and village were heard as a "howling wilderness," a vast torrent of weather, wolves and wild people who refused submission to the sovereignty of these visitors.[36] Reproducing silence required taming the wilderness, quieting the land and silencing the voices and drums of those who disrupted the peace of progress.

Today much of the Anglo-settler world has been transformed into a mirror of its European progenitor, the fields and woods emptied of inhabitation

32 Heidi Von Gunden, *The Music of Pauline Oliveros* (Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1983).

33 Alain Corbin, *A History of Silence: From the Renaissance to the Present Day* (New York: Polity Press, 2019).

34 Emily Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America, 1900–1933* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002).

35 Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (New York: Penguin Books, 2001).

36 Richard Cullen Rath, *How Early America Sounded* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003); William Cronin, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983).

in favor of densely paved cityscapes and suburban sprawl. Urban space is definitionally noisy, full of combustion engines and amplified transduction, while the wild has remarkably come to signify quiet. Of course, noise continues to be policed in the city, a constant companion of racialized gentrification and social control. Meanwhile the reach of the urban has spread across the globe as wild places are despoiled and wastelanded by extraction, churned on by industries that in turn fuel the trucks, chainsaws, airplanes, and motorboats that fill the soundscape.[37] Silence has become a luxury item, a vacation or wellness treatment, an expensive piece of real estate, a consumer product in the form of "orphic media" promising to block out the world that it has all conspired to create.[38] Placed in opposition to noise pollution, silence has been elevated to an environmental ethic, and yet its function is as a measure of both human control and possession of the natural environment. All of this suggests that the pursuit of silence expresses a desire for non-relation. This is why artistic and ecological projects that aestheticize silence so often misrecognize Cage's interventions as a call for the suppression of sounds in pursuit of sonic purity.

John Cage's association with silence is in large part due to his exhaustively referenced composition, *4′33″*.[39] The work consists of a musical score for any instrumentalist or combination of instrumentalists, divided into three movements lasting any duration of time, each marked by a roman numeral and the instruction *tacet* indicating that the performer does not play during that movement. In its original performance, the three movements lengths (33", 2′40", 1′20") were allegedly determined by use of the I Ching and tarot, and the performer of the piece, David Tudor, was instructed to soundlessly open and close the piano's fallboard at the start of each movement, never playing a note or intentionally making a sound for the duration.[40] I won't rehearse the more commonplace understandings of Cage's piece: the novelty of appropriating the world as a sonic readymade, the rhetorical insistence that the world is never silent, or that listening is always an act of co-composition. Instead, I want to draw our attention to what was

37 Traci Brynne Boyles, *Wastelanding: Legacies of Uranium Mining in Navajo Country* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

38 John Biguenet, *Silence* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015); Mac Hagood, *Hush: Media and Sonic Self-Control* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

39 Dieter Daniels and Inke Arns, ed., *Sounds Like Silence: John Cage, 4′33″. Silence Today: 1912, 1952, 2012* (Leipzig: Spector, 2012).

40 There is a good deal of ambiguity and discrepancy as to what the original or final version of the score would have been. See Gann, *No Such Thing as Silence*, 174–87.

being listened to at the first staging of the piece in Woodstock, New York in the late Summer of 1952 at the Maverick Music Hall.

We are more likely to experience or else imagine a performance of *4′33″* in a formal concert hall, self-conscious of the cacophony of breath, coughing, bodily shifts, and folding programs that we normally ignore. Yet Cage composed the piece in relation to a wholly different soundscape, a biophonic symphony that Canadian artist Paul Walde captures in his video *The Nature of Silence* (2012) by restaging *4′33″* in the same Maverick Music Hall on the 60th anniversary of its first performance.[41] In Walde's video, a stationary frame pictures an unattended grand piano enveloped in a dense sonic atmosphere of cicada, bird song, frogs, and other creaturely sounds. Walde's piece suggests that in its original context Cage's *4′33″* was less concerned with silence than with environmental sound, less concerned with acts of listening in a purely formal sense, and more concerned with the *affects* of listening in a broadly ecological sense.

Whereas classical European composition rends sound into an organized form that excludes whatever is unwanted, delimiting what can be heard as music, *4′33″* opens to the world as an animate sonic field full of compositional agencies. Much in the same way European painting traditions drew attention to a distinction between figure and ground, music in the same period attempted to distinguish between what ought to be listened to (as signal or "music") and what ought to be ignored (as noise). This latter abjected soundworld is what philosopher Michael Serres calls "the ground of perception," a "limitless, continuous, unending, unchanging" field of sound.[42] Serres' *Le bruit de fond* is similar to what Christoph Cox calls "the ceaseless *sonic flux*" the background noise out of which any meaningful signal must arise.[43] As Cox notes, "we tend to think of noise as something secondary or derivative … disruptive, disturbing an initial state of calm." Instead, he argues, noise is "a transcendental phenomenon, the condition of possibility for signal and music."[44] Given this, Cox says that *4′33″* "simply offers an auditory opening onto background noise, drawing attention to the sonic field ignored or concealed by everyday

41 Paul Walde, *The Nature of Silence* (2012), http://paulwalde.com/additional-works-and-projects/the-nature-of-silence/ (accessed November 16, 2025).

42 Michael Serres, *Genesis*, trans. Geneviève James and James Nielson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 7, 13.

43 Christoph Cox, *Sonic Flux: Sound, Art, and Metaphysics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 115.

44 Cox, 114–5.

hearing."[45] The first performance of *4′33″* then was drawing attention to the biophonic and geophonic field of upstate New York, Munsee Lenape territories, on a warm summer night in 1952. Rather than being reduced to the mere ground of audition in service of bohemian anthrophonic pleasures, Cages audience, as Walde's piece reveals, would have heard the dense sonic fields of living systems surrounding them as symphonies of inhuman noise.

In this interplay between sonic figures and ground, Cage uncovered a deep-rooted anxiety entrenched in America's settler colonial unconscious. The howling wilderness beyond the limits of the colony was deafening to early American settlers, evidence of the "untamed" nature of the *terra nullian* void outside their fortified settlements.[46] The domestication of the wild, its settling, was also its quieting. In practice this meant its devastation through harvesting, developing, and urbanizing a vast heterogenous landscape into grids of farmland, housing, and environmental sacrifice zones. Indigenous people were treated as a constituent part of this wilderness that howled, one more manifestation of the wild violence that needed to be subdued to manifest America's imperial project. As Patrick Wolfe bluntly puts it, the historical role of Indigenous people from the perspective of the European settler was "to disappear… to get out of the way, to be eliminated, in order that Europeans can bring in their subordinated, coerced labor, mix that labor with the soil, which is to say set it to work on the expropriated land and produce a surplus profit for the colonizer."[47] To the Anglo-American settler, a land which had not already been turned into spoils was *terra nullius*, an empty waste, and a people who refused to labor on that land for such purposes were not its actual inhabitants. Ignoring the obvious presence of established architecture and farming, and the perhaps more subtle transformation of the landscape through fire or hunting, these "non-inhabitants" were treated no differently than animals roaming the land, or else like trees to be hewn and cleared.[48] This is why silence cannot mean the same thing for the settler and the Indigneous person. As the settler world was made quiet, as millions of Indigenous people were killed by disease, war, and dislocation, the sounds that produced "indigenous spatialities" were likewise silenced.[49]

45 Cox, 123.

46 Rath, *How Early America Sounded*, 145.

47 J. Kēhaulani Kauanui and Patrick Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism Then and Now," *Politica & Società* 1, no. 2 (2012): 240.

48 Malcolm Ferdinand, *Decolonial Ecology: Thinking from the Caribbean World*, trans. Anthony Paul Smith, forward by Angela Davis (New York: Polity, 2022).

49 Natchee Blu Barnd, *Native Space: Geographic Strategies to Unsettle Settler Colonialism*

Nothing is Noisy

This historic silencing has not been complete. In fact, Indigenous life and cultural resurgence has become profoundly audible, from the circle drum demonstrations of Idle No More to the elevation of Indigenous leaders' voices in various governmental bodies.[50] Many contemporary Indigenous artists have explicitly embraced sound as a medium, including not only Chacon and his former collaborators in Postcommodity but also artists such as Suzanne Kite, Merrit Johnson, Tsēma Igharas, Geronimo Inutiq, Krista Belle Stewart, Jeneen Frei Njootli, Maria Hupfield, Jordan Bennet, Sonny Assau, and Rebecca Belmore.[51] Through their performances and soundworks many of these artists are engaging with landscape in ways that not only intervene in the primacy of modern European ways of seeing and listening, but also propose fundamentally different modes of relationship, what Candace Hopkins calls "listening otherwise," suggesting other possibilities of entanglement with the other-than-human world.[52] This is one available meaning behind Chacon's varied work on silence, perhaps made most explicit in his own ode to Cage, *Duet: for two musicians* (2000). Scored as a single page composition notated as a dynamically changing array of marked silences, it is performed by the two titular musicians in a silent interaction.[53] In his 1959 "Lecture on Nothing," Cage described this situation as a paradox:

What we re-quire is
silence ; but what silence requires
is that I go on talking .[54]

(Eugene: University of Oregon Press, 2017), 5–6.

50 Ken Coates, *#IdleNoMore and the Remaking of Canada* (Regina: University of Regina Press, 2015)

51 Many of these artists are featured in Jeffrey Gibson, ed., *An Indigenous Present* (New York: BIG NDN Press–DelMonico Books, 2023).

52 Candace Hopkins, "Heed the Call: A Score for Resistance," *Whitney Biennial 2022: Quiet as It's Kept*, exhibition catalog, ed. David Breslin, Adrienne Edwards, Gabriel Almeida Baroja, Margaret Kross, and Adam D Weinberg (New York: Whitney Museum of Art, 2022), 139.

53 Raven Chacon in conversation with Frank J. Oteri, "Raven Chacon: Fluidity of Sound," *SoundLives Episode 16*, New Music USA (June 29, 2022), https://newmusicusa.org/nmbx/raven-chacon-fluidity-of-sound/.

54 John Cage, "Lecture on Nothing," *Silence*, 109.

Chacon rejects this, insisting that even when not speaking we continue to be in dialog. In *Duet*, musically composed silence is not about withholding sound but rather about relating, being present in that relationship, and experiencing the world from in that condition.

In this piece and throughout Chacon's works exploring silence we are reminded that the true paradox of so-called silence is that it is conditioned on an already false assumption that nothingness exists. Cage also struggled to articulate this to his audiences, telling an audience in 1957 "try as we may to make a silence, we cannot" because producing silence requires the possibility of nothingness. "There is no such thing as an empty space or an empty time. There is always something to see, something to hear."[55] Yet in the wake of the long American project of dispossession that enfolded both Indigenous genocide and the mass abduction and enslavement of people from Africa, an ontological condition of nothingness has been imposed on the bodies of the decedents of these cataclysms. Black and Indigenous philosophers have labored to cut and recompose Aristotelian claims of *ex nihilo nihil fit*, that "nothing comes from nothing," as an unsettled and unfinished possibility. Fred Moten argues instead that "nothing will come from nothing" and it is in this spirit that *Duet* acts as a riposte to the *terra nullian* interpretation of silence as the soundscape of nothing.[56] To the contrary, it is a silence dense with intensities that must be felt, that require being present with silence. It is a reminder that, as Gertruid Stein once claimed, "nothing is noisy," that silence always returns to us as noise, and that this noisy silence will come from nothing.[57]

Perhaps Chacon's most emphatic assertion of this concept is heard in one of his earliest sound-based artworks, *Field Recordings* (1999). Chacon visited three sites within the Navajo Nation in the American southwest renowned for their visual beauty and stoic silence—Window Rock, Sandia Mountains, and Canyon De Chelly—and recorded whatever was there directly to DAT. He then re-recorded these sounds with their volume pushed to the absolute limit, "in the red" as Tricia Rose once called it, producing visceral effects of compression, distortion, and other sound events at extreme frequencies.[58] Chacon pairs appropriated images of these land-

55 John Cage, "Experimental Music," *Silence*, 8.

56 Fred Moten, *Black and Blur* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 152.

57 Gertrude Stein, *Selections*, ed. Joan Retallack (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 250.

58 Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994).

marks with shockingly abrasive recordings of their soundscapes. Instead of the quietude that these allegedly empty places are known for we hear harsh noise, a howling electronic wind, an evocation of the lands' lethal heat, rugged vitality, tectonic animacy and the bloody histories that predate their role as roadside vistas.[59] He draws out of the sonic flux a feral sound, indifferent to the 'civilizing' forces of the settler state whose roads, fences, and territorial designations attempt to erase the borders of the Navajo Nation even as they delineate spaces reserved for other use. The title of these works nod to the tradition of phonography practiced by twentieth century anthropologists, and to the archival methods of Schafer and the *World Soundscape Project*.[60] Rather than act to preserve a silence that is never truly there, Chacon's recordings transduce an altered perception of sonic reality, conveying intensities that are present but that may be inaudible to certain listeners.

It is possible that the powerful bursts of noise that project out of *Field Recordings* are meant to act as a heretical form of what Schafer called "ear cleansing." Schafer defined this practice as "exercises devised to help cleanse the ears," most important of which were "those that teach the listener to respect silence."[61] The harsh eruptions in Chacon's *Field Recordings* change our perception of silence, shocking us to attention in a way similar to the musically arranged rifle shot that constitutes Chacon's 2001 piece, *Report*. Composed for an ensemble of firearms, *Report*'s use of weapons as instruments demands we abdicate musical priorities like melody, tonality, even virtuosity, and listen otherwise to a suddenly altered soundscape. These shocking eruptions are followed by the long tail of the land's own reverberations, a kind of call and response reciprocation shaped by the land itself. In Dylan Robinson's poetic reading of this work, he writes,

59 "Harsh noise" is a genre of electronic music characterized by relatively undifferentiated amplified sound without melody or rhythm. See David Novak, *Japanoise: Music at the Edge of Circulation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013). Chacon was immersed in the Los Angeles experimental music community during his study at Cal Arts and continues to collaborate with noise musicians.

60 Brian Hochman, *Savage Preservation: The Ethnographic Origins of Modern Media Technology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014); David W. Samuels, Louise Meintjes, Ana Maria Ochoa, and Thomas Porcello, "Soundscapes: Toward a Sounded Anthropology," *The Annual Review of Anthropology* 39, no.1 (2010): 329–45; *The World Soundscape Project*, accessed November 18, 2025, https://www.sfu.ca/sonic-studio-webdav/WSP/index.html.

61 Schafer, *The Soundscape*, 208.

let's clear the air
listening to land is not a pristine act
that finds the quiet wild
not the breeze stirring leaves,
not the falling snow as your heart beats
not the clairaudience
that filters out all but buzzing insect and rustling reed
that filters sound, that is, from land.[62]

The rifle shot is a reminder that land, even wilderness, is never quiet.

Elsewhere in *Hungry Listening*, Robinson argues that our perception of land, indeed our listening capacities themselves, have been settled through colonial formations of our sensory engagement with the world. The consequence of this is the compartmentalization of sense perception into discrete externalities, organized and ruled by the *cogito*. "Listening regimes imposed and implemented 'fixed' listening strategies that are part of a larger reorientation toward western categorisations of single-sense engagement, as well as toward Western ontologies of music located in aesthetic appreciation. […] Unifying these listening practices is the 'civilizing' drive for selective attention that renders listening as a process of the ear rather than the body."[63] In the case of *Report*, noise is a disruptive force that unsettles listening, a sound out of place in a space we are conditioned to expect to be empty. The shock of this rupture could incite a rejection of the settler's *starving orientation*, inspiring them to "find ways to listen not driven by use, not by accumulative desire."[64] This possibility holds the potential of a remembering, a becoming whole, that might jump scales, from the individual body to the social in the broadest possible terms.

However ameliorative such encounters might be for some settler listeners, it may not be enough to unsettle the hungry listening habits of a people alienated from the places that they live but don't fully inhabit. According to geographer Natchee Blu Barnd, *inhabitation* describes "a frame used for establishing belonging or home, a relation to place." As a set of "spatially

62 Robinson, *Hungry Listening*, 107.

63 Robinson, 40–1. I find Robinson's removal of the ear from the body confusing but assume he is trying to make a claim that Western sense-perception itself isolates listening in the primary sense organ. I think it would be more helpful to distinguish embodied listening from the Cartesian claims for sense-perception as a practice of mental cognition that is somehow distinct from a body.

64 Robinson, 109.

defined and relational set of actions," it is both a condition produced by these actions and description of what it means to take these actions.[65] Inhabiting is the act of living in the world and *being* that world without distinction. For the inhabitant, there is no separation between figure and the ground, nor signal and noise. The *terra nullian* worldview is intrinsically a failure to recognize inhabitation, or for that matter to practice it, making it impossible for anyone possessing that view to enter into a properly inextricable relationship with land and life. The emptying of settler space, the act of making a place nothing as a precondition of possession, requires a foundational condition of non-relation. What is negated through this emptying is not only a historical and contemporaneous recognition of Indigenous inhabitation, but a consciousness of the possibilities for life within this relation.[66] What shape an Indigenous sovereignty might take in the future above and beyond "landback" and different forms of self-determination remains unknown, but could include forms of social organization, governance, and relationality that offer a way out of the terror of contemporary forms of ecocide, nationalism, carcerality, and alienation.[67] For this possible future to be actualized, it requires something more meaningful than relinquishment of property or privilege; it requires abolition of the *terra nullian* settler ontology itself.[68]

The Terrifying Audibility of Space

Voiceless Mass, Raven Chacon's roughly 18-minute-long composition for pipe organ and large ensemble, had been co-commissioned by Wisconsin Conference of the United Church of Christ, Plymouth Church UCC, and performed in 2021 as part of new music ensemble Present Music's annual Thanksgiving concert event in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.[69] The significance of

65 Barnd, *Native Space*, 5–6.

66 Jordan Abel, *Un/inhabited* (Vancouver: Talon Books, 2015).

67 The Red Nation, *The Red Deal: Indigenous Action to Save Our Planet* (New York: Common Notions, 2021).

68 Sylvia Wynter, "1492: A New World View," in *Race, Discourse, and the Origins of America: A New World View*, ed. Vera Lawrence Hyatt and Rex Nettleford (Washington, D.C.: The Smithsonian Institute, 1995), 5–57.

69 Javier C. Hernández, "The Pulitzer Prize Winner That Emerged Out of a Time of Quietness," *The New York Times*, May 9, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/09/arts/music/raven-chacon-pulitzer-prize-music.html.

that national holiday was not lost on the organizers, nor Chacon who was the first Native American composer to be invited.[70] Indigenous activists have long contested Thanksgiving's central myth of a providential dinner hosted by the Wampanoag offering invitation, friendship, and sustenance to the newly arrived British pilgrims. Schoolchildren in the United States receive through this story the notion that New England, and thus American colonization, was a product of the pilgrim's flight from religious persecution and that their presence was welcomed by the generous hospitality of local inhabitants. Students typically don't learn that this version of events is make believe, or why this moment of peace and fellowship should have heralded centuries of genocidal violence and dispossession. Plague introduced by Europeans had already killed most of the inhabitants of the Patuxet village that the Pilgrims would occupy, and after receiving material aid upon arrival from the original inhabitants those pious settlers reciprocated by robbing their homes, their graves, and their land.[71] The voices of Wampanoag descendants and their account of America's birth in blood and betrayal has continually been silenced by a nation that refuses to reckon with either its past or present relationship to colonialism.[72]

Chacon's work responds to this founding violence that gave shape to America, confronting directly the role that puritanical Christianity and Church institutions of other denominations have had in centuries of Indigenous suffering. Rather than through overt remonstration Chacon accomplishes this through a weaving of silence and noise, summoning the presence of those masses of human and non-human relations whose voices have been extinguished.[73] Again, Chacon articulates through certain absences the presence of history. As with earlier work on and about and with silence, *Voiceless Mass* counters the emptiness of the landscape, insists on the sen-

70 Jim Higgins, "Guest composer creates 'Voiceless Mass' for Present Music's Thanksgiving concert," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, November 18, 2021, https://www.jsonline.com/story/entertainment/arts/2021/11/18/raven-chacon-composed-voiceless-mass-present-musics-holiday-concert/8651526002/.

71 James W. Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* (New York: New Press, 1995).

72 Thomas Dresser, *The Wampanoag Tribe of Martha's Vineyard: Colonization to Recognition* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Press, 2011).

73 "My impulse is to turn down any Thanksgiving invitation, not because I'm anti-Thanksgiving but because that's the only time we get asked to do stuff." Raven Chacon quoted in Grayson Haver Currin, "Upending Expectations for Indigenous Music, Noisily," *The New York Times*, August 15, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/15/arts/music/indigenous-experimental-music.html.

sible presence of those who can't speak in their language or sing in a choir, but whose withheld voices wholly inhabit the interstices between frequencies, between the tectonic bass and high-pitched tones that comprise much of the music. Within a long body of work that challenges audiences to listen otherwise, this orchestration is perhaps his most effective demonstration of the potential of withheld sound as a compositional tool. That withholding is an act of resistance and a form of protest that also pushes our listening capacities to their limits.

With a church organ as its central feature, *Voiceless Mass* is required to be performed in venues that necessarily draw attention to the Church's complicated relation to Indigenous life.[74] Beginning with the very first Columbian voyage, conversion and coercion in the name of spiritual salvation structured the murderous antagonisms between European and Indigenous people. European explorers arrived believing in a God-given right to possess, kill, and enslave under a "doctrine of discovery" made explicit in the Papal Bull of 1493.[75] From an initial landfall in the Arawak and Taino lands of modern-day Cuba, the Spanish empire consumed territory in all directions north and south, including the traditional homelands of the Diné in what became New Spain and eventually the Southwestern United States. There the Catholic Church established missions that, failing in their efforts to convert Indigenous people to the Christian faith and European ways of living, transformed into concentration camps with forced labor and violent abuse.[76] Many years after the mission system of the Southwest had been established, and many miles away, the Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist was built in Milwaukee in the midst of violent military disputes between the region's American settlers and Indigenous Peoples, including the Ho-Chunk, Neshnabek/Bodwéwadmi and diverse Algonquian and Siouan-speaking people from the plains along Lake Michigan where this church now stands.[77] Here too the Church played a part in the cultural era-

74 Vine Deloria, *God Is Red: A Native View of Religion*, 3rd ed. (Golden: Fulcrum Publishing, 2003).

75 Robert J. Miller, "The International Law of Colonialism: Johnson v. M'Intosh and the Doctrine of Discovery Applied Worldwide," *Canopy Forum*, March 30, 2023, https://canopyforum.org/2023/03/30/the-international-law-of-colonialism-johnson-v-mintosh-and-the-doctrine-of-discovery-applied-worldwide/; Robert J. Miller, *Native America, Discovered and Conquered: Thomas Jefferson, Lewis and Clark, and Manifest Destiny* (Westport: Praeger, 2006).

76 Klara Kelley and Harris Francis, *A Diné History of Navajoland* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2019).

77 "Cathedral History," The Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist, https://www.stjohncathedral.org/index.php/history/.

sure of Native lifeways, silencing Native songs, Native languages, and the truth of Native history. It is within this broad and simultaneously specific historical and territorial context that *Voiceless Mass* was first staged.

As evident in video documentation, *Voiceless Mass* sees the musicians distributed throughout the vast central nave of the Cathedral, in among the columns and along the edges of the audience congregated in its center, creating an immersive and acousmatic effect.[78] A nearly subsonic drone is initiated by a piercing chime as the organist holds at length the lowest note on his instrument, a Nichols & Simpson apse organ built in 2005.[79] A complex interplay of acoustic instruments emerge introducing almost imperceptible tones of brass, woodwind, strings, and percussion gradually accumulating in density and harmonic complexity. Throughout, Chacon eschews traditional melodic development, instead focusing on timbre transformation and spectral manipulation, employing a harmonic language that is predominantly microtonal, with pitch centers constantly shifting and destabilizing. Instrumental voices emerge and recede from different corners of the room sounding out ethereal voices that merge into a singular collective sonic mass. Towards the composition's climax there is a perceptible shift in textural density, previously diffuse instrumental voices compressing into increasingly concentrated harmonic zones, emerging as an almost monolithic unity. By the work's conclusion, individual elements dissipate revealing their distinct acoustic complexities before falling into a near-silence, punctuated by a final thunderous mallet strike on a bass drum.

As its name suggests, *Voiceless Mass* is music haunted by the silence of its missing choir. The title invokes a congregation of persons whose capacity to speak has been robbed from them by historical violence. In particular, children stolen from Native families, taken to church-run boarding schools (or "residential schools" as they are called in Canada) where many died from abuse, and where those who survived could no longer speak their Native language with their families, or speak of the horrors of their experience in any language. Yet the implied silence of this absented choir is also conditioned by the inability of others to listen, the failures thus far of speaking truth and pursuing reconciliation. There is a paradox in Chacon's compo-

78 Raven Chacon, "Voiceless Mass," November 21st, 2021, premier at The Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist in Milwaukee, posted June 8, 2022, by Present Music, YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nctWwXbRvqM.

79 "Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist: Milwaukee, Wisconsin," Nichols & Simpson, Inc., https://www.nicholsandsimpson.com/stoplists/cathedral-of-st-john-milwaukee-wisconsin/ (accessed November 18, 2025).

sition, because this implied silence is made inaudible by the thick animate drones on either end of the human voice's audio spectrum, a density of noises borne upon the chthonic resonances of the lowest bass key on the church organ. The ghostly air surrounding these bass rumbles is threaded by highly constricted wind, string, and electronic instruments, a tapestry of atonal drones weaving at odd angles. The piece is colored throughout by percussion, from the high-pitched squeal of bowed cymbals soaring in a hallucinogenic flight over the groaning lower musical registers to the rumbling heartbeat of drums evoking distant ceremony, all of it punctuated by crystalline chime of bells. The composition directs our ears to the sounds missing from its vast frequency range, the terrifying audibility of empty space between different length soundwaves, the attending audience becoming attuned to the reverberant architecture's ricocheting tones. Listening to this emptiness one confronts what is missing—the singing community that gives the catholic mass its meaning.

This silent mass unfolds and enfolds countless others besides, a ghostly collective absence whose voices go unheard, unlistened to, muted in America. In this sense, the voicelessness of *Voiceless Mass* is a memorialization and a moment for reflection of the often-unheard experiences of Native people and their kin. It attempts to do so without ventriloquy, refusing to perform the ameliorative gesture of "giving voice to the voiceless."[80] Nor does its absence of voice denote a "moment of silence" in the sense that we have come to understand it as a quiet interruption in the noiseful everyday of our lives devoted to contemplation, remembrance and mourning. It is after all not a silent piece, and yet it does place a pause on its audience, a hiatus of sorts, in which the missing voices are contrasted against an imagined choral mass. In that pause, carried along rippling waves of subsonic beading tones and bird-flight droning atonalities, float the urgent implication of wordless speech. *Voiceless Mass* is a *parrhēsiastic* insistence, an attempt at paralingual truth-telling necessitated before reconciliation, much less justice, can be realized.[81]

80 As Chacon suggests, his intentions are quite the opposite: "In exploiting the architecture of the cathedral, *Voiceless Mass* considers the futility of giving voice to the voiceless, when ceding space is never an option for those in power." Hernández, "The Pulitzer Prize Winner That Emerged Out of a Time of Quietness."

81 Waziyatawin, *What Does Justice Looks Like?: The Struggle for Liberation in Dakota Homeland* (St. Paul: Living Justice Press, 2008); Michel Foucault, *"Discourse and Truth" and "Parrēsia"*, edited by Henri-Paul Fruchaud and Daniele Lorenzini, English edition by Nancy Luxon (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2019).

Restless Silence

Erupting in the wake of cascading urban revolts from Occupy to the post-Ferguson movement for Black lives, the 2015 standoff against the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) at the northeastern tip of the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation seemed to come out of nowhere and, to many Americans, be defending nowhere. The proposed oil and natural gas pipeline trespassed lands protected by the 1851 Treaty of Fort Laramie on its way to crossing beneath the Missouri River, the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation's source of drinking water, before connecting to an oil tank farm in Patoka, Illinois. In spite of active legal and political resistance from landowners, environmentalists, and Native communities, Energy Transfer Partners, the corporation responsible for the pipeline's construction, and various governmental bodies seemed determined to push the project through. At the confluence of the Cannonball and Missouri Rivers, 40 miles south of Bismark, North Dakota, the Sacred Stone Camp began in April of 2016 on family land stewarded by LaDonna Brave Bull Allard. This encampment became a beacon of resistance that would eventually call tens of thousands of self-described "water protectors" to the surrounding area, primarily tribal members from the region but also Indigenous people from across the globe alongside a notable number of settler allies. In the face of harsh winters and brutal police violence, the Standing Rock uprising succeeded in halting development of the pipeline for a year and continues to be a legal obstacle to its ongoing operation. Though the movement failed to stop the pipeline's construction, it succeeded in unifying Indigenous people in an unprecedented fashion and transformed popular understanding of Native people's lives in the U.S.[82]

The landscape across which the DAPL was being imposed had once been the recognized domain of a Lakota empire, Očhéthi Šakówiŋ, stretching from river valleys feeding the Missouri, across the great plains of the American west, to the giant lakes at its Western edge, its rolling grasslands and vast hilled expanses the profitable hunting grounds for dozens of Indigenous nations.[83] In the first half of the nineteenth century the Lakota experienced

82 Nick Estes, *Our History is the Future: Standing Rock Versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance* (New York: Verso, 2019); Jaskiran Dhillon and Nick Estes, eds., *Standing with Standing Rock: Voices from the #NoDAPL Movement* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019). Dina Gilio-Whitaker, *As Long as Grass Grows: The Indigenous Fight for Environmental Justice from Colonization to Standing Rock* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2019).

83 Though its political center drifted further west, Ho-chunk and Neshnabek/Bodwéwadmi lands were part of the greater reach of Očhéthi Šakówiŋ.

a technological breakthrough that accelerated their ascendancy, becoming a horse-riding people who could transform the nearly boundless biomass of grassland into fuel for movement. The U.S. empire struggled to make footholds in this enormous territory, whether through war or commerce, resigning itself for over a century to the slow march of settlement and treaty negotiation. Quietly, Americans from out East eroded the viability of the Lakota way of life through enclosure and cultural genocide, until a series of late nineteenth century wars forced land concessions and capitulation to U.S. governance. The Lakota had succeeded at keeping America's counter-sovereign claim at bay in part by virtue of the land itself and its hostility to the lifeways imported from Europe. The vast emptiness of the landscape, compounded by winters harsh enough to snap trees, made homesteading difficult, while Lakota raids did the rest. Yet that same emptiness was the very condition for life in that made Indigenous power possible.[84]

Today these vast regions of plains and river valley have become, like much of Native America, a zone of extraction. The Bakken oil fields in the Dakotas have (re)fueled a U.S. economy long past its 'sell-by' date, extending the lifespan of the nation's fossil fuel infrastructure even as it threatens to transform the globe into an uninhabitable world. Before the effects of the COVID 19 pandemic the U.S. was removing 1.5 million barrels of oil per day from these fields in total disregard for the environmental consequences of such production. Oil pipelines like the DAPL form a vast matrix of volatile liquids streaming across the continent, snaking their way from industrial wastelands as far flung as the northern Athabasca Tar Sands in Cree and Dene Treaty 8 territory to ports East, West, and South. Navajo Nation has likewise been a site of constant struggle against ecocide, its lands and waters spoiled by industries extracting uranium, coal, oil and gas. These sacrifice zones are wounds on the surface of the earth, vast territories where all life within them has become collateral damage for Empire's further expansion.[85]

84 Pekka Hämäläinen, *Lakota America: A New History of Indigenous Power* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019).

85 Ward Churchill, *Struggle for Land: Indigenous Resistance to Genocide, Ecocide and Expropriation in Contemporary North America* (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 1993); Judy Pasternak, *Yellow Dirt: An American Story of a Poisoned Land and a People Betrayed* (New York: Free Press, 2010); Andrew Nikiforuk, *Tar Sands: Dirty Oil and the Future of a Continent*, rev. ed. (Vancouver: Greystone Books, 2008); Matt Hern and Am Johal, *Global Warming and the Sweetness of Life: A Tar Sands Tale* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2018); Ryan Juskus, "Sacrifice Zones: A Genealogy and Analysis of an Environmental Justice Concept," *Environmental Humanities* 15, no. 1 (2023): 3–24.

Through the lens of corporatism and militarism the United States looks to the place where endless plains of grass once fueled the Lakota's expansion, as it does to the deserts, woodlands and rivers of Diné Bikéyah, and it sees nothing. It surveys these territories and judges them to be barren, empty and improperly used, a *terra nullius*. It then imposes this view through wastelanding, the lands now overrun by cattle, spotted with wind capturing turbines, submerged by lakes made from hydroelectric dams, and dug up for mineral wealth. The standoff that took place at Standing Rock was a refusal to concede to this fracturing of land and life, to acquiesce to dispossession and endless expropriation, to accede that this land is nowhere.

The shared conditions of sovereign struggle in defense of land and life are why tens of thousands of Indigenous people heeded the call and converged on Standing Rock. Raven Chacon was one of them and was witness to some of the most significant moments of confrontation between the movement and the state. He was present for a standoff on November 26th, 2016, when hundreds of water protectors congregated on Highway 1806 facing off corporate security and police. In a photo taken by Chacon at the scene one can see an array of heavily armed police and armored vehicles blocking access north, faced down by a crowd of unarmed, mostly seated protectors, banners flying above in the cold wind. As relayed by Candace Hopkins, the gathered crowd stood their ground in silence, in a pointed contradistinction to the sonic weaponry that the police forces had unleashed against the crowd the day before.[86] The police used noise for psychological effect—sirens, amplified commands, barking dogs, and the buzz of drones triggering unease and fear—but also to cause pain, targeting the crowd with their LRAD (Long Range Acoustic Device), a hyper-directional sound cannon that is among an array of "less-lethal" weapons sanctioned for use as crowd control.[87] Chacon documented the crowd's silent protest in a 12 minute field recording which he exhibited as *Silent Choir* (2021) during the 2022 Whitney Biennial. One hears Chacon's breath, the shuffle of his body, the adjustment of his hand on the recording device. Listening more deeply, one hears an extended moment of quiet interrupted by bodies crowded together,

86 Hopkins, "Heed the Call."

87 The LRAD can send a soundwave up to a mile. Its effects can range from mental distress to physical pain, even making targets' ears bleed. Wes Enzina, "I Witnessed Cops Using Tear Gas, Rubber Bullets, and Sound Cannons Against Anti-Pipeline Protestors," *Mother Jones*, October 31, 2016, https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2016/10/standing-rock-protests-pipeline-police-tasers-teargas/; James E. K. Parker, "Towards an Acoustic Jurisprudence: Law and the Long Range Acoustic Device," *Law, Culture and the Humanities* 14, no. 2 (2018): 202–18.

by the wind, and by the mechanical roar of combustion engines. An echo of his *Field Recordings* project detailed above, the audio in *Silent Choir* is dense with the pressure of historical time.

Silent Choir records a soundscape with no keynote, a document of an event notable because of what didn't happen, because of its voiceless intensity insisting that there is power in collective silence. The silence that Chacon evokes in his work is the disquiet of a people who refuse to not exist. There is an interrelation here, between this choir composed of bodies on a road in North Dakota, voicelessly singing their resistance to ongoing colonial enterprise, and the missing church singers absent from Cathedral of St. John in Milwaukee. The silent choir, like the voiceless mass, is a congregation whose song is audible without sounding, refusing to speak in the language of sorrow, redemption, or forgiveness as we might otherwise expect. *Voiceless Mass* followed in the wake of the Standing Rock camp's dismantling, in a period when water protectors and land defenders were dispersed from that site to struggle elsewhere, when a new silence took hold in the form of the global pandemic and the world-wide shutdowns that sought to eliminate its spread. For a people who had already experienced such catastrophic viral death, Covid was an unwelcome return, exponentially destructive in Indigenous communities already depleted of services and overwhelmed with deleterious health effects from pollutions, poor nutrition, and an epidemic of despair driven substance abuse.[88] Yet even in this moment of often unheard grief and loss, masses of voices rose up in a groundswell of resistance. The "mass" summoned by Chacon's work is thus also constituted by "the masses" manifest in what became a global uprising.

Their bodies vulnerable to state violence, their deaths ungrieveable, their homes and communities devalued, the *terra nullian* ontology of the settler state and racial capitalism seemed for a moment to be at its limit. That uprising that gave voice to the silenced, that demanded a different kind of listening from power, emerged from social classes that had been relegated to a status of nothingness and places that had been made nowhere. For these

88 Simon Romero, "Checkpoints, Curfews, Airlifts: Virus Rips Through Navajo Nation," *The New York Times*, April 9, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/09/us/coronavirus-navajo-nation.html; Mark Walker, "'A Devastating Blow': Virus Kills 81 Members of Native American Tribe," *The New York Times*, October 8, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/08/us/choctaw-indians-coronavirus.html; Farina King and Wade Davies, eds., *COVID-19 in Indian Country: Native American Memories and Experiences of the Pandemic* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024).

insurgents, silence wasn't a choice but a condition of power. This is the root of Chacon's departure from Cage, Schafer, Oliveros and other proponents of silence and the restorative act of deep listening. "Maybe we can't all be silent. Maybe silence means different things to different people." Instead of asking how to redistribute the privilege of an aesthetic silence, Chacon urges us to attend to the world as it is, asking "what it would mean to deep listen in a time of crisis, or emergency."[89] Perhaps it's no surprise that were we to listen to crisis we would hear the tumult of protest all around us. Such moments of insurgent noise, of tumult, are always there in the sonic flux, audible even in the restless silence, emerging from the unsettled landscape surrounding us. Thus, even in this too late stage of capital-driven climate crisis, of colonial wreckage, there is a collective constitution whose notional silence is a misapprehension.

89 Eshun, "On Land," 42.

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Abstract

Raven Chacon's 2022 Pulitzer Prize winning composition *Voiceless Mass* is only one of many works he has created to engage with cultural and political conceptions of silence. Far from denoting a lack of sound, silence in Chacon's work often is full of noise that requires different forms of listening. In what follows I argue that Chacon's use of silence is a direct challenge to the visual and sonic legacy of European landscape art and to a *terra nullian* ontology that perceives land as empty. In doing so Chacon's work aligns with a resurgence of Indigenous resistance to settler colonialism and its extractive logics that reached a climax with the resistance to pipeline construction at Standing Rock. By listening to Chacon's works that engage in silence we can hear a theory of relationship to the land that insists on its sacred fullness of life.

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