

October 2022

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Recommended Citation

Oliver, Catherine (2022) "Echoing Ecopoetics: Fantasy Literature's Background Sounds," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 41: No. 1, Article 5. Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol41/iss1/5>

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Echoing Eco-poetics: Fantasy Literature's Background Sounds

Abstract

Despite David Abram's fear that reading disrupts people's "attunement to environing nature," fantasy literature can vibrantly convey how to hear our environments as it describes characters attuning their ears to particular places. Garth Nix's *Old Kingdom* series (1995-2021) and Patrick Ness's *Chaos Walking* trilogy (2008-10) develop an echoing eco-poetics of place through both world-building and style. Their fantasy worlds emphasize that characters must relearn to listen in unfamiliar environments: adjusting their expectations and interpretations of background sounds, recognising significant silences, adapting to new ways of communicating, and seeking meaning in nonhuman sounds rather than dismissing them as noise. Their stylistic choices also draw attention to background sounds, enabling readers to hear certain environments along with the characters. Ness uses eye-catching visual strategies to mimic how we aurally orient ourselves in changing, contested places, while the aural movements of Nix's syntax express the characteristic sounds of particular places. Precisely by dis-locating readers and characters from familiar environments, fantasy novels may remind us how to hear them.

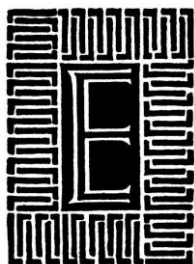
Additional Keywords

Hear; Sound; Listen; Poetics; Style; Ecocriticism; Place; Environment

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CHOING ECOPOETICS: FANTASY LITERATURE'S BACKGROUND SOUNDS

CATHERINE OLVER

INTRODUCTION: HEARING LOSS

THIS PLANET IS A NOISY PLACE. From vibrating molecules to earthquakes, from crackling krill to calling whales, from bats at dusk to the birds' dawn chorus, the world sings on many more frequencies than humans hear. The developing science of ecoacoustics tunes into these nonhuman sounds: it divulges how animals project their voices through the ambient sounds of their environments to speak with their own species and it discloses how species listen to others, like the migrating birds who orient themselves by frog-song (Farina & Gage, "The Duality of Sounds"). However, some humans are forgetting how to hear these voices. In *The Spell of the Sensuous*, the ecophenomenologist David Abram takes to task the technology of writing, believing that literacy is a key reason people in many contemporary societies have lost their "attunement to environing nature" (27). Transforming our embodied, multisensory experience of places into an interior mental phenomenon, reading redirects—or misdirects—our senses:

In learning to read we must break the spontaneous participation of our eyes and our ears in the surrounding terrain (where they had ceaselessly converged in the synaesthetic encounter with animals, plants, and streams) in order to recouple those senses upon the flat surface of the page. (131)

Although Abram's environmentally-motivated lament opposes the nineteenth- and twentieth-century belief that a society's transition from orality to literacy is 'progress,' it nevertheless reinforces the assumption that reading ruins habits of listening. Such an assumption, observes Leigh Eric Schmidt in "Hearing Loss," bolsters one of the dubious but influential metanarratives of modernity: "the eye's clear eclipse of the ear" (23). Schmidt condemns the white supremacist ideology shaping supposed oppositions between oral and literate cultures, and he critiques the shaky historical foundation of the claim that the eye has eclipsed the ear even in European and North American cultures.

This article's point of departure is Abram's concern that reading causes environmental hearing loss. However, directed by Abram's ecophenomenological interest in sensing our surroundings and Schmidt's scepticism about cultural hearing loss over *time*, I will focus on the loss and reattunement of hearing when people are in unfamiliar *places*—a sensory dislocation that fantasy literature is able to convey in vibrant detail. Although reading temporarily distracts readers from their immediate environments, both the worldbuilding and the formal techniques of Garth Nix's *Old Kingdom* series (1995–2021) and Patrick Ness's *Chaos Walking* trilogy (2008–10) emphasize that unfamiliar environments require relearning to listen.

Garth Nix's *Old Kingdom* is a magnificent high-fantasy realm of sword-wielding royals and magicians who fight destructive Free Magic creatures and grotesque revenants from Death, helped and hindered by a sarcastic cat and an enigmatic dog. The medieval-style kingdom borders to the north on wide plains inhabited by nomadic peoples and to the south on Ancesterland, which resembles 1930s England in its technology and social expectations. The *Old Kingdom* relies for its technology on spells written with magical Charter Marks but is plagued by necromancers wielding magical bells there and in the parallel realm of Death. The text's two magic systems establish tension around hearing, and ever-attentive listening is a vital skill for the protagonists who battle necromancers with their own special bells. Patrick Ness's trilogy creates tension around hearing because all characters can hear the "Noise" of men's and animals' thoughts. Although this telepathic Noise contains fragmentary images, it is mostly experienced as sound, and the need for skillful listening to overcome communication difficulties is a key theme in the toxic masculinity and colonialism of the frontier society Ness depicts. Spaceships of settlers arriving from Earth give the fantasy a science-fiction feel, supported by the suggestion that a "germ" causes Noise but a "cure" could be developed from local plants (*The Knife of Never Letting Go* 13, 138; *The Ask and the Answer* 27). However, the novels shift more to fantasy as part of their critique of colonial attitudes: the protagonists stop describing the magic in scientific terms and begin adapting to indigenous ways of perceiving. These well-known series for teens occupy different places in the fantasy genre, but both accentuate characters relearning to listen as they adapt to new places within their fantasy worlds.

The educational takeaway from these literary representations of environmentally attuned hearing is promising but debatable. In Garth Nix's *Abhorsen*, the teenage Lirael and her companions defeat an ancient evil by ringing the necromantic bells:

Together, the bells and Dog sang a song that was more than sound and power. It was the song of the earth, the moon, the stars, the sea and the sky, of Life and Death and all that was and would be. It was the song of the Charter, the song that had bound Orannis in the long ago, the song that sought to bind the Destroyer once again. (386)

The repeated “song” tries to convey the continuous music of the bells—but textual sound effects risk striking readers as disappointingly faint compared to the all-encompassing grandeur of the cosmic music described. No matter how many times the word repeats, readers cannot hear the cosmic song. Listening hopefully, academic readers may hear in Nix’s “song of the earth” an intertextual echo of Jonathan Bate’s belief that literature can combat “modern Western man’s alienation from nature” through an “ecopoetics” that reminds us how to dwell (Bate, *The Song of the Earth* ix, 282). On the other hand, those disappointed by the faintness of the cosmic music may recall Kate Rigby’s argument in “Earth, World, Text: On the (Im)possibility of Ecopoiesis” that the work of art is unable to convey nature’s spontaneous voices but saves the earth “precisely to the extent that it draws attention to its own status as text”: through formal qualities that alert us to the text as a constructed artefact, through moments of incoherence, and through explicit disavowals of sayability (437). In the passage above, intermedial tension between words and music highlights the artifice of the novel and the “song that was more than sound and power” might be a disavowal of sayability. Similarly, the “song of [...] the moon, the stars” alludes to the Pythagorean music of the spheres but modern readers know that outer space is a vacuum, so the movements of moons, stars, and planets cannot be heard. Is the written text also a vacuum? Does the page reduce places to silence?

Angela Leighton beautifully argues in *Hearing Things* that “the purpose of literature is somehow to turn up the volume of that listening when we hear ‘nothing,’ to make it speak or sing” (5). Rigby and Abram are, of course, profoundly correct that listening to literature should not replace listening to our own environments, but if Abram is also right that readers have forgotten how to hear their surroundings, then novels have a role to play in reminding us. These fantasy novels leverage silent, imaginary sounds and the written word’s audibility to demonstrate listening to places. In my first section, ‘Located Listening,’ I shall discuss how Nix and Ness build fantasy worlds that emphasize humans must attune their ears to particular environments: adjusting their expectations and interpretations of background sounds, recognising significant silences, adapting to new ways of communicating, and seeking meaning in nonhuman sounds rather than dismissing them as noise. In my second section, ‘Hearing Place on the Page,’ I shall explore how textual poetics

undermine the belief that reading furthers “the eye’s clear eclipse of the ear” (Schmidt 23), examining how Nix aurally mimics the lively movements of the world and Ness sets up a playful reciprocity between the ear and the eye. The redirection of our eyes and ears through words and around pages may worry David Abram, but fantasy’s demonstrations of characters relearning to listen and the literary features that draw readers into their attentive listening are encouraging antidotes to fears that contemporary readers—and, more widely, contemporary cultures—are permanently alienated from their environments.

LOCATED LISTENING

Interpreting background sounds and knowing what background sounds to expect are skills that rely on knowledge of particular environments, as Garth Nix makes clear. Sabriel, the eponymous protagonist of the first novel in the *Old Kingdom* series, was born in the Old Kingdom but has been educated in Ancelestierre, so the reader witnesses her adjusting her aural expectations in the two countries. On her first night back in the Old Kingdom, during the difficult journey to the Abhorsen’s House, she makes a series of mistakes predicting and interpreting sounds in certain places. First, discovering several decapitated soldiers, she forgets to check the vicinity immediately for a magically recorded voice message explaining what happened and so wastes crucial time (*Sabriel* 58). When she finds it embedded in the bridge post, she is too shocked to interpret the information because she has never before “heard anyone actually die,” so she “force[s] herself to listen once more” (59). On reaching the Long Cliffs, which contain a tunnel opened by ringing the necromantic bell Mosrael, she senses something Dead following her but reassures herself that “it was too far away to hear even Mosrael’s raucous voice” (80). Unfortunately, unfamiliar with this landscape, she fails to predict that the bell’s sound will rebound “echoing from the cliffs, multiplying into the scream of a thousand birds. [...] [T]he echoes raced across the valley and she knew the thing behind her had heard” (80). Running down the tunnel, she hears “a new sound ahead,” a “deep, roaring noise”: “Heavy trucks passing on a road above, Sabriel thought, before remembering where she was” (87). The sentence structure emphasizes how speedily we interpret background sounds and her conscious adjustment to “where she was” highlights the relearning necessary when we change environments. The rumble she attributes to trucks is actually a waterfall, a sound signalling possible safety in the Old Kingdom because the Dead dislike crossing running water. This series of misinterpretations and adjusted expectations underscores her dangerous lack of experience in this place.

In Nix’s recent prequel, *Terciel and Elinor*, Sabriel’s father and his teacher make the same nocturnal journey, showcasing the place-attuned listening skills that Sabriel lacks. They regularly stop walking “to look about and listen” and

their knowledge of these ecosystems shapes their expectations and interpretations:

There were few other sounds, for this was a barren heath, with no branches to sway or leaves to rustle. Once he heard an owl call in the distance, a falling, high-pitched scream, and once he stopped for some time to listen to something moving up ahead, before he determined it was a small predator, a fox or a vatch. (*Terciel* 103)

Terciel's sense of Death, which manifests as a "strange, icy tingle in his mind," alerts him to the presence of Dead creatures, but he relies equally on hearing them move (106). When his teacher complains that her "ears are too old for this," he reassures her that he can hear "only the scrabbling of small animals" (107). The phrase echoes the moment on her journey when Sabriel stands "shivering, listening, every sense concentrated, like some small animal that knows a predator hunts nearby" (*Sabriel* 63). In the Old Kingdom, humans too are prey, since the Dead hunt them. Nevertheless, if the characters know what animal, plant, and landscape sounds to expect in these ecosystems, then it is possible to journey here without being surprised.

Nix's characters often must distinguish a place's natural quietness from the unnatural silence brought by the Dead. As Sabriel steps back through her boarding school's gates, she notices that the village bell has stopped its peal of alarm (339). Touchstone, an Old Kingdom resident who finds the mechanical sounds of Ancelstierre baffling, is reassured that he understands the bell: "'The bells are a warning?' asked Touchstone. This was something he was familiar with and he began to feel more at home, even with this sound, warning of dire trouble" (324). When the bell stops, however, the text stresses the need for familiarity with how sounds travel in particular places, not just what they signify. Touchstone suggests the quiet might be naturally caused, the wind carrying away the sound, but Sabriel has grown up here and knows they should always hear the bell. The moment foregrounds the ability to notice unusual silences, an evolutionary and mostly subconscious attentiveness to background sounds. The musician and scholar David Toop writes evocatively that "[s]ound is a present absence; silence is an absent present. Or perhaps the reverse is better: sound is an absent presence; silence is a present absence?" (vii-viii). Previously, the bell's pealing confirmed the absent (distant) presence of villagers ringing the bells; now, the contrasting present absence of the bell's sound signifies the absent presence of the Dead, who have reached the village and killed the bell-ringers. Sabriel's familiarity with the place enables her to notice and correctly interpret the silence.

Unnatural silence signifying the proximity of the dead is an ancient trope. In Virgil's *Aeneid*, for example, Aeneas descends to the underworld near

Lake Avernus, which takes its name from the Greek ἄορνος (*aornos*, birdless), as sulphurous fumes from the underworld reputedly killed the birds and left the place without birdsong (VI.238-42). Nix modifies the trope to suit the mechanized society of Ancelstierre. His characters exemplify place-attuned listening as they infer the proximity of the Dead from the cessation of mechanical sounds: the village bell, failing telephones (*Sabriel* 327, 331), the “rapid volley—then sudden silence” of guns (344), or the stalled engines of army trucks (*Abhorsen* 265). Sometimes it is only a wind silencing the machines, blowing from the Old Kingdom and carrying magic that interferes with technology, but necromancers may create such magical winds (327). In northern Ancelstierre, therefore, characters try to distinguish natural, machine-free quiet from the unnatural, death-filled silence that some winds bring.

Silence is usually a listener's subjective judgment that they hear nothing they consider significant, but fantasy's representations of absolute, lifeless silence encourage characters and readers to value all the nonhuman background sounds that characterize places. Christopher Manes has written on how western cultures designated nonhuman voices “silent” by insisting that only the human speaking subject could convey meaning (“Nature and Silence”). As we have seen—or rather, heard—Nix's texts accentuate the sounds of machines, animals, plants and landscape features like cliffs and waterfalls by rendering these sounds meaningful to human characters wary of the Dead and listening for their whereabouts. The texts further encourage characters to value background sounds when Orannis threatens to annihilate all life indiscriminately, exploding repeatedly “till silence rings [them] in eternal calm, across a sea of dust” (*Abhorsen* 384). Taking the form of a metal sphere, Orannis mocks the cosmic music of necromantic bells and Charter Magic that characterizes the Old Kingdom, even as Lirael channels that music to defeat him. In Orannis's utterance, the “rings” are not bell-ringing or the orbits of Pythagorean singing spheres but instead the visual traces of explosions in the dust. The silent world Orannis desires—and has previously created, as depicted in *Goldenhand*—is ironically like the environment of certain planets as we now understand it: a vacuum, with no air to carry sound, nor to sustain a listener's life (343). Nix also dramatizes the impossibility of a living listener experiencing absolute silence when Orannis magically commands Lirael to “be still,” so still “that even her lungs were frozen” and she could not breathe (*Abhorsen* 174). Since life requires movements and movements make sound, the act of hearing itself becomes an grateful affirmation that the listener is alive in a place with other living things.

Contrasting with Nix's interest in significant silences, Patrick Ness's fantasy world is distinctive for its “Noise.” Characters' ways of listening to Noise express the differences between the groups now sharing this planet. For the Spackle, the indigenous humanoid people, this telepathic exchange of ideas

and memories enables communication and establishes community. Finding such telepathic communication overwhelming, however, the human colonizers refuse to integrate with the Spackle and instead kill or expel them from the places where they establish towns. The Noise also exacerbates gender-based divisions among the human community because human men project their thoughts as Noise, whereas women's thoughts are revealed only by their speech and their body language, as in the actual world. The women's relative quietness swiftly breeds suspicion among the men, who fear the women's ability to hide their thoughts, so the young protagonist, Todd, grows up in a village where all the women have been driven out or killed. Such treatment initiates cycles of violence in which the women come to occupy the enemy role the men had feared; in the second and third novels of the trilogy, insurgents led by women rebel against patriarchal control and their lack of Noise does indeed enable duplicity as they spy and secrecy as they exchange messages (*Ask* 157, 178; *Monsters* 123). As characters' responses to Noise dramatize cross-cultural and gender-based differences in communicating, the trilogy stresses the choice between violent suppression or relearning to listen.

The antagonist Mayor Prentiss aspires to despotic control, and his refusal to accept that places are created communally—by many individuals and species—is reflected in his refusal to participate reciprocally in the exchange of ideas through Noise. Prentiss controls his own Noise to hide his thoughts from others, then opens his mind wide to everything else's Noise to gather information for controlling the world (*Monsters* 545, 550). Although he trains Todd in this manipulative way of listening, Todd ultimately opens himself to the world without the motive to control it. After being killed, Todd drifts through the Spackle's memories of dwelling on this planet, dreaming his way back to life through “the middle of the million voices that create the ground [he] walk[s] on,” gradually navigating back to his body by Viola's voice (599). The description emphasizes that places are continually created by all the humans and nonhumans who live and have lived there.

Underscoring that Todd has finally learned to hear and communicate in a way suited to this planet, he thinks of the ideas he hears as different “voices” that constitute the world (as they are called by the Spackle) rather than “Noise” (as it is labelled by the human colonists). Noise is a derogatory term for sound that the hearer finds disruptive and meaningless, “a dissonance that counters our expectations” (Le Breton 72). Used xenophobically to dismiss the language of cultural others (*ibid.* 78), the word is a clue that the speaker has not learned to listen appropriately for that place. It is also used anthropocentrically to dismiss nonhuman sounds. When Aristotle expounds his thoughts on hearing in *De Anima*, he defines “voice” as “a particular sound made by something with a soul” (by which he means a being capable of purposeful meaning) through the

medium of breathed air, “not with any chance part of its body” (II.8). The ancient Greek ψόφος [*psophos*], meaning “mere sound, noise,” denotes sounds produced by means other than the larynx, including the stridulations of insects and the rattle of falling stones; today it endures almost exclusively in biological names for animals, such as *Psophia crepitans*, the grey-winged trumpeter bird (“ψόφος [*psophos*];” Connor 8). Steven Connor nicely sketches the opposition between the terms in contemporary English:

[V]oice may be imagined as the antonym of noise, and noise as the matrix or ground of voice. Noise is anonymous, mechanical and meaningless; voice is personal, animate and expressive. Noise is accident, voice is intent. Noise has no importance, voice is full of portent. (7)

In coming to understand Noise as voice, therefore, Todd accepts as meaningful all the human and nonhuman voices he can hear, refusing the anthropocentric categorisation of sounds as humans’ meaningful voices or otherwise meaningless noise. The wide spacing and scattered lines of type in the chapter describing Todd’s dreaming reinforce that there is no foreground of the individual against a background of noise any longer. Listening carefully, Todd locates himself in a network of voices—or rather, according to the anthropologist Tim Ingold’s powerful metaphor, in the “meshwork” of human and nonhuman activities that constitute places (70; cf. *Monsters* 595-603). Since the indigenous Spackle’s healing has caused this shift in Todd’s hearing, the novel challenges the colonialist, anthropocentric category of “Noise” as part of its admonitory portrayal of frontier-style masculinity and colonialism.

Those who play the necromantic bells in the Old Kingdom learn to hear meaning in nonhuman sounds as they listen for the bells’ nuances of tone and rhythm, which have various magical effects. The seven bells differently affect listeners and their surroundings: Ranna and Saraneth limit listeners’ movements; Mosrael, Kibeth, and Astarael transport them to different places, with Mosrael “throwing the ringer further into Death, as it brought the listener into Life,” Kibeth making them “walk [...] where they would not,” and Astarael “cast[ing] everyone who heard it far into Death” (*Sabriel* 65). Nix blurs the anthropocentric opposition of noise to voice by sometimes referring to the sounds of the bells as their “voices” (e.g. *Sabriel* 65, 80, 209). Connor’s antitheses help to illustrate the bells’ slippery elision of who makes meaning: the bells are “mechanical” but intermittently “animate,” sometimes twisting in the ringer’s grip; they cannot sound of their own accord, but they take advantage of any “accident” to work against the ringer’s “intent” (Connor 7). They wilfully usurp human intentions when given the chance, as when Lirael loses her balance while ringing Saraneth: “her mind wandered,” and it is several paragraphs before she

feels “her hand still ringing Saraneth, without her being aware of it” (*Abhorsen* 308-9). Constant attentive listening is vital for a necromancer who wants to stay in control of her own body. Each bell has its own name and personality, and the narrative slowly reveals that the bells embody ancient magical nonhumans who were once conscious, confirming the bells’ posthuman refutation of the voice-noise dichotomy and the need to listen carefully to nonhuman voices.

Unusually, Nix’s juxtaposition of a magical medieval setting with a twentieth-century industrialized setting encourages listening to nonhuman voices in modern places too. Discussing the mixing sounds of landscape and the railway in Chris Watson’s musical composition *El Tren Fantasma*, the geographer George Revill argues that sounds made by machines are part of the way we experience place: “Rather than an external imposition on the landscape, arcs of sound can be understood as media through which landscape is made and experienced in its historical, geographical and cultural specificity” (336-7). Even as Nix emphasizes Ancelstierre’s noisiness, the sound is framed as music:

“What do you mean?” asked Sabriel, but her question was lost as the driver pressed the starter switch, and the car coughed and spluttered into life, a tenor accompaniment to the bass cacophony of the trucks and tanks. (*Sabriel* 321)

Nix’s description encourages his readers to hear Ancelstierre as a place with its own music. Nor can it easily be considered less harmonious: Ancelstierre’s cars, trucks and tanks are contradictorily harmonious and cacophonous but so are the Old Kingdom’s bells. The unexpected musical metaphor cultivates uncertainty over what experiential framework should govern the interpretation of nonhuman sounds in this border zone where magic and technology meet. Sudden shifts from the Old Kingdom to Ancelstierre prompt characters (and perhaps readers) to listen to mechanical sounds for meaning and liveliness, rather than dismissing them as noise: the vehicles in the passage above beg the posthuman question of whether our mechanical objects might have a kind of life. Bill Brown has proposed that we “begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us” and their physical resistance teaches us that the “‘body is a thing among things’” (“Thing Theory” 4, quoting Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind” 163). Nix’s phrasing economically captures this realization in the phrase “coughed and spluttered,” which simultaneously suggests mechanical resistance and breathing life. Nix uses transitions between the Old Kingdom’s magical music and Ancelstierre’s mechanical sounds not to lament that humans lose their ability to hear in the modern world, but to ask what meanings we might hear in all kinds of nonhuman voices if we allow experiences of other places to broaden our ways of listening.

On the other hand, the Old Kingdom's two magic systems—necromantic bells or Charter Magic—apparently discourage listening and celebrate writing instead. Ringing the bells is an aural skill that very few people can learn: the tragic narrative of *Clariel* illustrates that the bells corrupt anyone who rings them, even with good intentions, unless they are from the correct bloodline and have been selected to fulfil the official role of Abhorsen. Only the two Abhorsens wield the bells for the good purpose of protecting the living, and all others are necromancers who cause havoc raising the Dead. Understandably, anyone in the Old Kingdom who encounters a traveller with a bell bandolier is frightened and eager *not* to hear the bells (*Sabriel* 220, *Lirael* 310). Charter Magic, by contrast, is learnable by anyone baptized with a Charter mark. Like writing, Charter Magic is largely a visual and tactile skill of reading Charter Marks to understand a spell and visualising then gesturing to compose spells. Charter Marks are sometimes whistled for working weather. This form of magic makes *Sabriel* feel “like a bird revelling in flight,” exhilarated by “freedom” (*Sabriel* 130). It is tricky, however, and *Sabriel* quickly loses control when she summons a stronger wind. The text consistently associates aural magic with unpredictability, danger, and freedom.

Yet Free Magic is the basis for Charter Magic, just as sound is the basis for alphabetic writing systems. It is deeply significant that the dangerous type of magic which the bells channel is called “Free Magic,” whereas a ‘charter’ (from the Latin *charta*, meaning ‘paper’) is a written document with legal force. As various Free Magic creatures demonstrate, wild freedom taken too far hurts others, and their desire for life at the expense of others’ lives enacts a terrifying Darwinian competition for survival. However, preferring to create a stable environment in which many creatures could thrive, seven powerful Free Magic beings made the Charter at the Beginning of the Old Kingdom (*Abhorsen* 187). The tension between Free Magic and Charter Magic thus beautifully represents the conflict in nature between individuals’ survival and orderly, balanced ecosystems. The Seven themselves manifest that tension, since they mostly died to create the orderly Charter, but they live on just a little in each of the willful, chaos-causing bells. Those who truly understand magic in the Old Kingdom learn to hear the wild freedom that powers the bells’ sounds and, more distantly, written magic.

In summary, Nix and Ness orchestrate fantasy worlds in which characters must listen closely to their environments, relearning to listen appropriately in different places. The protagonists’ aural abilities to predict and interpret background sounds, notice unusual silences, communicate in new ways, and hear meaning in nonhuman sounds are important for their survival and for negotiating how to share environments with other societies and creatures. Through their world-building, these series highlight human

characters hearing place; precisely by dis-locating readers and characters from familiar environments, fantasy novels may remind us how to hear them. But what about style? In opposition to Abram's fear that reading disrupts readers' aural attunement to their environments, could the literary form of the printed novel revive the ability to hear place?

HEARING PLACE THROUGH THE PAGE

Of all the senses, hearing most directly produces the human experience of our environment in its etymological sense of that which surrounds us. For George Revill, "[t]he substantially passive receptivity of hearing and its 365-degree [*sic*] field of reception ensure that sounds encompass us" (334). Revill's slippage from space to time, from 360 degrees to 365 days, is amusingly apt in his argument that sound figures landscape as a historically specific geographical experience, but in literature place apparently disappears into time. As they mentally sound out streams of words, readers hear continuously but they are no longer surrounded by sounds from multiple directions. Written words, frozen on the page, split the experience of reading into a temporal auditory stream and a visual impression of page space. Out of context, Walter Ong's assertion in *Orality and Literacy* that "the shift from oral to written speech is essentially a shift from sound to visual space" holds promise for the visual ways in which texts enact human emplacement in our environments (115)—but place has lost its depth, dismally reduced to a "flat surface" (Abram 131). Our ears and eyes are forced to make their way along lines of text in the foreground with nothing to hear or see behind them except a blank white background. How can the temporal order of words and the flatness of the page convey an aural sense of place?

A growing amount of recent ecocriticism focuses on details of how literature—poetry, fiction and non-fiction—puts pressure on the language that constitutes it in order to encourage readers to more ecoconscious thinking (James, *The Storyworld Accord*; Nolan, *Unnatural Ecopoetics*; Weston, *Contemporary Literary Landscapes*). Scott Knickerbocker's *Ecopoetics* defines "sensuous poesis" as "the process of rematerializing language specifically as a response to nonhuman nature" (2). In this section, I will reveal how Ness and Nix rematerialize language both aurally and visually to convey the experience of hearing nonhuman voices that characterize particular places. These formal literary techniques challenge Ong's and Abram's judgements that the written text eclipses hearing and alienates us from our environments. In making these accusations, they both underestimate the visual potential of literature to work on behalf of hearing and allow their reading eyes to eclipse the spatial effects discernible by reading ears.

Novels' inability to "gather sound from every direction at once" and thereby place the listener "at the center of [their] auditory world" works against this slightly anthropocentric idea of the organism (Ong 70). Instead, the texts' poetics conduct readers along "trail[s] of movement or growth" which draw attention to human participation in all the human and nonhuman movements that create the "meshwork" of place (Ingold 69, 70). Melba Cuddy-Keane's excellent contribution on hearing in the *Companion to Narrative Theory* argues for the "inclusiveness of auditory perception" partly on the grounds that we can hear in 360 degrees, but she goes on to explain:

the increased inclusiveness of sound produces a heightened awareness of separate and disparate events, with the result that part of the crucial work of hearing is perceiving, or trying to perceive, relationships. What, then, is hearing's relational work, and how does narrative record it? (388)

Texts dis-locate their readers from familiar surroundings into imaginary spaces, and the aural and visual cues through which we hear those imaginary environments emphasize that space is "a multiplicity of trajectories" (Massey, *For Space* 5). Hearing place is an active process of recognising human and nonhuman sounds and negotiating our own movements among them, not a passive dismissal of sounds in the background.

BOUNCING SOUNDS

By dis-locating the reader from the one body they usually inhabit, literature can allow them to hear a single sound resonating in different locations, from different characters' points of view—or rather, "points of audition" (Hones 85). Cuddy-Keane distinguishes representations of a single sound heard in multiple locations (e.g. Big Ben heard by many characters in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*) from representations of multiple sounds heard in a single location (e.g. the mixing sounds of wildlife, people and traffic in Woolf's "Kew Gardens") but she feels that both auditory representations build a sense of inclusive shared space (388). Although I agree with her conclusion, her selection of Big Ben as the example of a single sound heard from multiple locations makes her argument rather too easy, since the sound of the bell itself symbolizes belonging and orientation. The sensory historian Alain Corbin has described how church bells sonically marked place in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century France, cherished by parishioners and valued by travellers who used the bell's sound to navigate safely through hilly and forested terrain or along foggy coasts ("The Auditory Markers of the Village" 187-90). As well as prompting spiritual thoughts, therefore, bells heard across the parish signified the unity of an earthly community. By contrast, symbolically violent sounds heard from multiple

locations and different characters' points of audition stress the contentiousness of sharing space, especially when their literary representation prompts *disorientation*. Patrick Ness communicates this disorientation to striking effect in his trilogy's second volume, *The Ask and the Answer*.

Ness's narrative alternates between the two protagonists, Todd and Viola, who have been forcibly separated but are in the same town and can both hear the violent sounds that echo through the place. In the eighth chapter, Viola attempts to escape her imprisonment and is nearly shot by a soldier but, recognising her, he shoots her friend instead (113). At the end of the following chapter, Todd hears "a faint *pop* outside, somewhere in the distance, some stupid soldier firing off his gun at who knows what (or who knows who)" (123). The reader's knowledge of Viola's narrow escape underlines Todd's realization that "she coulda been out there" (123). Although Todd doesn't realize it, the sound has travelled from exactly where Viola is and his hearing the shot allows the reader to link their separated narratives in time and weave together the imaginary shared space of New Prentisstown.

As the violence escalates to bombs, Ness leverages the visual space of the page to complicate that unifying auditory effect of a single sound echoing twice in the narrative:

"Davy," I start to say but it's all that comes out cuz —

BOOM!

—in the distance, almost not a sound at all, more like the faraway thunder of a storm you know is gonna get here quick and do its best to knock yer house down.

[...]

"Those bitches," Davy whispers.

But I'm thinking —

(is it her?)

(is it her?)

(what is she *doing*?) (169)

The instant visibility of the capitalized, emboldened, and italicized word against the background text of the narration visually communicates the shock of the onomatopoeic explosion interrupting Todd's speech and thoughts. The explosion is in the distance for him but the ominous simile of the storm travelling towards him gestures to its potential to affect him nevertheless. Is Viola still okay? As the page turn reveals, Viola is right next to the explosion, so the "**BOOM!**" appears in larger font to convey her proximity (170)—a visual intensification of the way variations in volume encourage readers to construct imaginary places from aural information (Hones 83). Hearing bombs makes Todd think of Viola throughout *The Ask and the Answer* because he fears she is

planting them; the elliptical "is it her?" ambiguously conveys his fear that she has been hit or that she planted the bomb on behalf of Mistress Coyle, who leads a rebel group calling themselves "the Answer" and violently opposing Mayor Prentiss's takeover of the town. The appearance of the same explosion twice powerfully conveys that though they share a place, that place is far from politically unified, and sets up a call-and-response dynamic accentuating the fact Todd and Viola find themselves apprenticed to the two opposing leaders of a war.

Paradoxically, these visual effects catch the reader's eye but imitate the character's ear, requiring readers to learn a new way of listening. In their innovative typography, Ness's *Chaos Walking* books are "hybrid novels" and, as Eve Tandoi observes, this form manipulates "the book's potential to engage readers visually and kinaesthetically as a means of contesting the supremacy of written language in novels and disrupting its referential function" (330). It is the visual, kinaesthetic, *and* the aural that vividly disrupt the referentiality of language here, because Ness chooses the onomatopoeic "**BOOM!**" The probable meaning of 'bomb' echoes aurally but not referentially. Rather than apprehending meaning, therefore, the reader encounters the sheer materiality of sound become solid, imitating Viola's experience of the bomb as a "sound so big it makes the air as solid as a fist, as a wave of bricks, as if the world's dropped out beneath you and you're falling sideways and up and down all at once" (170-71). Tandoi's assertion chimes with Walter Ong's belief that concrete poetry "plays with the dialectic of the word locked into space as opposed to the sounded, oral word which can never be locked into space" (127). Both are right to partner the visual with the kinaesthetic and to emphasize the disruptiveness of visual effects: Ness's explosions stand out against the background of more ordinary text; they repeatedly caught my eyes in the moment of visual "global attention" when I first turned the page such that I struggled to return to the top left corner and read in proper sequence (Mikkonen and Lautenbacher para. 9). To mimic a sound moving from an unexpected direction, Ness's synaesthetic poetics made me notice the jumping movements of my eyes. Ong is also right that sound itself cannot be "locked into space," but humans certainly do find themselves unable to escape loud sounds; the unavoidable prominence of "**BOOM!**" aptly conveys Viola's experience of being in the wrong place at the wrong time (170). The typography visually enhancing the onomatopoeia makes the reader enact both the alarming solidity and the disorientation of their aural experience.

Having taught readers to listen to visual effects, Ness combines page-space visual effects with sounds heard in different locations to emphasize the tactical importance of place. In the final volume, Viola is at the top of a hill with one army and Todd is in town with the Mayor's opposing army when "the

world splits itself in two," according to Todd (370). The double-spread shows a large "**BOOM!**" as we shift to Viola's narrative on the left page, directly under her name, and another "**BOOM!**" as we switch back to Todd's point of audition on the facing page. This spatial organisation strongly encourages us to read the bombs as the same explosion heard from their two divergent points of audition, as we have often done previously, especially since Viola describes the sound ringing "across the valley, echoing back on itself again and again" (370). In fact, they are two different bombs. Adding to the confusion, both words are printed the same size, implying that the sound is not close to either character—so who is being attacked? After a third explosion, the Mayor reveals that he has decimated a different force of Spackle north of the river, having seen through firstly, their agreement to peace, and secondly, their tactical diversion of torches in the south (372). At the Mayor's cleverest moment of tactical outmanoeuvring the enemy, the text outmanoeuvres its readers by encouraging multiple conflicting strategies for interpreting the point-of-audition shifts and page-space effects. Like Todd and Viola, readers are disoriented by the sounds of war. The violent sounds of Ness's *Chaos Walking* trilogy embrace the dis-locating potential of literature, his visual effects turning the background space of the page into a way to convey sound. Characters and readers must relearn to listen in order to understand the converging and conflicting interests played out in a shared place.

Ness further experiments with words' attention-grabbing visual effects by using alternative fonts against a background of ordinary text to foreground nonhuman lives. On this planet, men's thoughts echo through the world as Noise alongside the thoughts of dogs, squirrels, horses, fish, and other creatures, as Viola explains to the newly arrived Simone:

We head outside. *Girl colt?* Acorn says, coming over from where he's been munching grass.

"And the animals, too," Simone says, as I rub Acorn's nose. "What kind of place *is* this?"

"It's information," I say [...]. "Information, all the time, never stopping, whether you want it to or not." (*Monsters* 91)

As a human woman, Viola cannot answer with Noise so she answers the horse's verbal greeting physically, as animals in the actual world often answer our verbal greetings. The horse's thought appears in letters of irregular thickness, some serif and some sans-serif, possibly evoking how letters might look if they were drawn by hooves in the dirt. The font's evocation of the horse's bodily gesture mitigates what David Abram considers the "highly anthropocentric" experience of reading via an alphabet in which "each letter [is] now associated purely with a gesture or sound of the human mouth" (138). Abram

prefers how pictographic and ideographic writing operates like “the tracks of moose and bear [to] refer beyond themselves to those entities of whom they are the trace” (132), yet Ness’s font choice for Acorn’s Noise allows even alphabetic writing to highlight nonhuman bodies. So far, so happily anti-anthropocentric; however, all horses in Ness’s series share a species-specific font and verbal style, and this is true of other animals too, whereas individual humans each have their own distinctive font and style conveying something of their personality. Nevertheless, this way of ‘hearing’ foregrounds the nonhuman voice. Ong contrasts chirographic “control of space,” which he considers more “ornamental,” with the “tidiness and inevitability” of typographic control, conveying “an insistent world of cold, non-human, facts” (120). The combination of the chirographic (or hoofographic?) with the typographic makes the horse’s thought more urgent than “ornamental.” It disrupts the smaller, tidily printed font of Viola’s narration and the reader’s eye tends to skip to it, disturbing the proper order of reading. In a book where each character thinks in their own font, as if speaking in their own voice, there are no “cold, non-human, facts” given vacuous power by the apparent impartiality of print. There are humans and nonhumans conversing as they share places.

Viola’s description of this world as information is one judgement on which all the humans who have settled there agree. The choice of “information” rather than “communication” is tellingly colonialist and anthropocentric, defining nature as matter to be manipulated; Viola is repeating Ben’s description of the first settlers’ impressions, and a few pages later Mayor Prentiss too ponders this “planet of information” (*Monsters* 97). The Mayor’s formulation could be read as meaning that the planet contains information, in the same way that a “jug of water” means a jug containing water, but Viola’s simple statement that “It’s information” is at once simpler and more radical, implying that the relational information exchange of Noise constitutes the place. Intriguingly, Ong claims the shift from writing to print prompted a parallel change in the understanding of books: “Once print has been fairly well interiorized, a book was sensed as a kind of object which ‘contained’ information, scientific, fictional or other, rather than, as earlier, a recorded utterance” (123). Even the physical objects of Ness’s books cannot contain the Noise that their readers encounter in and on the pages: a rush of semi-visible Noise flows across the back and front covers, under the title, over the author’s name, and off the edges mid-word, as if spilling into the actual world. The first UK editions of Garth Nix’s *Old Kingdom* books have the same style of jacket, covered with semi-visible Charter marks. The tactility of the marks is fitting for Nix’s novels because his characters let their minds become immersed in the Charter when they touch each other’s forehead Charter Marks in greeting. Each reader is immersed as they hold the book open, with the Charter under their fingers as a constant background, until

they choose to withdraw, as Nick does, by “pull[ing] his fingers back, breaking the connection and restoring himself to himself” (*Goldenhand* 191). The tactile printed layering is another small denial of Abram’s “flat surface of the page.” Echoing the Noise and Charter Magic they signify, written marks slip under readers’ fingers and bounce off pages while they inhabit these places.

STILL LISTENING

I have examined how Ness’s bombs and representations of Noise play against the background of regular printed text to communicate that hearing is an active process of “perceiving, or trying to perceive, relationships” that constitute place (Cuddy-Keane 388). Let me return to Cuddy-Keane’s differentiation between single sounds heard from multiple locations and multiple sounds heard in a single location in order to concentrate on the latter. There is a peculiar asymmetry between listeners who stand still, avoiding making sound, and the sounds moving around them. Tim Ingold objects to the word “soundscape” because it reinforces the idea that the nonhuman world is static, especially in combination with “emplaced”:

Attentive listening, as opposed to passive hearing, surely entails the very opposite of emplacement. [...] [T]he sweep of sound continually endeavours to tear listeners away, causing them to surrender to its movement. It requires an effort to stay in place. (139)

Nix’s series associates sound with the inescapable movements of time and place such that characters who listen without making sounds are indeed temporarily resistant to their environments.

For necromancers who enter Nix’s river of Death, the constant challenge is to resist the river’s attempts to trip them up and sweep them down to a final end. Even the Abhorsens, who work with the river to ensure that the Dead stay dead, struggle to stay still enough to orient themselves via the sense of Death that Lirael experiences as listening:

Lirael was made to take one step before she could fully exert her will and resist the current. It grabbed at her heels, twisting and pulling, but it could not move her beyond that first step.

Apart from the rush of the river and the distant roar of the waterfall that was the First Gate, there was no sound. It was impossible to see very far, for the strange grey light stretched to an entirely flat horizon that seemed close, but always retreated.

Both Abhorsens stood for a few minutes, letting their sense of Death expand. Sabriel sniffed; though it was not precisely a smell she sought, it seemed to help. Lirael quirked her mouth, for it seemed to help open her

ears, though again it was not sound she listened for with that extra sense.
(*Goldenhand* 327-28)

The rhythms of Nix's words and syntax help to convey the initial struggle. In the second sentence the river attempts a forceful approach first with the monosyllabic "grabbed," then alters to the more devious multidirectional, disyllabic "twisting and pulling." Parenthetical commas set those words apart both visually and aurally, perhaps suggesting the river eddying around Lirael's heels. References to smell and the mouth gesture to the predatory quality of the Abhorsens' listening as they try to hunt the Dead without being hunted; the short clauses "Sabriel sniffed" and "Lirael quirked her mouth" convey their bodily stillness as they expand their awareness of their surroundings, which they seem to do as each of those sentences continue. Through all these minute details, Nix varies the flow of words in the reader's ear as appropriate for the characters' sensory experiences of the place, conveying the eddying of the river and the characters' resistant stillness as they attempt to listen without being heard.

Listening is particularly important in Death because it is a place which confuses the eyes. In the fourth sentence of the passage above, Nix confuses readers imagining the space from Lirael's point of view by denying the ability to see far, then sending the mind's eye along the light that "stretched" to the horizon, reining the eye back by declaring the horizon seems "close," and sending it away with the retreating horizon, all in the space of a sentence. No wonder Lirael prioritizes hearing, as Nix indicates by placing the sentence about listening first. The onomatopoeic "rush" and "roar," significantly alliterating with "river," fills the mind's ear with satisfying sounds, only for Nix to deny their significance by concluding with the idea that "there was no sound," since the ordinary background sounds of the place are not what Lirael is listening for. Drawing on the work of the auditory psychologists Brian Moore and Reinier Plomp, Cuddy-Keane explains that our cognitive ability to distinguish foreground sounds from background sounds depends on the continuity effect, which keeps up the impression of continuous sounds even when others interrupt them (392). The continuity effect does not come into play when silence breaks the continuous sound, as it does when spirits pass through the roar of the First Gate. Lirael "listened carefully to that—for the roar would stop if the woman went through—and kept walking" (*Abhorsen* 112). The fact often comes with its own syntactic signature, involving parenthetical punctuation which resists the flow of the narrator's speech, aurally mimicking how the brief silence disrupts the noisy flow of the river (*Sabriel* 68). Characters listening in Death, and readers listening to Nix's sentences, hear the river's continuous flow and the interruptions in its current.

From a secular perspective, death cannot be heard, as Nix makes obvious when Lirael passes through the Eighth Gate: “Lirael could see nothing, hear nothing and feel nothing, including her own body. She felt as if she had suddenly become a disembodied intelligence that was totally alone” (*Abhorsen* 314). Yet she is never alone, because the reader is with her. As readers listen to the unknowable they hear their own hearing: “to be hearing listening [...] is to be caught in a whirlpool of resonance and attention which somehow leaves the subject writer or reader, as well as the actual listened-to object, a little out of account” (Leighton 16). Nix’s verbal depiction of death cannot operate in silence. He communicates death’s unknowability instead by constructing the fictional river of Death as a place in which characters learn to listen carefully, only to have that ability suddenly removed just before the point of no return.

Lirael travels deep into Death to learn about the past. The Clayr See (and hear) fragments of the future, but her mixed Clayr and Abhorsen heritage instead allows her to See (and hear) past events. To do so, she must look into a mirror while standing in the river of Death. Different locations require certain ways of looking and listening throughout the series; reciprocally, this type of looking and listening requires a certain location. Like the future itself, the Clayr’s visions are achieved collaboratively, as they gather to combine many individuals’ perspectives, but Remembrancing is an isolating activity. Few can come into Death, but fortunately the Disreputable Dog is able to accompany and guard Lirael (*Abhorsen* 344). As well as making her isolated and vulnerable, standing still in the river of Death is oddly unnatural. The movement of the river reflects the movement of time in the living world, the ever-changing present, which Lirael ignores to focus on the past.

When Sabriel and Lirael navigate Death, the bodies they leave in Life are motionless—an unnatural dis-location from the movements and sounds of their surroundings. Characters can stand next to one another in the same location in Life, but someone whose spirit is walking in Death does not hear the same sounds. This auditory dis-location creates tension in *Sabriel* as the narrative alternates between Touchstone’s perceptions in Life and Sabriel’s in Death. At one transition, Touchstone and Mogget’s strained whispers contrast with Sabriel “gabbling” a spell (267, 268). At another, Sabriel runs through Death ahead of a great wave: “[t]he thunder and crashing grew louder and one by one the various screams and shouts were submerged in the greater sound” (265). Meanwhile, Touchstone “stared out past the southern vortex, listening. He had heard something, he was sure, something besides the constant dripping. Something louder, something slow, attempting to be surreptitious” (265). Again, Nix’s syntax emphasizes the sounds of characters’ locations: the absence of commas in the sentence describing Sabriel aptly conveys her headlong rush and the merging of the sounds behind her, contrasting with the comma-broken

sentences that describe Touchstone standing still in the reservoir and listening hard, which themselves are delivered drip by drip. When Sabriel and her father Terciel finally reach the border with Life, the more experienced Abhorsen stands “like an eavesdropper, body slightly bent, ear cocked to a non-existent door” (285). As hesitant as the character, the syntax stresses that Terciel is picking the best moment to change place.

Neither Ness's *Chaos Walking* trilogy nor Nix's *Old Kingdom* series supports the idea that the eye eclipses the ear when we read, ruining how we listen to our environments. Their literary ways of mimicking sound do ask readers to learn new ways of listening, but those readerly listening practices support the characters' demonstrations of attuning listening to different places. Ness's novels direct readers' ears and eyes to echo fictional sounds, bouncing between characters and off the background text of the page. His representations of single sounds heard from different locations make hearing an active process of orienting ourselves, as do his portrayals of nonhuman voices. Nix's writing directs readers' ears and eyes along the lines as usual, but his syntax flows and twists to mimic places' background sounds, especially in the river of Death. His representations of the sounds heard (or not heard) in a single location reveal the strange asymmetry of still listeners and of readers themselves, who temporarily suspend their own movements through places to hear and see others moving. These fantasy novels stylistically underscore David Abram's key idea about hearing our environments: listening means tuning our ears to the human and nonhuman sounds that characterize different places.

CONCLUSION: ECHOING ECOPOETICS

By way of conclusion, let me return to the climax of Garth Nix's *Abhorsen*:

On and on the bells went, till they seemed to echo everywhere inside Lirael. She was saturated with their power, like a sponge that can take no more. She could feel it inside her and in the others, a welling up that filled them all and then had to go rushing out.

It did, flowing into the mark she'd drawn, which grew bright and spread sideways to become a strand of light that joined the next mark, and then the next, to form a glowing ring that closed around the globe of Orannis, a shining band in orbit around the dark and threatening sphere.

Lirael spoke the rest of the binding spell, the words flying out of her on a flood tide of power. (386)

As part of saving the Old Kingdom and Ancelstierre, Lirael and her companions hear in a new way—listening to the background sounds characteristic of places, as characters do throughout the series, but at the scale of whole worlds, since the companions embody the beings who created the Charter at the Old

Kingdom's Beginning and linger in the bells. Lirael hears not just through her ears but with her whole body, and the passage stresses Lirael's immersed participation in this place, this magical cosmos, as the bells "echo everywhere inside" her. Like the music Lirael feels, Nix's phrase slips from the macrocosm of the environment to the microcosm of the human body. Perhaps reflecting the novel form's power to express the sounds of place, the cosmic music flows back out of her both as speech and as writing on the ground. As the spell flows across the ground, the sentence draws attention to its own aural movement to emphasize that patterns of sound and movement define different places. Nix does not support his aural poetics with the eye-catching visual strategies that Ness's hybrid novel uses to convey how we actively aurally orient ourselves in changing, contested places. However, Nix communicates the same message through the aural movements of his syntax, demonstrating how any novel may use style to convey the characteristic sounds of certain environments.

In her lament that nonhuman voices cannot be heard in literature and our songs are therefore "wounded," Kate Rigby believes it is the "woundedness of our song, our recognition of its inadequacy, which necessitates and affirms a plurality of voices" (439). Nix stresses the participation of nonhuman voices in making place by narrative means, because the world-saving spell does not work until Mogget (a Free Magic creature who manifests as a sarcastic cat) freely chooses to add his voice to the song. Readers do not hear the voice of a real cat, except in memory, and humans never could hear the planets singing. Rigby is therefore correct about *what* we can and cannot hear but, rather than trying to transmit nonhuman voices from the actual world, fantasy's tendency to dislocate characters and readers from familiar environments can valuably demonstrate *how* to hear place. Sound-attentive world-building and style comprise an echoing eco-poetics that may inspire readers to reattune their ears to their environments.

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