

SETTLER COLONIAL LISTENING AND THE SILENCE OF WILDERNESS IN THE  
BOUNDARY WATERS CANOE AREA

by

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## ABSTRACT

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Title: Settler Colonial Listening and the Silence of Wilderness in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area

The Boundary Waters Canoe Area soundscape in northern Minnesota has a long and contested history but is most often characterized today as a pristine and distinctly silent wilderness. This thesis traces the construction and perpetuation of the Boundary Waters as a silent space by government agencies and conservationists, as well as the ways the notion of silence has and continues to limit Ojibwe sovereignty and, in related but distinct ways, undermine non-human animal agency. As extractive industries increasingly threaten the Boundary Waters, advocacy groups continue to appeal to the idea of the place as silent despite the similarity in logics underlying both extractivism and the myth of pristine wilderness. The project also considers broader historiographical and activist consequences associated with the idea of a silent Boundary Waters and utilizes public-facing writing formats to challenge iterative processes perpetuating settler colonial soundscape control.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

At the time of this writing, my shelves are filled with theory books on racialized listening practices, collections of stories from Ojibwe culture, studies of animals and animal music, and histories of Minnesota's environmental policies, among others. Filling nearly two shelves alone are the more than twenty book-length studies related to Boundary Waters conservation that I have used over the course of my thesis research. Some are histories of conservation practices, others are memoirs and biographies of important players in battles over environmental legislation, and still others are field guides to the place's rich geologic and ecological histories. There are certainly other accounts that I do not have on my shelves, including many shorter publications in periodicals or the travelogues and novels written about the place. Most, if not all, of these books include at least a handful of references to the Boundary Waters' famously contested policy history, and the stack whose authors wrote directly about conservation battles is difficult for me to carry from room-to-room in one trip.

In short, accounts about the Boundary Waters, especially its conservation history, have been published plenty of times – so then, why yet another publication about the place? Within the books focused on the heated conservation policy battles of the mid-twentieth century, there are disagreements over the minutiae of who said what and the other sorts of details that morph over time through repeated remembrance, but for the most part, the publications form an echo chamber of closed citation. This has formed what seems to be an objective biologic, geologic, and cultural historical narrative of the place that especially highlights how the Boundary Waters is a pristine wilderness, an idea

particularly maintained by the frequent characterizations of the place as silent. This thesis seeks to disrupt those echoes of repetition in two ways: 1) by directly examining how the concept of silence has been used by conservationists and the Minnesota government as a form of settler colonial control over the Boundary Waters soundscape and the ways such control has enacted violence on the land and its inhabitants, and 2) by scaling out to consider which stories are not included in the retellings, and what consequences those exclusions have had on the place's watery landscape and the multispecies communities that have, and in some cases, continue to call the place home.

Today, the Boundary Waters does seem relatively quiet when compared to other recreation-heavy wilderness areas due to state and national legislation limiting motor use and airplanes in the area. Yet the Boundary Waters soundscape has always been characterizable by a cacophony of animal sounds, and prior to control by the settler state of Minnesota was also filled with the rich sounds of Ojibwe and Dakota life. Devastating violence by the government including direct physical acts and cultural assimilation (which continue today, though they manifest differently) literally removed, and thus, silenced Indigenous people within the Boundary Waters. These practices made possible the careful construction and cultivation of the popular idea of the place as distinctly silent and pristine by government agencies and popular conservationist figures through environmental planning to make the place sound and look like a frontier, cultural production like the writings of bestselling author Sigurd Olson, and the enforcement of silence through policies banning motors.

Through the idea of the Boundary Waters as silent, government and cultural practices have limited Ojibwe sovereignty and treaty-promised rights to continue to

legally use the place. In related but different ways, such characterizations trivialized non-human animal existence and continued to uphold ongoing settler colonial thinking deeming animal bodies as disposable. A wide cast of actors brought the Boundary Waters silence into being and reinforced it through listening practices that are rooted in settler colonial forms of engagement with wild places. These practices included hearing the area as a frontier empty of humans other than the seemingly valiant wilderness explorers whose experiences of the place were enabled by a “silent” background of animal sounds and the literal and metaphorical silencing of Ojibwe people. Settler appeals to naturalness, objectivity, and the pleasant beauty of the so-called wilderness have obscured these practices, and ultimately have continued to repeat themselves through the aforementioned webs of Boundary Waters conservation history publications.

### **Sound and Silence**

My focus is on the concept of silence in the Boundary Waters, but the aesthetics of settler colonial control manifest themselves in the Boundary Waters in more ways than just sonically.<sup>1</sup> The primary visual imagery used by advocacy groups is another iteration of the pristine Boundary Waters wilderness that I work to complicate through this thesis. Images on northern Minnesota-focused environmental advocacy group websites and public information booth materials often include a lone (usually white) wilderness enthusiast paddling through a misty morning on a lake or a hiker at a cliff’s edge, usually looking off to one side as if to pay attention more closely to the wilderness world around them. You can practically *see* the silence. Yet my orientation as a musicologist and sound studies scholar has always been to sound, which I believe can have an influence on the

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of “dark-sky reserves” is an excellent example of a similar visual policy.

world in ways that are subtle and difficult to detect. Sound misbehaves – it is difficult to control and does not conform neatly to boundaries of most sorts, and it is difficult to maintain and preserve, and thus, study if not intentionally saved as in music recording and transcribing practices.

Of course, these ideas of sound’s exceptionality can be taken too far, as Jonathan Sterne has famously critiqued as the “audio-visual litany.”<sup>2</sup> However, dominant white American settler society is one especially attuned to the visual. Jennifer Stoeber (quoting Sterne) explains this brilliantly, as I also cite later in this thesis:

Because racism seems to be a “discourse of power that thinks with the eyes” in a culture driven by an “overdetermined politics of looking,” sound has served as a repository of apprehension, oppression, and confrontation, rendered secondary—invisible—by visually driven epistemologies. Far from being vision’s opposite, sound frequently appears to be visuality’s doppelgänger in U.S. racial history, unacknowledged but ever present in the construction of race in the performance of racial oppression.<sup>3</sup>

Sound can likewise more richly texture our understanding of the workings of settler colonialism in and on land, animals, and people.

My concern in this thesis with the perception of sounds rather than sounds themselves has been a long time coming. All throughout my musicology master’s studies prior to this degree, I had a nagging feeling that violence lurked in the practice of extrapolating my listening experience through music analysis or assuming that if I hear

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<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Jennifer Lynn Stoeber, *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening*, (New York: New York University Press, 2016).

something a certain way, so must others. Phil Ewell has recently made waves in music theory by pointing to music theory's "white racial frame,"<sup>4</sup> and other scholars within music and sound studies have pointed to the ways normative listening practices are influenced by racialized subjectivities, including but certainly not limited to Nina Eidsheim, Marie Thompson, Jennifer Stoeber, Rachel Mundy, and Karin Bijsterveld.<sup>5</sup> Dylan Robinson's *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies* is the first project to point to the specific ways settler colonialism inflects listening practices within sound art and art music contexts.

My work's primary contribution to scholarly work is that I use these scholars' thinking on racialized listening practices to demonstrate the ways the oft-critiqued human-Nature binary thinking manifests in sound in the Boundary Waters.<sup>6</sup> The silence that Sigurd Olson develops is the sonic equivalent to notions of an empty wilderness, nostalgic for an imagined frontier and simultaneously ready for resource extraction. There are others who have critiqued simplistic dual notions of silence as good and noise as bad, for example, Marie Thompson, Karin Bijsterveld, and Peter A. Coates, though none considers the often-racialized nature of such thinking at length.<sup>7</sup> However, many

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<sup>4</sup> Philip A. Ewell, "Music Theory and the White Racial Frame," *Music Theory Online* 26, no. 2 (September 1, 2020), <https://mtosmt.org/issues/mto.20.26.2/mto.20.26.2.ewell.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Nina Sun Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019); Marie Thompson, *Beyond Unwanted Sound: Noise, Affect and Aesthetic Moralism* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017); Marie Thompson, "Whiteness and the Ontological Turn in Sound Studies," *Parallax* 23, no. 3 (July 3, 2017): 266–82; Stoeber, *The Sonic Color Line*; Karin Bijsterveld, *Mechanical Sound: Technology, Culture, and Public Problems of Noise in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> For classic critics of the wilderness idea see, for example, Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, Fifth edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014); William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness," in *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: Norton, 1995), 69–90; Mark David Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>7</sup> Thompson, *Beyond Unwanted Sound*; Bijsterveld, *Mechanical Sound*; Peter A. Coates, "The Strange Stillness of the Past: Toward an Environmental History of Sound and Noise," *Environmental History* 10, no. 4 (2005): 636–65.

more perspectives continue to flourish that perpetuate dualistic human/Nature thinking in sound, perhaps most intensely within acoustic ecology through the work of Bernie Krause and R. Murray Schafer and through the work of many sound artists.<sup>8</sup> The Boundary Waters sound conflicts are an excellent example of the ways universalized, unmarked listening practices and conceptions of sound are transformed into structural oppression and alteration of land via state enforcement.<sup>9</sup> These reinforcing processes are the focus of Chapter I, which is a draft that I will develop to submit to an environmental humanities academic journal.

### **Thesis Structure and Public Scholarship**

I understand academic research as relevant for real-world change as long as it is continually engaged in a looping process of reflexivity, community engagement, and real world-practice. I did not devise this project to intervene in broader scholarly conversations about listening practices. For reasons which I will explain more in the next section of this introduction, I am deeply invested in the collective project of building just futures in the Gichigamiing region. This is the position from which I began this project – my intended intervention was within the piles of historical narratives on Boundary Waters conservation that I described earlier. That initial orientation to the project is why I

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<sup>8</sup> For example Bernie Krause's *The Great Animal Orchestra: Finding the Origins of Music in the World's Wild Places* (New York: Little, Brown, 2013) and *Wild Soundscapes: Discovering the Voice of the Natural World* (New Haven: Yale University, 2016); R. Murray Schafer, *The Tuning of the World* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977). Sound art that follows such patterns of thought often is aesthetically indebted to the work of John Cage, John Luther Adams, and R. Murray Schafer, among others. Sonic notions of wilderness are prevalent within recreation and tourism literature, which have direct influence over policy-making. Ecomusicology has been criticized for similar thinking (see especially, Ana María Ochoa Gautier, "Acoustic Multinaturalism, the Value of Nature, and the Nature of Music in Ecomusicology," *Boundary 2* 43, no. 1 (February 2016): 107–41.), but critics often do not recognize the wide range of thinking present within the seemingly still-emerging and constantly self-redefining field.

<sup>9</sup> Much of my thinking on whiteness as a racial construct is drawn from work in critical whiteness studies, including Barbara Applebaum's "Critical Whiteness Studies," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education* (Oxford University Press, 2016) and some of the many authors included in her summary.

decided to construct this thesis as a portfolio of three writing pieces rather than a traditional thesis. My critique of settler colonialism operates on two different registers and could not function just within academia-bound writing: I explore the development and consequences of the Boundary Waters silence idea across the last half century, but I also question how silences in history and in contemporary public discourse influence those ongoing processes. The former is the primary subject of each chapter, but the style and form of the chapters works to address the latter.

While I have included contextualizing comments that connect the chapters at the ends of each, here I provide a summary of aims to briefly orient readers: After the scholarly intervention of Chapter I, I wrote two shorter pieces intended to directly intervene in specific conversations about the Boundary Waters. Chapter II is a historiographical corrective intended to be read by Minnesota history teachers and historians. I will submit the draft to *Minnesota History Magazine*, the Minnesota Historical Society's peer-reviewed local history periodical. Chapter III is intended to intervene in settler environmentalist discourse, so I will submit it to the "Commentary" section of the *Star Tribune*, a widely read newspaper in the Twin Cities area.

There are significant contradictions in trying to pursue activist research that is published only in academic journals, which are often inaccessible to the public and utilize specific self-referencing systems of knowledge production and dissemination. For activist-oriented scholarly work it is imperative to share ideas outside academic publications, but the university structures currently in place do not make it easy to do so.<sup>10</sup> It was immensely challenging to complete the scholarly second chapter and mold

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<sup>10</sup> Helene Meyers addresses further challenges, including the difficulties of pushback by the public or academic peers, in her article "The Risks and Rewards of Engaging in Public Scholarship," *Inside Higher*



these ideas into the public-facing third and fourth chapters, the specific challenges of which I discuss at greater length in the conclusion. More generally, however, this was true both in terms of the time required to do so alongside the many other degree requirements as well as because of a gap in my formal training writing for audiences outside academia.

Despite calls for public scholarship to continue to increase both within and outside academia, degree programs intended to train future academics rarely require students to practice writing in registers outside the traditional seminar paper. Furthermore, the time constraints that I felt attempting to reformulate my ideas are a small example of a larger problem in which public-facing writing does not often count toward university requirements, such as for tenure review. The pressures to “publish or perish”, particularly at research-oriented universities, do not often include non-peer reviewed forums and thus, time to complete such work is often scarce. In addition to the roadblocks this poses for academics trying to publish elsewhere, this also reflects a larger problem of treating some forms of knowledge and knowledge distribution as less valuable. Academia continues to remain under fire for its “ivory tower” tendencies and calls to “decolonize” research<sup>11</sup> abound, and practices prioritizing academic publications represent significant roadblocks to such changes. The University of Oregon Environmental Studies Program allows for capstone work in the form of a “project”, but

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*Ed*, April 11, 2019, <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2019/04/11/risks-and-rewards-engaging-public-scholarship-opinion>. There are many other opinion pieces with sage advice about the potential promises and perils of public scholarship that are widely available online.

<sup>11</sup> I am critical of such efforts, as they often fall into patterns of easing settler minds while failing to contribute toward actual decolonial (or anticolonial) efforts that change material conditions for Indigenous peoples. For an excellent and by-now famous critique of such processes, see Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1–40.

even within this forward-thinking system, the project format is discouraged for those hoping to continue within academia. The format of my thesis represents my commitment to what I understand as the ethical obligation and activist necessity to publish work outside academia; however, these problems are much larger than myself and will require structural change.

### **What This Thesis is Not (or a Concession to the Pandemic)**

Most of what I understand as the limitations of the project will be addressed by my concluding chapter in the form of ideas for future directions, but there are a few particularly high-stakes limitations that I want to consider during this introduction. Because of the Covid-19 pandemic, this is not the thesis I set out to write in many ways, primary of which is that I planned to include many more first-hand accounts. In the spring of 2020 while hopes were high for a swift end to the pandemic, I optimistically wrote up an IRB protocol to conduct interviews and planned visits to the Minnesota Historical Society archives.

In my project of questioning the ways Boundary Waters histories have been told by settler scholars especially noting the absence of Indigenous stories about conservation policy, it was important to me to hear directly from Ojibwe people involved in the conservation legislation battles. However, the Ojibwe communities of individuals I wanted to speak with were hit hard by the pandemic, and I realized that the most ethical option was perhaps not to risk infecting anyone outside my quarantine pod. I attempted to rely on published first-hand accounts, but I am painfully aware of the ways such an approach falls short, particularly in the ways I am telling stories without consent or

approval by the individuals involved. I thus understand these chapters to be *early* versions of the article drafts, all subject to change after I can speak with those involved.

I also planned to get my hands dirty in the archives of the Minnesota Historical Society to reconsider some of the primary materials so many other histories of the Boundary Waters have relied on and look for more stories that had been left out or told in ways biased toward settlers and the settler government. The motor debates were really a battle over public sentiment, so plenty of primary material exists in the form of newspapers and other public published forums. However, the Historical Society has largely been closed throughout the pandemic, including during the summer I travelled to Minnesota to conduct research. Though the Historical Society research librarians were available to find small quantities of specific materials, my plan to search for materials that have not necessarily been referenced many times in the published histories was not possible. Like my plans for future interviews, I also plan to visit the archives when it is possible to do so.

Because of these limitations, I decided to pivot the project to rely more heavily on secondary historical accounts, an admittedly fraught project because I am aware of the many stories they left out. However, this approach cued me in to some of the historiographical problems I reference throughout the project, which was helpful. Beyond Covid restrictions, I also realized that a reliance on secondary accounts was much more practical for the beginning stages of the project – the Boundary Water conflicts happened over a century, so to conduct a balanced examination of public opinion through primary sources would have expanded the project beyond what could be completed in the two

years of a master's thesis. I consider the entire document a work in progress and hope to continue this research over the next year or so.

### **A Few Notes on Reflexivity**

I am particularly well-suited to write a thesis on settler listening practices in the North Woods. The first time I visited the area, I was a newborn. Though I grew up in the bluff country six hours to the south, the Gichigamiing region is one of the most significant places in my life as it is deeply intertwined with my life story: I have consumed copious amounts of snow on the area's ski slopes after crash-landing, bickered with friends about paddling technique on a river while swapping middle school gossip, dunked into Lake Superior after pre-season varsity volleyball scrimmages with local teams, and sunned on the massive granite boulders of the Superior shore while inhaling fiction in the summers. I know where to find the most impressive waterfalls and embarked on my first backpacking trip along the Superior Hiking Trail. It is also where I developed a fanatical love of wild places, which later grew into an undergraduate degree in biology focused on ecology and conservation biology, and a now-embarrassing pro-wilderness attitude including idolatry of the likes of John Muir and Sigurd Olson. In short, I grew up feeling entirely at home in northern Minnesota and come from a line of Minnesotan settlers who similarly felt at home in land that was not our own.

I say all this not as my personalized version of the oft-critiqued settler confession, but because the settler colonial listening practices, to use Dylan Robinson's phrase, from which the silence idea in the Boundary Waters stems are my own. I know them intimately because I have inhabited them all my life. Settler colonial listening is certainly not the exclusive purview of settlers. That is part of the point – that these practices have

expanded to become the dominant form of listening, exercised by nearly all, as Dylan Robinson points out. Furthermore, I tend to emphasize the ways settler colonialism manifests structurally rather than focusing on individual acts of violence – but the process of grappling with my positionality in relation to this project has been immensely personal because of the ways my family’s history is intertwined with the place, and I think it is valuable for me to share about that process, especially in case any future graduate students encounter this thesis in the future.

My great-great-grandfather on my dad’s side was the first to stake out a claim in the township in Minnesota where my family’s home is today. He may have engaged in direct physical violence toward the Dakota people who lived there, and certainly participated in nefarious land claim systems that stole land from them. I critique Sigurd Olson’s ideas a great deal in Chapter I, and his family has significant parallels with my own. The Olsons moved from Sweden to Alexandria, Minnesota in 1888 and had Sigurd in 1899. My great-great-grandfather moved from Sweden to just outside Alexandria, and my great-grandpa Hjalmer was born in 1900, one year after Sigurd. My ancestors were farmers and sportsmen who may have held beliefs about wilderness similar to Sigurd Olson’s. In other words, I am descended from the people who I am critiquing.

I am not proud to consider how much time I spent considering my own positionality within this project, especially because I am aware of the ways that this has real possibility to fall into patterns of recentering myself and of reinforcing my own dominance. Reflexivity can be a powerful tool and I believe it is essential to consider how each of our positionalities operate on and within our scholarship. Yet reflexivity can also function as a prompt for deeply unhelpful (and unhealthy) spirals of shame. I like to

think of this as like a mirror positioned across from another mirror, or perhaps like Alvin Lucier's sound work "I Am Sitting in a Room": critical considerations of my relationship to my work bounce from mirror to mirror or audio player to microphone until the result is distorted and exists only within that loop rather than the outside world. The consequences of such a reflexive loop for me were both damaging to my mental health and limiting in my progress on this project.

In the aftermath of George Floyd's murder at the hands of the Minneapolis Police, many new, often white, activists took to social media with venomous enthusiasm – I have perhaps never seen such intense manifestations of the ways white supremacy encourages us to individualize and simplify complex problems, seek perfection in progress over messiness, and jump to easy conclusions and immediate solutions. To be frank, I internalized many of these white supremacist messages, and in the heat of a charged political moment, used them to oversimplify the previously nuanced thinking on settler colonialism to which I had been exposed by my brilliant professors at the University of Oregon. Reading early notes from my research during the summer of uprisings has been an uncomfortable part of my later research process.

I am still unlearning these practices, but I have arrived at a place where I recognize that it is especially important to attend to structures that shape individual life experiences and the radical changes necessary to dismantle those structures. I also continue to work toward accepting the ideas that thinking and action toward just futures requires difficult questions, sometimes unclear steps forward, the discomfort of incommensurable differences, and something that looks like a hope that is not naïve but rather closely attends to past harm and is eyes-wide-open to the future. This thesis

operates from such a place of difficulty, ambiguity, and hopefulness and reflects some of the thinking that I have learned, particularly from fellow researchers in the Environmental Studies Program at the University of Oregon: a particularly useful application of the skills one develops in humanities training is to develop nuance into a practice, to question the stories uncritically handed across time, and to keep an eye trained on the big picture while exploring the minute. When oppressive systems seem like they have always been a certain way, their workings opaque and seemingly “natural”, it is hard to see how things can be any different. If it can be built, however, it can be unbuilt.

### **Bridge: Toward a Scholarly Interruption**

The first chapter is a draft of an article intended for an academic environmental humanities journal. I trace the construction and perpetuation of the idea of a silent Boundary Waters through looping processes of settler colonial control and violence. These processes of silencing have been literal through settler violence; metaphorical or figurative through cultural representations like Sigurd Olson’s work; legal through settler state legislation limiting who can make sounds and what sounds can be made; and historiographical through retellings of triumphant and two-sided conservation histories.

Though readers of an environmental humanities journal will likely be familiar with the ways the wilderness idea and conservation policies prioritizing it enact settler colonial violence, my primary contribution through this chapter is the idea of an empty wilderness manifests in the particularly subtle form of sound within the Boundary Waters. Because I assume a particular readership of environmental humanities thinkers, I do not spend much time explaining some of the ideas that readers from another audience may be less familiar with, including definitions of settler colonialism, in-depth

explanations of the mechanisms by which settler colonialism enacts violence, and the importance of animals.



## CHAPTER II

### A SCHOLARLY INTERRUPTION: SOUND CONSERVATION POLICY AND THE SILENT VIOLENCE OF SETTLER COLONIAL LISTENING IN THE BOUNDARY WATERS WILDERNESS

The great silences mean more than stillness. They are the ancient overpowering silences this planet knew before the advent of modern man. They included the temporary physical sounds of wind and falling water, the roar and crashing of prehistoric creatures, natural in origin and always present. [...] Today this ancient silence is increasingly hard to find.

Sigurd Olson, *Reflections from the North Country*<sup>12</sup>

On Saturday, August 7, a sunrise ceremony on the shores of Fall Lake in the boundary waters broke through the silence of this wilderness area, signalling the start of an expedition by a small group of Native Americans and some very worthy non-native supporters into the Basswood Lake area. The purpose of this trip was to begin rebuilding the home of Heart Warrior, whose cabin was burned to the ground last year by yet "unknown" persons. The real story of this area is one of deceit, greed, and racism, all perpetrated by the so-called friends of the wilderness and the US Forest Service.

Mike Chosa, *The Ojibwe News*<sup>13</sup>

The North Woods soundscape in the settler state of Minnesota is rich with the sounds of wind howling through the pine forests, waves lapping against the sides of canoes and rocky shores, and in the winter, the creaks and crunches of ice and snow. Receding glaciers carved a vast network of waterways into the land of the region and because sounds travel far across watery surfaces, the place has unusual and sometimes surprising acoustic properties. Voices of the animal communities unique to the temperate-boreal ecotone that sweeps west from Lake Superior have produced a diverse biophony<sup>14</sup>,

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<sup>12</sup> Sigurd F Olson, *Reflections from the North Country* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 37.

<sup>13</sup> Mike Chosa, "Heart Warrior Begins to Rebuild," *Ojibwe News*, August 13, 1993, 1.

<sup>14</sup> Biophony, geophony, and anthrophony are Bernie Krause's widely used terms for sounds created by living creatures, non-living sources, and human sources. I am critical of his separation of humans and animals into different categories, but the terms are useful when accompanied by acknowledgement of this problem.

which has remained largely intact in the over one million acres now federally designated as the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the area's din of bio- and geophonic sounds, it is famous among settler visitors and area environmentalists as a distinctly silent place. A long history of state anti-Indigenous violence and aggressive conservation strategies in the mid-twentieth century limited settler and Indigenous infrastructure and motor use, and thus, anthropogenic sound within the wilderness area. The anti-motor policies, which were hard-won by environmentalists after decades of debates, have legacies that echo through the Boundary Waters today. At present it is illegal to use any motorized vehicles or equipment on all but twenty-one of the over one thousand lakes within the area's boundaries, so visitors traverse almost entirely by canoe, ski, or foot. Wilderness enthusiasts widely take these policies to be evidence of successful conservation strategies and continue to celebrate them today.

Bestselling author Sigurd Olson was particularly influential in arguing for a Boundary Waters silence during the mid to late twentieth-century debates over legislation intended to limit motor use to maintain the place's silent wilderness character. In this paper, I explore how Olson's notion of a silent Boundary Waters is a sonic manifestation of the oft-critiqued settler colonial human/Nature binaries. His silence enacted and justified settler colonial violence against Ojibwe people and nonhuman animals in the

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<sup>15</sup> The area is managed by the United States Forest Service. Throughout this paper I refer to this land by a shortened version of its contemporary settler government name – the Boundary Waters, an abbreviated form of Boundary Waters Canoe Area or Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness. This name was only formalized in 1978 and the area went through many name and boundary changes prior to this, but “Boundary Waters” was used informally prior to the official change. There are Indigenous place names for waters and landmarks in the area, but none encompass the specific boundaries enacted by the settler state. Though I recognize the possible epistemological damage in reinforcing static settler boundaries, I choose to use “Boundary Waters” to highlight the settler-enforced boundaries.

Boundary Waters in part by hearing these groups as components of a nostalgic frontier wilderness that formed the backdrop to his experiences. I contextualize Olson's notion of silence using the work of sound and music theorists who have explored the ways situated listening practices are conditioned by racialized subjectivities and made universal.

Once codified into legislation, the idea of silence functioned as a form of settler colonial control over the Boundary Waters soundscape and has continued to perpetuate violence against animals and Ojibwe people. I trace the looping processes which reproduce settler listening practices and have continued to erase Indigenous presence and trivialize animals while obscuring the harm caused by settler colonial control. However, I also consider the ways animals and Ojibwe people have not always neatly fit into the silent wilderness imposed on them by the settler state and settler environmentalist aesthetic expectations, possibly disrupting some of the iterative silencing processes.

As the Boundary Waters has been threatened by extractive industry in recent years, contemporary environmentalists often continue to appeal to settler colonial conceptions of the place as silent and pristine. I conclude with an analysis of the ways such appeals will not effectively challenge mining threats because the listening practices underlying the silent wilderness idea are rooted in settler colonial logics similar to those driving resource extraction. I instead briefly consider alternative listening practices within the Boundary Waters.

### **Sound Conservation and the Construction of a Wilderness Aesthetic**

In a by-now familiar story, the characterization of the Boundary Waters as a pristine, untouched wilderness by settler wilderness enthusiasts is in direct contradiction with the area's long and contested history of human habitation and use. Dakota people

inhabited the Gichigamiing (Lake Superior) region for thousands of years and the Ojibwe migrated to the area starting in the 1720s.<sup>16</sup> When European voyageurs entered the region in search of westward waterways and resources, they established trading posts and forts and jockeyed for control of trade along Indigenous-established routes. Though foreign governments used voyageurs to develop thriving international trade networks, the Ojibwe and Dakota continued to control commerce in the area for decades.<sup>17</sup>

As settlers expanded westward and north into lake country and the Ojibwe and Dakota peoples attempted to maintain their relationships with the land, the U.S. government engaged them in increasingly violent conflicts, including attempts to strip away language and culture through assimilation programs. Throughout the early nineteenth century, Dakota were pressured and threatened into signing treaties ceding millions of acres of land, and the entire Arrowhead region around Gichigamiing was ceded to the Minnesota Territorial Government by the Lake Superior and Mississippi bands of Ojibwe in the 1854 treaty of LaPointe.<sup>18</sup> After the 1862 U.S.-Dakota War, the Dakota Expulsion Act abrogated all Dakota treaties and made it illegal for Dakota to live in the state of Minnesota, an act which still stands today. The Ojibwe reluctantly ceded most of their remaining lands in treaties at the end of the nineteenth century.

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<sup>16</sup> Recent research has demonstrated that this area of Minnesota has been home to Native people for potentially thousands of years more than was previously established. People moved with receding glaciers, which places their first inhabitation in what is now the Boundary Waters around 11,000-12,500 years ago. This expands the already long timeline of continuous connection and use of that place (beyond what had been established through oral histories). Mark P. Muñiz, "Exploring Paleoindian Occupation of Knife Lake, Superior Nation Forest, Minnesota," *Minnesota Archaeologist* 72 (January 2013): 113–57.

<sup>17</sup> Timothy Cochrane, *Gichi Bitobig, Grand Marais: Early Accounts of the Anishinaabeg and the North Shore Fur Trade* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018).

<sup>18</sup> There's significantly conflicting information about Dakota habitation in the Arrowhead region. The Dakota lived there long before the Ojibwe and the two alternately battled and were allies for centuries, but the only information I have found on land cession to the U.S. Government is of the La Pointe treaty with the Ojibwe. In my thesis work I've focused on Ojibwe land use because they have maintained formal treaty rights to the land of the Boundary Waters, but the Dakota people were also violently erased from this land and soundscape.

The state's violent removal of Ojibwe and Dakota people from their homelands intentionally further opened the North Country to colonial expansion and resource extraction, and the logging industry flourished after lumber companies took advantage of an easily defrauded homesteading system.<sup>19</sup> Intensive logging practices, including fire suppression, created conditions for dramatic alteration of species within tree communities and a significant forest fire problem, and the logging industry quickly fell into decline. In 1909, Theodore Roosevelt established 644,114 mostly burned or cutover acres as the Superior National Forest, in part, to facilitate further timber sale and harvest. The state continued to undermine Ojibwe treaty rights and tribal land ownership in subsequent decades, though the Ojibwe continuously exercised their treaty-promised "right to hunt and fish [and gather]" when possible.<sup>20</sup> Wilderness designations like those in northeastern Minnesota and elsewhere often overlapped with allotted reservation lands, effectively rendering those lands unavailable for Indigenous habitation or resource use.

With an impending collapse of the North Woods timber industry, rampant forest fires wreaking havoc on nearby towns, and increased pressure to compete with the newly established National Parks Service for support, the National Forest Service turned to recreation as a possible use for public lands in the mid-1910s.<sup>21</sup> Within the Superior National Forest, the Forest Service developed management plans that attempted to

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<sup>19</sup> For a thorough account of the northern Minnesota logging industry, see Jeff Forester, *The Forest for the Trees: How Humans Shaped the North Woods* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2010) and Agnes M. Larson, *The White Pine Industry in Minnesota: A History*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

<sup>20</sup> "1854 Treaty," 10 Stats., 1109 § (1855).

<sup>21</sup> James Kates carefully chronicles the intention of the Forest Service to build the area as a wilderness in his *Planning a Wilderness: Regenerating the Great Lakes Cutover Region* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001). David Backes explores an early and particularly influential management plan in his "Wilderness Visions: Arthur Carhart's 1922 Proposal for the Quetico-Superior Wilderness," *Forest & Conservation History* 35, no. 3 (July 1991): 128–37.

reconcile the burned and cutover areas left behind by the timber industry with the aesthetic goals required to market the place as a frontier wilderness.<sup>22</sup> As intended and encouraged by the National Forest Service, crowds of tourists enjoying post-war rising income and increased leisure time flocked to the Boundary Waters to canoe, fish, hike, snowshoe, and ski. Ely and other former logging and mining towns in the area welcomed the increased outdoor-based tourism and built large fishing resorts on some of the easily accessible lakes. Because the Boundary Waters had been established as a roadless wilderness area in 1926, quick transport of tourists in and out often involved motorized boats and hydroplanes. The loud planes especially became a source of conflict among wilderness enthusiasts, as the number of aircrafts used to drop off tourists in the area increased tenfold in the span of just a few years.<sup>23</sup>

Historian Mark Harvey has written that the wilderness enthusiasts “generally scorned the airplanes, [believing] that motor noise spoiled the solitude that made the Boundary Waters a distinctive place to gain peace and serenity away from the sights and sounds of ‘civilization.’ They contended that, besides being noisy intrusions, airplanes violated the principle that the roadless areas were to be managed for public enjoyment.”<sup>24</sup>

Local conservationists, Forest Service officials, canoe outfitters, and citizen groups worked to obtain an air-space reserve designation over the area, which became effective

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<sup>22</sup> I do not include every iteration of formal protections for the area in this thesis, but there were many additions and policy changes throughout the twentieth century that are well-documented elsewhere. There’s a fairly comprehensive timeline of government protections in the appendices of Miron L. Heinselman’s *The Boundary Waters Wilderness Ecosystem* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999). R. Newell Searle’s *Saving Quetico-Superior: A Land Set Apart*, explores early legislative battles over the area (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1977) and Kevin Proescholdt, Rip Rapson, and Miron L. Heinselman’s *Troubled Waters: The Fight for the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness* recounts later conflicts (St. Cloud, Minn: North Star Press of St. Cloud, 1995).

<sup>23</sup> Mark W. T. Harvey, “Sound Politics: Wilderness, Recreation, and Motors in the Boundary Waters, 1945-1964,” *Minnesota History* 58 (Fall 2002), 133.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

in 1951.<sup>25</sup> After a hotly contested and legally complex battle over the reservation in the following years, a judge eventually confirmed that the only legal access to the resorts in the Boundary Waters was by canoe, boat, or portage.

The plane sound conflict deepened decades-old resentment over the previous roadless area designation – and ultimately, this was a sonic issue. Harvey wrote of the final decision confirming the airspace reservation: “While effectively prohibiting flights, the ban had also crystallized public debate over sound in Minnesota’s recreational economy. Lovers of silence rejoiced.”<sup>26</sup> Lines had been drawn between the self-described pro-recreation and pro-wilderness camps. Environmentalists contended that the original management goals for the designated wilderness areas – aesthetic pleasure, spiritual nourishment, and escape from the bustle of city life – were best achieved through maintenance of quiet spaces free of human sound. This idea was reinforced in a second set of equally contentious debates over the passage of the Wilderness Act (1964) and the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness Act (1978), the latter of which expanded included acreage, removed nearly all buildings, and drastically limited motorboat usage in the protected area.

### **Sigurd Olson’s Silence**

The idea of a silent wilderness as a goal of conservation policy was widely held among Minnesota’s conservationists leading the charge for legal protections, but Sigurd

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<sup>25</sup> Later in this paper, I discuss efforts in the 1990s by Heart Warrior Chosa to resist motor laws, but it is unclear whether there were significant efforts by Ojibwe people to intervene in these debates while they were happening. Elizabeth Ley Steinson's excellent thesis “Ojibwe Absent Narratives in Minnesota Forest Park History” (St. Cloud, MN, St. Cloud State University, 2018) works to address a dearth of absent narratives of Ojibwe resistance to conservation in Minnesota. However, Steinson primarily focuses on the Chippewa National Forest and the Leech Lake Reservation in the north-central region of the state.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 136.

Olson's writing and advocacy work was particularly influential.<sup>27</sup> Olson, who was also a wilderness guide, fervently believed that the Boundary Waters area was among the last of America's wild places and fought for most of his life to establish what he understood as legislative protections for it. Across his many published writings, he developed a wilderness philosophy that skillfully wove together reflections on his experiences in the Boundary Waters, philosophical speculation, and his knowledge of the region's geology and ecology.

To Olson, close attention to a place's specific characteristics was foundational to developing a sense of familiarity with the place and thus, a desire to fight for it. Descriptions of the sounds and sights of the Boundary Waters pepper his writing, but he believed true wilderness experience was best entered into and represented by silence. As environmental historian Peter A. Coates has written, quoting Olson's 1956 *Wilderness Days*, "For Olson, silence was more than just an attribute of a wild place. Silence was its essence. 'Without it the vision of unchanged landscape means little more than rocks and trees and mountains.'"<sup>28</sup> Environmental planner Kristof Van Assche's analysis of Olson's works likewise interprets silence as one of the most important themes in his wilderness philosophy. Van Assche writes that silence was to Olson both "a precondition for a

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<sup>27</sup> I primarily focus on Sigurd Olson in this thesis and often use possessive language that implies the Boundary Waters silence is Olson's, but do not intend to establish his exclusive development and control over the idea. In future work I plan to expand the silent Boundary Waters wilderness idea by exploring similar iterations in the work of other conservationists, including Arthur Carhart, Ernest Oberholtzer, and Miron Heinselman. It would also be useful to trace the connections between Olson and his on-again-off-again mentor, Aldo Leopold.

<sup>28</sup> Peter A. Coates, "The Strange Stillness of the Past: Toward an Environmental History of Sound and Noise," *Environmental History* 10, no. 4 (2005): 650–51; quoting Sigurd F. Olson, Olson, *The Singing Wilderness* (New York: Knopf, 1956), 130-32.



philosophical transformation of place and self” and “a necessary context to make a physical place a spiritual place and to turn a canoe trip into a self-discovery.”<sup>29</sup>

Olson understood a journey into the Boundary Waters as a journey into a fictional version of the past where settlers dominated the land, and he heard that frontier past in his present soundscape. He was fascinated by the voyageurs; accounts of the voices of former settler inhabitants feature prominently in his writing. In his 1956 book *The Singing Wilderness*, for instance, Olson declared that someone who successfully navigates river rapids can hear “all the voyageurs of the past join the rapids in their shouting.”<sup>30</sup> Olson “listened” backward in time and could hear past voyageur voices. He did not similarly hear voices of the Ojibwe and Dakota people who, until half a century earlier, had maintained thriving settlements in the North Woods and whose generations of place-specific knowledge guided the voyageurs and controlled the fur trade economy. In Olson’s time, Ojibwe people continued to maintain a presence within the area due to treaty-promised subsistence rights, but the settler project to remove them from that piece of land was largely successful. Within Olson’s present-day Boundary Waters soundscape, Dakota people and to some extent, Ojibwe people, had been literally silenced by decades of settler colonial violence enacted by the Minnesota government.

This erasure was a conscious one, as Olson was certainly aware of the long history of Ojibwe presence in the area. On his guided canoe trips, he frequently shared

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<sup>29</sup> Kristof Van Assche, “Semiotics of Silent Lakes: Sigurd Olson and the Interlacing of Writing, Policy and Planning,” *Journal of Environmental Policy & Planning* 17, no. 2 (March 15, 2015): 267. Notably, Van Assche develops specific environmental planning recommendations from Olson’s work in this article as well as in Kristof Van Assche and Felip Costaglioli, “Silent Places, Silent Plans: Silent Signification and the Study of Place Transformation,” *Planning Theory* 11, no. 2 (May 2012): 128–47; and Kristof Van Assche and Ming Chien Lo, “Planning, Preservation and Place Branding: A Tale of Sharing Assets and Narratives,” *Place Branding & Public Diplomacy* 7, no. 2 (May 2011): 116–26.

<sup>30</sup> Olson, *Singing Wilderness*, 80.

information about settler and Native human histories and often showed clients the sites of former Ojibwe villages. However, Indigenous history and natural history blended together for Olson; his biographer David Backes wrote about Olson's love of Lac la Croix that "his enjoyment of [the lake] was enhanced by his knowledge of the location where Ojibwe warriors long ago staged races and by the reddish-brown pictographs along the cliffs of Shortiss Island."<sup>31</sup> Where Olson did acknowledge Ojibwe presence and influence in the region, he framed them as long gone, a part of a history so distant that it was essentially geologic.<sup>32</sup> Within the nostalgic soundscapes of his "mythology of the north", to quote Van Assche, Native people were silent.<sup>33</sup>

In a soundscape largely emptied of Indigenous sounds and settler infrastructure, abundant animal communities became the dominant sonic feature of the soundscape, but animals experienced a different kind of silencing within his philosophy. To be sure, many individual animal lives in the region were lost through exploitation by the fur trade and habitat loss due to land use. Wolves and other predators were especially targeted for population reduction due to poorly conceived management practices. However, the settler government generally managed the Superior region in ways that sought to maintain animal presence or, at least, did not actively seek to remove them.

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<sup>31</sup> David Backes, *A Wilderness Within: The Life of Sigurd F. Olson*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 251.

<sup>32</sup> It is unclear whether Olson interacted with any Ojibwe people in his present. His champion and biographer David Backes leaves out anything about the Ojibwe in publications on Olson's life and work other than the note I include later in this paragraph and a brief anecdote about Olson's honeymoon where he and his new wife were terrified after seeing a sign that said "Wild Man, last seen east just across the portage." I plan to consult Olson's journals in future work to explore this question, but will need to explore the unedited journals as, again, Backes edited their recent publication. That said, I would not be surprised if Olson had not had many interactions with Ojibwe people. It seems that he genuinely believed that Indigenous peoples were long gone.

<sup>33</sup> Van Assche, "Semiotics of Silent Lakes."

Olson's writing reflects an abundance of animals in the Boundary Waters, with frequent references to animal sounds – yet these references often exist in conflict with the great silence central to his wilderness philosophy. For example, in a passage ruminating on a listening experience from atop Robinson Peak, Olson wrote that he “became conscious of the slow, steady hum of millions of insects and through it the calling of the whitethroats and the violin notes of the hermit thrushes” which “gradually [...] merged one with another, blending in a great enveloping softness of sound no louder, it seemed, than my breathing.”<sup>34</sup> In his hearing of the place, the nonhuman sounds, which are wildly differentiated and rich with meaning within nonhuman communities, become part of a dull ambience that constitutes the silent background against which his experience take the foreground. In the interactions between Olson as listener and animals as listened-to, the animals do not have agency or any sort of individual importance; they are generally subsumed into the silence. Though Olson often wrote of the importance of feeling connected to a non-human nature and is frequently lauded for his attention to human relationships with environments, the animal sounds he heard remained fundamentally apart from his human experience and were subsumed into a silent wilderness that prioritized conceptions of Nature on the other side of the binary from him.

### **Settler Colonial Listening Subjectivities**

Sigurd Olson and other advocates for silence in the Boundary Waters likely would have been disturbed by a *truly* silent soundscape. As Rachel Carson so famously demonstrated in her 1962 classic, *Silent Spring*, non-human environments devoid of sound likely indicate serious damage. Sound and silence are rooted in materiality. Our

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<sup>34</sup> Olson, *Singing Wilderness*, 130.

listening to the world involves precise physiological processes, to be sure, but listening also shapes and is shaped by individual positionalities inflected by different experiences in the world.<sup>35</sup> Because we share experiences of soundscapes, disagreements may result from differing positionalities and sound preferences, which was certainly the case in the mid- to late twentieth-century debates over motor policies in the Boundary Waters.

Sound studies scholar Karen Bijsterveld puts this simply: “Hearing has a highly subjective side to it: sounds that annoy some people are music to the ears of others.”<sup>36</sup>

Olson’s frontier silence may have been rooted in momentary lulls in the physical sounds present with him in the Boundary Waters, but other listeners perceiving from different subject positions could interpret those same moments in dramatically different ways.

Differing positionalities are especially shaped by experiences with systems of oppression. Stó:lō scholar of Indigenous arts Dylan Robinson has specifically theorized listening experiences as they manifest from subjectivities structured by settler colonialism in his concept of “settler colonial listening positionalities”.<sup>37</sup> He calls the settler listening practices that often grow out of settler positionalities “shxwelítémelh xwélalà:m,” or “hungry listening”, after the Halq’eméylem words for settler or starving person and listening. These practices, which he primarily theorizes within sound art and music contexts, center around settler desires to consume Indigenous aesthetics in ways that

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<sup>35</sup> Scholars of music and sound have and continue to move through many reckonings with normative disciplinary traditions treating sound and listening as objective or absolute. There have been, however, many brilliant demonstrations of the ways that notions of music, noise, sound, and silence are contingent and vary widely according to cultures, places, and times. Sound studies scholars have particularly shown that the ways we listen to sounds even beyond the concentrated thick nodes of cultural practice that we often call music or sound art are always socially and culturally constituted. Studies of sound perception have demonstrated similar cultural conditioning.

<sup>36</sup> Karin Bijsterveld, *Mechanical Sound: Technology, Culture, and Public Problems of Noise in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008), 2.

<sup>37</sup> Dylan Robinson, *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020).

erase Indigenous artists and supplant them as keepers of cultural practices. Because settler and Indigenous aesthetic frameworks and practices are often incommensurable, as Robinson points out, this results in epistemological violence and erasure of Indigenous peoples and culture.

Sigurd Olson, operating from a settler colonial listening positionality, engaged in hungry listening to the Boundary Waters soundscape. He heard the Boundary Waters in accordance with his own aesthetic sonic values reinforcing the place as a silent and empty frontier wilderness, which had been partly literally accomplished through physical violence against Native peoples by the state. His hearing of the past Boundary Waters soundscape as figuratively emptied of Ojibwe people prepared the way for him to “become Native.” By hearing his ideal wilderness, his listening practices allowed him to supplant Ojibwe people as the intimate knowers and inhabitants of the Boundary Waters, justifying his presence there and erasing evidence of the construction of this idea as well as its violence. Olson writes of the way knowing silence means knowing the land in his 1958 *Listening Point*, “[silence] is being in tune with waters and rocks, with vistas and horizons, with constellations and the infinity of time and space.”<sup>38</sup>

The dynamics of Olson’s listening to animals as part of the silent Boundary Waters soundscape work in different, though related, ways. Olson’s experience of hearing animals as part of the ambient and silent background of the Boundary Waters aligns with settler colonial patterns of thought and action that deem humans as fundamentally different from and superior to animals, even as he rhapsodizes about the interconnectedness of all beings. The animal sounds that Olson hears as ambient

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<sup>38</sup> Sigurd Olson, *Listening Point* (New York: Knopf, 1958), 13.

constitute the “Nature” side of binary thinking which allows him to experience the place from a position outside the nonhuman Nature. This thinking, made manifest in his hearing of animals as the silent background to his Boundary Waters experience, casts animals as without agency and as resources to be used.

Furthermore, scholars have noted the ways notions of difference have been constructed against cultural beliefs about humanness that rely on animality as a social category by which Other social categories are constructed.<sup>39</sup> Musicologist and animal studies scholar Rachel Mundy advocates “not just that we listen to animals, but that we hear the way we listen” (following art critic John Berger’s claims about our role as observers of animals in *About Looking*<sup>40</sup>). She writes,

Listening is a practice that has been built with, against, and through cultural beliefs about interiority and human identity that rely on animals—not any animal, but ‘the’ animal, the category of the animal—to persist. In hearing ourselves listen to animals, we can begin to notice foundational notions of difference that inform both how we hear, and how we see, animals and other Others.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> See, for example, Claire Jean Kim, *Dangerous Crossings: Race, Species, and Nature in a Multicultural Age* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Aph Ko and Syl Ko, *Aphro-Isms: Essays on Pop Culture, Feminism, and Black Veganism from Two Sisters* (Brooklyn: Red Wheel/Weiser, 2017); Simon Springer, “Check Your Anthroprivilege! Situated Knowledge and Geographical Imagination as an Antidote to Environmental Speciesism, Anthroparchy, and Human Fragility,” in *Vegan Geographies: Ethics Beyond Violence*, ed. Paul Hodge et al., 2019; Kelly Struthers Montford and Chloë Taylor, *Colonialism and Animality: Anti-Colonial Perspectives in Critical Animal Studies* (Routledge, 2020); David N. Pellow, *What Is Critical Environmental Justice?* (Medford, MA, USA: Polity Press, 2018).

<sup>40</sup> John Berger, *About Looking* (New York: Vintage International, 1991).

<sup>41</sup> Rachel Mundy, “Why Listen to Animals?,” *Musicology Now*, October 17, 2018; see also Mundy’s *Animal Musicalities: Birds, Beasts, and Evolutionary Listening* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2018).

The animal sounds that Olson hears form the silent and empty background of Nature that exists on the other side of the binary opposite him, where he also casts Indigenous people. In other words, Olson’s racialized hearing of the Boundary Waters silence is possible because of his understanding that he is apart from or unlike Nature, and that belief is built against and through ambient animal sounds.

Olson’s Boundary Waters silence, like many other dominant cultural practices and beliefs, is a potent concept in part because of his explicit claims of its naturalness, universality, timelessness, and objectivity throughout his published writings. As he expressed in his 1998 *Reflections from the North Country*,

The great silences mean more than stillness. They are the ancient overpowering silences this planet knew before the advent of modern man [...] natural in origin and always present. The silence itself [...] dealt with distance, timelessness, and perception, a sense of being engulfed by something greater where minor sounds were only a part, a hush embedded in our consciousness.<sup>42</sup>

Olson frames the silence as “ancient” and “natural in origin” rather than constructed through physical and epistemological violence against Ojibwe people or against animal sounds.

Scholars of music and sound art have pointed to the ways racialized listening practices – what Robinson refers to as settler colonial listening positionalities – often obscure their situatedness and production by claiming a universal position.<sup>43</sup> Sound

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<sup>42</sup> Olson, *Reflections*, 37.

<sup>43</sup> Robinson notes that “shxwelítémelh xwélalà:m [hungry listening] does not reduce simply to ‘listening through whiteness;’” but rather “is a state of perception irreducible to racial identity” which “must be understood on a continuum of listening practices that includes subtle and significant gradations of

studies scholar Marie Thompson has written of a universalizing listening practice similar to Robinson's settler colonial listening positionality which she calls "white aurality" (after Nikki Sullivan's "white optics")<sup>44</sup>:

White aurality can be understood as not just relying upon but actively producing a series of bifurcations [...]: it amplifies the materiality of 'sound itself' while muffling its sociality; [...] amplifies dualisms of nature/culture, matter/meaning, real/representation, sound art/music and muffles boundary work; all the while invisibilizing its own constitutive presence in hearing the ontological conditions of sound-itself.<sup>45</sup>

Olson's settler colonial listening practices not only erase Ojibwe people and trivialize animals sounds, but also by seeming universal and ever-present, erase evidence of their construction.

Musicologist Jennifer Stoeber evokes pre-eminent Black sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois in her related concept of a sonic color line through which "whites not only have been conditioned to see and hear the world differently but also have labeled and

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normativity" (Robinson, *Hungry Listening*, 3). While his point of the irreducibility of colonial listening practice to racial identity is well taken, I understand both Robinson's concept of hungry listening and the theorists working with the concept of "whiteness" that I reference here to resonate because they are both identifying structural oppression. In the following comments on whiteness and listening, I understand the scholars to be referring to whiteness as an important structuring component of white supremacy and not just a racial identity. It is worth noting that Marie Thompson's and Jennifer Stoeber's studies focus on Blackness. The particularities of constructions of Indigeneity and Blackness differ, of course: Blackness is often framed as a sonic "too-muchness" while Indigeneity involves a disappearing process. In both distinct processes of racialization, however, whiteness becomes the universalizing, dominant mode of existence.

<sup>44</sup> Marie Thompson develops her concept of white aurality in reaction to Christoph Cox's sonic ontology theory as explained in his 2018 book, *Sonic Flux: Sound, Art, and Metaphysics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018). There are important resonances between Olson's silent Boundary Waters ideas and Cox's formulation of a sonic ontology as a fundamental and primeval vibration that has always existed, but that certain exceptional (mostly white) sound artists and listeners are able to tap. Thompson, "Whiteness and the Ontological Turn in Sound Studies," *Parallax* 23, no. 3 (July 3, 2017): 266–82.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.



propagated this sensory configuration as universal, objective truth.”<sup>46</sup> Importantly, Stoever writes that it is not that whiteness is truly unmarked, “but rather that Americans are socialized to perceive [the sonic markers of whiteness] as the keynote of American identity.”<sup>47</sup> Olson’s silence is not neutral or objective, but those indoctrinated in the empty wilderness idea may hear silence as the natural state of the place. In a settler colonial state where claims to naturalness often are paired with claims to land, settler listeners may hear a silent (empty) wilderness as an important component of their identity as Americans.

Olson then frames the “natural” silence as endangered: he wrote in *The Singing Wilderness*,

In our cities the constant beat of strange and foreign wave lengths on our primal senses beats us into neuroticism, changes us from creatures who once knew the silences to fretful, uncertain beings immersed in a cacophony of noise which destroys sanity and equilibrium.<sup>48</sup>

When the “natural” silence is under threat by civilization, its protection seems especially urgent and morally charged. Environmentalists’ work becomes clear: to preserve the silence through legislation. Through the passage of the motor ban laws, settler colonialism as located in Olson’s internal listening practices and inflected by his subjectivity and norms about wilderness aesthetics are relocated *externally* to enact tangible change on the land and its inhabitants. The Boundary Waters silence that Olson imagined, already partly enacted by ongoing settler colonial removal of Indigenous

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<sup>46</sup> Jennifer Lynn Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 10.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>48</sup> Olson, *Singing Wilderness*, 131.

peoples, becomes more literal through the anti-motor laws. This reinscribes settler colonial control of land and further erases evidence of violence and the processes by which the silence was constructed, thus precluding future accountability.

### **Enforced Listening and Limited Sounds**

Olson's settler colonial listening does not neatly superimpose on top of listening practices operating from Other(ed) positionalities which may deem certain sounds appropriate or not in ways that do not align with settler listening practices. Though his silence as representation does not fully occlude other listening practices, when embedded in the state's legal system, it does have the potential to limit who can make sounds and which sounds can be made within the Boundary Waters. As Stoever writes of a racialized listening practice similar to hungry listening, "the listening ear has evolved to become the only way to listen, interpret, and understand; in legal discourse, the listening ear claims to be how any 'reasonable person' should listen."<sup>49</sup>

A particularly significant instance of Olson's silence limiting sounds that do not align with settler colonial wilderness listening values occurred after the passage of the motor vehicle legislation through the 2000 court case, *US v. Gotchnik*. In a parallel development to the state anti-motor use legislation, the Minnesota Chippewa bands' own natural resource programs (funded in part by the U. S. Department of the Interior) concurrently developed a conservation code that did not prohibit the use of motorized vehicles or equipment to travel in the ceded territory.<sup>50</sup> The two conflicting policies existed in tension until they came to a head in the late 1990s on Basswood Lake, a nearly

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<sup>49</sup> Stoever, *Sonic Color Line*, 16.

<sup>50</sup> Eric Freedman, "When Indigenous Rights and Wilderness Collide: Prosecution of Native Americans for Using Motors in Minnesota's Boundary Waters Canoe Wilderness Area," *American Indian Quarterly* 26, no. 3 (2002): 378-92.

26,000-acre body of water on the border between the United States and Canada. In the spring and summer months of 1998 through 1999, four members of the Bois Forte band of Chippewa were cited as violating the federal law that banned motorized vehicle, boat, and equipment use in off-reservation national forest wilderness areas: Mark Stepec received a ticket in April of 1998 when his motorized all-terrain vehicle and equipment broke through the ice while ice fishing; three months later, David Gotchnik was cited for crossing the lake to fish with an eight-horsepower motor attached to his canoe; and in May 1999, Gotchnik, Terry Anderson, and Thomas Anderson all received citations for using outboard motors while fishing.<sup>51</sup>

The men contested the citations, asserting that their motor usage demonstrated a lawful exercise of their treaty rights. U.S. District Judge Ann Montgomery rejected the defense on two grounds: that the parties involved with the 1854 treaty would not have understood or intended the treaty rights to include motorized transportation means, and that the motor ban in the Boundary Waters was necessary for conservation purposes. The case was appealed and heard in the Eighth Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals, where a three-judge panel unanimously upheld the convictions; Chief Judge Roger Wollman wrote that “a motorboat, all-terrain vehicle or helicopter for that matter may make it easier to reach a preferred fishing or hunting spot within the Boundary Waters Area, but the use of such motorized conveyances is not part and parcel of the projected act of hunting or fishing, as is the use of a rifle, ice augur or other hunting or fishing instrument.”<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> The Gotchnik case is included as a brief example in Mark Woods’ “Trammeling People 1: The Imperial Argument,” in *Rethinking Wilderness* (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2017), 123–48.

<sup>52</sup> *US v. Gotchnik*, No. 99–4288 (United States Court of Appeals for the Eighth Court August 21, 2000), 510.

The defendants filed a petition to the U.S. Supreme Court, arguing that previous cases indicated that tribal members were not held to using only technology available at the time of treaty signing and that legislation imposing the no-motor ban on the Boundary Waters was not intended to restrict treaty rights. In his study of the case, legal scholar Eric M. Freedman argued that perhaps most important in the decision were the potential consequences for public policy when the Eighth Circuit decision was allowed to stand: “The no-motor restrictions effectively render the rights reserved under the 1854 Treaty meaningless because they prevent subsistence harvesting by tribal parties to the treaty in large parts of the BWCA.”<sup>53</sup> The prosecution’s Supreme Court filing argued that the motorboat restrictions were necessary to avoid human intrusion in the congressionally defined wilderness area. On May 29, 2001, the U.S. Supreme Court denied the defendants’ petition, refusing to accept the case for review and upholding the Court of Appeals decision.

US v. Gotchnik was the first fully litigated case that involved traditional ways of life and treaty rights within a federally designated wilderness, and thus it set an important precedent for similar conflicts. Freedman emphasized that “the legal and public policy ramifications of the Gotchnik decision are not limited by geography to the Boundary Waters but may apply to other public lands ceded under treaties [...] nor are the ramifications limited to disputes stemming from the specific 1854 treaty whose rights the defendants in Gotchnik sought to exercise [...] whether these decisions are made by courts, Congress, or administrative agencies.”<sup>54</sup> Similar cases have been tried with varying degrees of success, but usually with decisions to the detriment of Indigenous

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<sup>53</sup> Freedman, “When Indigenous Rights and Wilderness Collide,” 384.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 380.

people in the name of protections for federally protected wilderness areas. Ultimately, the decision functioned to enforce the settlers' historical (silent) understanding of Ojibwe participation in the Boundary Waters soundscape, further erasing their presence.

Though the Gotchnik case is a perhaps more obvious example of enforcement of Olson's silence serving to impede other listening positionalities, non-human animals are also limited, albeit in different ways. In the short term, a Boundary Waters soundscape with fewer loud motor sounds actually protects non-humans from damages like hearing loss, increased stress response, communication interference, and reproductive challenges – all of which can result from an abundance of loud sounds.<sup>55</sup> Animal protection was often used as a rhetorical strategy by Boundary Waters conservationists during the motor conflicts. The Boundary Waters Act itself made this explicit, as it was designed to “provide for the protection and management of the fish and wildlife of the wilderness so as to enhance public enjoyment and appreciation of the unique biotic resources of the region” (italics mine).<sup>56</sup> Despite the animals' apparent key role in conservation debates, however, there have not, and never have been, any attempts to give animals any formal representation in debates over motor policies. Furthermore, and ultimately, animals are often instrumentalized in service of gaining the environmental “protections” that most often reinforce manifestations of settler listening positionalities, and, therefore, settler colonialism.

As many Indigenous scholars have shown, the fates of animals and Indigenous people are inextricably tied together. This is, in part, because of often dramatically

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<sup>55</sup> See, for example, Catherine P. Ortega, “Effects of Noise Pollution on Birds: A Brief Review of Our Knowledge,” *Ornithological Monographs* 74, no. 1 (July 2012): 6–22.

<sup>56</sup> U.S. House of Representatives, “Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness Act (Boundary Waters Act),” Pub. L. No. 95–495, 92 Stat. 1649 (1978).

different Indigenous systems of interspecies relationality that may result in less extractive relationships between humans and nonhuman animals than settler systems. As Billy-Ray Belcourt has written, “settler colonialism wants to produce animal bodies as commodities embedded in a global economy of reiterated deathliness. Said differently, animal bodies that are inserted into capitalist spaces of commodity production are always already scheduled for death to be consumed as meat, clothing, scientific data, and so forth.”<sup>57</sup>

Further, in addition to ongoing violence toward Indigenous people, environmentalism that fails to meaningfully work toward deconstruction of settler colonialism (including binary human/nature thinking like in Olson’s) continues to result in physical damages to animals through the continuation of a system that deems both animals’ and Indigenous peoples’ bodies and lives as expendable. And what’s worse, because settler listening positionalities maintain a dominant way of thinking that causes animals harm, environmentalism that uses animals as a justification for environmental protections ultimately uses them as metaphors in service of their own harm.

### **Sonic Environmental Privilege**

As Kyle Whyte has pointed out, one of the ways settlers today sustain the illusion of a moral high ground and thus maintain settler colonial control is

to ensure that permanent settlement involves terraforming the landscape to reflect settler economies, cultures, and visions for the future so that there are few if any physical or ecological traces of Indigenous economies, cultures, and visions.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Billy-Ray Belcourt, “Animal Bodies, Colonial Subjects: (Re)Locating Animality in Decolonial Thought,” *Societies* 5, no. 1 (December 24, 2014): 9.

<sup>58</sup> Kyle Powys Whyte, “On Resilient Parasitisms, or Why I’m Skeptical of Indigenous/Settler Reconciliation,” *Journal of Global Ethics* 14, no. 2 (May 4, 2018): 285.

As stated previously, settlers intentionally constructed the silence of the Boundary Waters wilderness through historical instances of settler colonial violence. In the writing of Olson and other conservation work, they metaphorically erased the Ojibwe people and animals from the soundscape, and this silence was enshrined in and enforced via settler law. These practices, however, can be difficult to detect in the contemporary North Woods soundscape.

Manifestation of settler control via terraforming in soundscapes may perhaps be an even more subtle working than visual manipulation of landscapes. I do not intend to replicate the many stereotyped ways sound is fundamentally different from the visual – what sound studies scholar Jonathan Sterne has called the “audio-visual litany”<sup>59</sup> – but as Jennifer Stoever usefully writes (quoting Sterne),

Because racism seems to be a “discourse of power that thinks with the eyes” in a culture driven by an “overdetermined politics of looking,” sound has served as a repository of apprehension, oppression, and confrontation, rendered secondary – invisible – by visually driven epistemologies. Far from being vision’s opposite, sound frequently appears to be visibility’s doppelganger in U.S. racial history, unacknowledged but ever present in the construction of race in the performance of racial oppression.<sup>60</sup>

The Boundary Waters silence is particularly excellent at covering up its intentional construction and the ways it has been and continues to enact violence; settler control literally makes itself inaudible. As it stems from settler colonial listening

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<sup>59</sup> Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 8.

<sup>60</sup> Stoever, *Sonic Color Line*, 8.

positionality, the silence conforms to settler aesthetic expectations for wilderness soundscapes, particularly where it can even feel pleasant and calming, a form of sonic environmental privilege. Framings of the silence as primordial and existing before humans were present there, like Olson and other conservationists have done, makes it seem natural. Furthermore, as the Boundary Waters is an important study site for ecological research, scientific quantifications of the place's wilderness character are used to claim objectivity and naturalness.<sup>61</sup>

Landscape architect Anita Bakshi writes of “the portrayal of landscapes as tranquil, neutral, and quiet” as a representational logic that obscures ongoing processes of land exploitation.<sup>62</sup> She writes of literally toxic settler colonial landscapes,

concealment can take place at the scale of bodily experience. Walking through sites where pollution dwells quietly below the surface, there may be no markers, or at least no markers that can appropriately convey the scale, extent, and drama of the contamination.<sup>63</sup>

Though the Boundary Waters has so far not been significantly polluted to the extent Bakshi discusses, the same logics of representation are at work to hide the workings of settler colonial control. The place today is widely known within the public imaginary as “tranquil, neutral, and quiet” (in no small part, due to legacies of Sigurd Olson's writing). Not only does this hide the harm the silent wilderness causes to those outside the dominant listening positionality, but it also limits accountability: “Landscapes can help us

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<sup>61</sup> An excellent example of this is James Tricker et al., “Mapping Wilderness Character in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness,” General Technical Report (Fort Collins, CO: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Research Station, April 2017).

<sup>62</sup> Anita Bakshi, “Contaminated Representations,” *e-flux Architecture*, October 19, 2020 .

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*



[settlers] to believe that all is well and good and that we don't really need to organize to force the government or corporations to clean the toxins from the soil” – or in the case of the Boundary Waters, consider anticolonial management strategies that prioritize animal wellbeing and Ojibwe sovereignty.

### **Interrupting Silence**

The violence hidden within the pleasant and seemingly objectively quiet Boundary Waters soundscape is further exacerbated through historical representations of the place and the motor debates. Many have written about the frequent conflicts over Boundary Waters conservation throughout the twentieth century through today. Yet in these many publications, Boundary Waters history is rarely told with significant inclusion of stories about settler colonial violence, nonhuman animal agency, or Ojibwe survival, resistance, or even existence.<sup>64</sup> Ojibwe participation is most often limited to the first few scene-setting pages alongside natural historical context. Ojibwe people, it seems from these accounts, existed primarily alongside long-ago processes of glaciation and species distribution, then ceased to exist. Nonhuman Boundary Waters communities are certainly not taken seriously as other stakeholders in most of the histories and are either instrumentalized as rhetorical tools or left out altogether.<sup>65</sup>

Within the many accounts of conservation in the Boundary Waters, authors typically frame the motor debates as two-sided, with a clear group of heroes fighting for

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<sup>64</sup> These omissions are especially notable on the extensive USFS webpages about the Boundary Waters filled with timelines of policy events and descriptions of places and pieces of legislation. On these pages, the anonymous authors rarely even make the preliminary attempts at recognition of past violence that seem to be common to contemporary settler governments seeking reconciliation.

<sup>65</sup> With the notable exception, perhaps, of Clifford E. Ahlgren and Isabel Ahlgren, *Lob Trees in the Wilderness: The Human and Natural History of the Boundary Waters* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

Nature against villainous industry interests. As David Backes has written of the conflicts, “Participants fortified the boundaries of their own images of the region, closed off access to other viewpoints, and joined battle to dominate public opinion. The resulting rhetoric was often black and white.”<sup>66</sup> The two-sided manner of recounting the history of the debates may make for engaging storytelling that aligns with straightforward environmentalist-as-hero narrative expectations. These conservation debates, however, included more stakeholders than just industry advocates and conservationists, even if conflicts most often looked two-sided in the formal halls of policymaking. This historiographical problem is not only a further silencing of Ojibwe people and animals that erases long histories of relationship with and care for the land, but it also misses important stories where the internal contradictions of the wilderness idea are laid bare and where the reproduction of hungry listening, specifically, and settler colonialism, broadly, have been interrupted.

And there certainly are many such instances of disruption from both Ojibwe people and nonhuman animals where they do not fit neatly into the story told to justify the silent wilderness. Ojibwe people have refused to simply accept the anti-motor laws’ intrusions on their treaty rights, as *US v. Gotchnik* clearly demonstrates. The case also highlights a moment of Ojibwe survivance that was particularly audible: the reverberation of the mens’ motorized sounds literally disrupted the Boundary Waters silence as well as legally disrupted the easy narrative that the motor laws were morally good. Another brilliant figure of Ojibwe disruption of settler colonial listening is Heart Warrior Chosa, who ran for mayor of Ely in 1989 (as the city’s first woman and first

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<sup>66</sup> David Backes, “Wilderness Visions: Arthur Carhart’s 1922 Proposal for the Quetico-Superior Wilderness,” *Forest & Conservation History* 35, no. 3 (July 1991): 134.

Native candidate) and then in 1990 ran for governor as the Earth Federation candidate. She won neither seat, but made impressive runs in both: despite starting her campaign one month before the mayoral race, she received a third of the vote, and during the gubernatorial election, won 23,000 votes even while sustaining four separate attacks on her person and campaign.<sup>67</sup> Though her wide-ranging platform in the governor's race was "strong on basic democracy issues ignored by the other candidates" and particularly targeted "concerned voters and traditional non-voters disenchanted with the system," her run was primarily centered around environmental issues.<sup>68</sup> Chosa focused her platform on critique of heavy metal mining surveys and the then-fledgling free trade agreements which were to allow multinational corporations to exploit places like the Boundary Waters for natural resources.

Chosa's environmental goals also included strong opposition to the motor bans, an issue she and her family had fought for years and which directly complicates straightforward historical narratives pitting the pro-environment and pro-motor camps against one another. She often aligned herself with those seeking to bolster the North Woods tourism economy and was sympathetic to mine workers even as she vehemently opposed the industry. Instead of assigning blame for extraction and environmental degradation to working-class supporters of industry, on the one hand, or vilifying the conservationists' many shortcomings, on the other, Chosa identified the *state* and its partnerships with extractive corporations as the problems: a self-described main effort of hers was "to bring attention to the Minnesota government's sell out of the BWCA

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<sup>67</sup> *Judith Ann (Heart Warrior) Chosa*, Portrait, 1991, <https://www.pbs.org/video/may-23-1991-14636/>.

<sup>68</sup> "Heart Warrior Chosa Files Candidacy for Governor," *Ojibwe News*, July 18, 1990.

watershed and tourism-based economy of all northern Minnesota.”<sup>69</sup> While writing about her platform in an October 3, 1999 *Ojibwe News* editorial, she wrote that

We, in Minnesota, can see these forces at work in our own state government [...] [mining corporations] poison the BWCA Watershed, extracting its minerals that will poison the farm fields (food chain), destroy a tourism-based economy in northern Minnesota and cripple the US by destroying one-third of the population downstream from this watershed. [...] The corporations control the US and profit all the way around.<sup>70</sup>

Chosa and her family members were the last Ojibwe people legally allowed to live in the Boundary Waters and continued to maintain residence there even while Olson and other conservationists fought for the motor laws using their rhetoric of the place as an untouched and silent wilderness. The lifetime provision in the 1978 Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness Act otherwise eliminating residences and businesses on Basswood Lake allowed the Chosas to remain until their homes were abandoned or destroyed. However, as Mike Chosa reported in a 1993 *Ojibwe News* article, Heart Warrior’s cabin “was burned to the ground last year [1992] by yet ‘unknown’ persons” – “unknown”, though “on the night of the cabin fire, it was known by several witnesses that U.S. forestry personnel were in the Basswood area.”<sup>71</sup> Investigators determined that the fire was caused not by lightning, as the Forest Service had claimed, “but was probably intentionally set.” Mike Chosa puts it plainly: “The real story of this area is one of deceit, greed, and racism, all perpetrated by the so-called friends of the wilderness and the US

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Heart Warrior Chosa, “Voice from the Boundary Waters,” *Ojibwe News*, October 3, 1990.

<sup>71</sup> Mike Chosa, “Heart Warrior Begins to Rebuild,” *Ojibwe News*, August 13, 1993, 1.

Forest Service.” Mike Chosa’s *Ojibwe News* article recounted that a group of Ojibwe friends and family of Heart Warrior, trailed closely by Forest Service employees, had travelled out to the cabin site to begin to rebuild after the fire. He reported: “On Saturday, August 7, a sunrise ceremony on the shores of Fall Lake in the boundary waters broke through the silence of this wilderness area, signaling the start of [the expedition] to begin rebuilding the home of Heart Warrior.” The sounds of their ceremony challenged the silent wilderness, momentarily interrupting the imposed settler colonial listening and flagging the beginning of a trip to rebuild Heart Warrior’s cabin – to reclaim a home and a land lost to settler colonial violence.<sup>72</sup>

Nonhuman animals have interrupted reproduction of settler colonialism as well, though in different ways than the intentional disruptions by Heart Warrior Chosa and the men involved with *US v. Gotchnik*.<sup>73</sup> Where these Ojibwe efforts have been direct conflicts with the state, non-human animal disruption in the Boundary Waters manifests primarily in animals subverting human expectations for their participation in a silent, pristine, and controllable wilderness. Beyond the many expected recountings of distant, haunting calls and howls of loons and wolves, the blog posts and online forums where paddlers often swap trip stories include many stories of surprising animal encounters.

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<sup>72</sup> On the second day, the group began to cut down a dead white pine tree for another ceremony, but Forest Service employees (who had refused to participate in the ceremony) cited participants for “defacing U.S. forest service property.” They later cited Heart Warrior “for violating the residence prohibition ‘without permission.’” I was not able to find more information on Heart Warrior’s citation, and it seems she was not allowed to rebuild. *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> The idea of subversion involves an element of intentionality that I’m not sure I’m comfortable fully applying to these stories of animals not fitting human expectations. There certainly are instances of animals intending to resist human control and harm, but I have not necessarily come across any in the Boundary Waters. For now, I use the concept of disruption or interruption to partially sidestep questions of intentionality. This sidestepping language applies also to Heart Warrior Chosa and the men involved with *US v. Gotchnik* – without speaking with them about their intentions, I do not want to frame their work as resistance. However, Ojibwe people certainly were and continue to be intimately aware of settler colonial control, so these two groups’ interruptions take different forms though I use the same terminology for both.

Accounts abound of the scuffles of bears and mice searching sites for human food – sounds of animals adapting skillfully to human presence and blurring lines between humans and a separate non-human Nature. Other stories tell of bird songs interrupting a particularly contemplative moment on a misty morning or swarms of mosquitoes buzzing in ears and making it difficult to hear anything else, including especially a tranquil wilderness silence. Still other stories include animals interfering with moments of peace, silence, and sleep, including owls producing “blood curdling screams” at 2:00 am, beavers surprising sleeping campers by making what sounded like “an earth-shaking sound, at least when everything else is dead quiet”, or the jarring sound of a crow “busy doing whatever crows do at 5:00 a.m. on a summer morning in the Quetico” which “required being loud by accepted a.m. standards”.<sup>74</sup>

One blog post sharing about a conversation with a Boundary Waters hunter had a particularly jarring conclusion about the sounds of male grouse drumming: “Especially at a distance, the thrumming, drumming noise can sound like a tractor or truck engine starting up – at least in the Boundary Waters, there is a lot less of such noises actually occurring in the background!”<sup>75</sup> The comical poignancy of the grouse creating motorized vehicle-like sounds similar to those that conservationists worked so hard to limit emphasizes the lack of concern non-human animals have for human legislation attempting to control the soundscape. Many other forum users similarly acknowledge

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<sup>74</sup> First two quotes are contributions by users “starwatcher” and “journeyman,” respectively, on Corsair, “Strangest Thing Seen or Heard?,” *Boundary Waters Quetico Forum*, January 6, 2009, <https://bwca.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=forum.thread&threadId=117831&forumID=12&confID=1>; and the last is by Rick Sides, “The Absence of a Low Hum,” *Seagull Outfitters Paddler’s Tales*, accessed July 1, 2021, <https://bwca.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=forum.thread&threadId=117831&forumID=12&confID=1>.

<sup>75</sup> Jake Dahlke, “Grouse Hunting in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness,” *Sportsmen for the Boundary Waters*, September 28, 2020, <https://sportsmenbwca.org/grouse-hunting-in-the-boundary-waters-canoe-area-wilderness/>.

these unexpected animal stories with a sense of humor that makes it clear they are aware that the animals in the Boundary Waters do not operate by human rules. However, the story also highlights the possibility for retaliation for these efforts: the motor-like grouse, even while creating sounds which do not fit within the hunter's listening expectations, is still subject to violence at the hands of the hunter.

Failure to recount these stories of Ojibwe and animal interruptions of settler listening practices alongside the frequent favorite retellings of Olson's travels and the sound legislation conflicts allows continual trivialization of animal wellbeing and erasure of Ojibwe connections to this land in the minds of settlers and settler state. In the looping process by which settler colonialism is ongoing, this further silencing in the eyes of the settler state allows further future exclusion and limits opportunities to hold the settler state accountable for past and ongoing violence.

### **Olson's Legacy: Contemporary Maintenance of Silence**

Even outside the sound legislation still effective today, Olson's silence is deeply embedded in North Woods environmentalist and recreationist culture. This partly manifests in a flourishing popular culture of veneration for Boundary Waters silence, much of which carries echoes of or overt references to Olson's philosophies. The official Forest Service Boundary Waters rules and regulations, posted online, at access points, and around outfitter lodgings, include a rule to "let nature's sounds prevail—avoid loud voices and noises."<sup>76</sup> A Forest Service pamphlet detailing Boundary Waters trip preparations has a section with guidance on how to protect natural resources, including

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<sup>76</sup> See these rules, for example, within the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Superior National Forest, "Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness Trip Planning Guide," n.d., [https://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE\\_DOCUMENTS/fseprd611535.pdf](https://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/fseprd611535.pdf), 5.

“noise” among the more conventionally considered resources of fisheries and native species. The noise panel includes the note that “Sound carries a long distance over water, mostly in the evening when people are listening more than moving” and encourages paddlers to maintain quiet: “When you keep noise down, your group and others will have a better chance of experiencing wildlife and a sense of solitude.”<sup>77</sup>

Recreation researcher Ian M. Foster conducted an ethnographic project in 2012 exploring the ways paddlers often describe Boundary Waters experiences using language tied to spirituality. He found that for many, silence is an important component of spiritual experience, writing that in his interviews about Boundary Waters spirituality “nearly all participants made reference to the quiet that they found in the wilderness.”<sup>78</sup> Foster framed the philosophies of Olson (whom he referred to as “the original paddling philosopher and poet”<sup>79</sup>) and other conservationists as a precedent and possible root for some of the thinking around silence and spirituality.

Within continued Boundary Waters advocacy work in the decades after the 1978 motor bans, Olson’s silence has still been used to justify and fight for pro-wilderness and anti-motor vehicle policy. A report by Edward M. Tillman in the *Hamline Journal of Public Law and Policy* (published in the same year as *US v. Gotchnik* was litigated) argued for entirely curtailed motor use on the grounds that “sections of the BWCAW Act that allow for motorized recreation cut against what many visitors consider the most important feature one may find in wilderness: solitude. The roar of engines, one of the

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>78</sup> Ian Foster, “Wilderness, A Spiritual Antidote to the Everyday: A Phenomenology of Spiritual Experiences in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness” (Thesis, Missoula, University of Montana, 2012), 100.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 265.



trappings of everyday life these visitors had come to the BWCAW to escape, disrupts their sense of oneness with nature.”<sup>80</sup> Olson echoes throughout Tillman’s language in the report: for example, Tillman’s phrase “oneness with nature” in particular hearkens back to Olsonian philosophy.<sup>81</sup> More recently, Dana Johnson, staff attorney for environmental advocacy group Wilderness Watch, expressed her frustration with allowances for towboats within the Boundary Waters by explicitly referencing Olson: she noted in a 2020 blog post for the group that she believed “Sigurd would be troubled to learn that roughly one-fifth of the Wilderness’s waterways are still subjected to the persistent back and forth buzzing of motorboats including, on some routes, commercial towboats carting paying clients and their canoes to campsites and remote drop-off locations within the Wilderness, turning many entry-points and travel routes into busy motorways.”<sup>82</sup>

Beyond the historical and ongoing alterations of the soundscape in both concept and practice that I have discussed already, Olson’s silence continues to have a legacy tied to terraforming in the literal sense of land alteration manifesting today in mineral extraction and contemporary Boundary Waters advocacy group rhetorical strategies. Proposals by corporations PolyMet and Twin Metals for open pit copper-nickel mines in northern Minnesota have been making their way steadily through permitting processes and court challenges by environmental advocacy groups. There are no known instances of this type of mine that have been operated and closed safely without polluting local bodies of water with devastatingly high concentrations of contaminants, and both

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<sup>80</sup> Edward M. Tillman, “The Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness: Arguments for Eliminating Motorized Recreation,” *Hamline Journal of Public Law & Policy* 22, no. 1 (2000): 93.

<sup>81</sup> The word “oneness” appears no less than 9 times in Olson’s collected speeches alone.

<sup>82</sup> Dana Johnson, “What’s All the Buzz in the Boundary Waters?,” Wilderness Watch, March 16, 2020, <https://wildernesswatch.org/uncategorized/what-s-all-the-buzz-in-the-boundary-waters>.

proposals site mines just a few miles from the Boundary Waters, where polluted water will probably drain.<sup>83</sup> The mining process and subsequent pollution will profoundly affect all in this region. If the government allows copper sulfide mining, there is a high risk of the toxic water intensifying silencing of animal and Ojibwe communities, as well as settler community members who work for the mining companies and rely on sources of water likely to be polluted.<sup>84</sup>

Several advocacy groups have been working in opposition to the mines for years, including the Friends of the Boundary Waters Wilderness, a group founded in 1976 to advocate for the motor bans by ecologist and wilderness enthusiast Miron Heinselman, one of the key players who worked alongside Olson in the debates. Settler colonial listening and conservation practices have long legacies in the group. Heinselman himself conducted research in 1973 disagreeing with the possibility that Ojibwe had managed wilderness through fire (and supporting the belief in “virgin” forests before fire suppression regimes), an issue reconsidered and disproved by Lane B. Johnson and Kurt F. Kipfmüller in 2016.<sup>85</sup> The Friends of the Boundary Waters Wilderness seem to also

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<sup>83</sup> PolyMet’s Environmental Impact Statement noted that high concentrations of water pollution would require treatment for at least the next 500 years and likely far beyond that estimate – and notably, the modelling used in their analysis only projects out 500 years. Sara Wolff, “Sulfide Mining Fact Sheet” (Minnesota Environmental Partnership, 2018), <https://www.mepartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/MEP-Sulfide-Mining-Fact-Sheet-2018.pdf>, and Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, U.S. Forest Service, “Final Environmental Impact Statement, NorthMet Mining Project and Land Exchange,” November 2015.

<sup>84</sup> Potential impacts to human bodies alone include mercury contamination, drinking water pollution, and increased risk of cancer in mine workers. Emily Onello et al., “Sulfide Mining and Human Health in Minnesota,” *Minnesota Medicine*, (November/December 2016).

<sup>85</sup> Miron L. Heinselman, “Fire in the Virgin Forests of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area, Minnesota,” *Quaternary Research* 3, no. 3 (October 1973): 329–82; Lane B. Johnson and Kurt F. Kipfmüller, “A Fire History Derived from *Pinus Resinosa* Ait. for the Islands of Eastern Lac La Croix, Minnesota, USA,” *Ecological Applications* 26, no. 4 (2016): 1030–46. It is worth noting also that Heinselman, a prolific researcher who was often on the front edge of forest management research, was instrumental in demonstrating the necessity of a fire regime for Boundary Waters forest health. His work is often simply celebrated, much like Olson. See, for example, Kevin Proescholdt, “First Fight: Bud Heinselman and the Boundary Waters Canoe Area, 1964-65,” *Minnesota History* 64 (Summer 2014): 70–84.

have an ambivalent past relationship with Ojibwe people. For instance, in the above-referenced article on Heart Warrior's cabin rebuilding, Mike Chosa referenced "the so-called friends of the wilderness" who, along with the US Forest Service, helped perpetrate the "deceit, greed, and racism" that comprise the Boundary Waters past.

Sonic legacies that retain echoes of Olson's silence also continue within the group: their homepage claims that they're the "voice for clean water, wilderness, and people", and until a webpage redesign several months ago, asked site visitors and potential donors to "be the voice for this quiet place."<sup>86</sup> Similar appeals to pristine wilderness are the main rhetorical tactic of the group, reflecting the legacy of the conservation debates they were formed to fight as well as Olson's silent wilderness philosophy. Further, on June 11, 2021, they hosted a book launch event for Olson biographer David Backes' recent completion of an edited collection of Olson's journals which celebrates Olson's fight for wilderness. Backes' editorial work, celebrated by most media coverage of the book's publication so far, casts Olson directly into a hero narrative. The Friends of the Boundary Waters launch event press described the book as "The personal diaries of one of America's best-loved naturalists, revealing his difficult and inspiring path to finding his voice and becoming a writer."<sup>87</sup>

### **Alternative Boundary Waters Listening Practices**

I remain skeptical that using silence as a stand-in for a threatened, pristine wilderness will effectively challenge industry in the long-term. Such strategies are likely to simply reinscribe the patterns of thinking they intend to fight because the same settler

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<sup>86</sup> "Friends of the Boundary Waters Wilderness Homepage," accessed November 10, 2019, <https://www.friends-bwca.org>.

<sup>87</sup> A recording of the event is available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vmOgGaK-QII>.

colonial logics rooted in extractivism underlie both the silent wilderness idea and the mineral industry's possible destruction of the Boundary Waters ecosystem. The settler colonial listening practices driving Olson's conception of silence are themselves an extractive form of relationality that perpetuates and even models a form of engagement with land- and soundscapes that assumes all are resources for the taking. To return to Dylan Robinson's work, the hungry listening that Robinson describes and that Olson demonstrates relocates settler colonial listening from internal and cultural practices to the consumption of land. As Robinson writes, "to be starving is to be overcome with hunger in such a way that one loses the sense of relationality and reflexivity in the drive to satisfy that hunger. Hungry listening consumes without awareness of how the consumption acts in relationship with those people, the lands, the waters who provide sustenance."<sup>88</sup> Even if the PolyMet and Twin Metals proposals are rejected, there will always be more threats to the Boundary Waters and other beloved wild places until advocates grapple with these underlying logics of extraction and consumption.<sup>89</sup>

Not only am I skeptical that such silence-focused rhetorical strategies will be effective in challenging extractive industry, but I also do not believe they can coexist with meaningful anticolonial work that disrupts the iterative processes by which settler colonialism reproduces itself and continues to enact violence on Ojibwe people,

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<sup>88</sup> Robinson, *Hungry Listening*, 53.

<sup>89</sup> There do seem to be increasing attempts by Boundary Waters groups to move towards this sort of change. In the winter of 2020, the Friends of the Boundary Waters Wilderness hosted a virtual talk by Karen Diver, former Chairwoman of the Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa. At one point, she addressed the group plainly with regards to what the relationship might be between the Chippewa tribes and the Friends, saying "we just want to be able to be Indigenous" and later commenting that "we can't wait to see how you'll listen." However, massive threats to Minnesota's water sources in the form of Enbridge and a disturbingly supportive state and national government betray how difficult these efforts will be. Karen Diver, "Federal Indian Policy and Its Local Impact," speech delivered to the Friends of the Boundary Waters Wilderness, December 9, 2020. <https://www.facebook.com/16897432723/videos/702907463692623> (accessed August 10, 2021).

nonhuman creatures, and the lands that tie all together. In dealing with toxic landscapes, Bakshi offers the following words of guidance: “We need to develop the skills to see what hides beneath the logics of [landscape] representations.”<sup>90</sup> We certainly also need to be able to develop the skills to *hear* what hides beneath those logics, in physical soundscapes as well as in their representations in cultural, scientific, political, and historical contexts. But merely identifying and acknowledging settler colonial listening falls into much-critiqued patterns of reconciliation that allow settlers to absolve themselves of responsibility through appeals to multiculturalism while failing to enact meaningful anticolonial change.

Instead, we might envision an active politics of redress through different forms of relationality. Robinson in his work suggests a form of listening practice to replace hungry listening that he calls “guest listening”:

Moving beyond hungry listening toward anticolonial listening practices requires that the ‘fevered’ pace of consumption for knowledge resources be placed aside in favor of new temporalities of wonder disoriented from antirelational and nonsituated settler colonial positions of certainty. The critical listening positionality above might further be described as a practice of guest listening, which treats the act of listening as entering into a sound territory.<sup>91</sup>

Within sound territories, which notably are “not constituted through static boundaries of settlement,” listening becomes “a listening through, or in relation

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<sup>90</sup> Bakshi, “Contaminated Representations.”

<sup>91</sup> Robinson, *Hungry Listening*, 53.

with land” and an act that “attend[s] to the relationship between listener and the listened-to.”<sup>92</sup>

Settlers cannot simply inhabit Ojibwe listening strategies, though. To do so would function as yet another form of erasure and silencing. As Robinson is quick to remind his readers,

in entering Indigenous sound territories as guests, those who are not members of the Indigenous community from which these legal orders derive may always be unable to hear these specific assertions of Indigenous sovereignty, which is not to be understood as lack that needs to be remedied but merely an incommensurability that needs to be recognized.<sup>93</sup>

Ultimately, Robinson’s guest listening is just one possibility for alternative settler listening practices. The Boundary Waters soundscape needs a paradigm shift in listening patterns practiced by settlers toward considering the implications of sounds rather than the current absolute and rigid enforcement of silence as an extension of settler frontier fantasies.<sup>94</sup> Because critical listening positionality is not “something that might simply be applied by choice”, applying Robinson’s relational ethics and turning to guest listening as a new paradigm for critical listening practice would require ongoing practices of ethics, and would not necessarily prevent conflict between all who believe they have a stake in

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>94</sup> Though I do not intend to make recommendations for actual policy change in the Boundary Waters as I understand such an act to require more formal embeddedness in a place that I have and believe such recommendations should be led by Indigenous communities, a concrete example of what this might look like within the Boundary Waters may be helpful. Quetico Provincial Park, which is continuous with the Boundary Waters but lies on the Canadian side of the border, has a much more stringent policy disallowing motor usage. However, they have a special provision for First Nations peoples to use motors to exercise treaty rights. Though I certainly do not intend to hold up Canada as an example of effective anticolonial policy, their policy prioritizes not a blanket enforcement of settler colonial listening and silence, but rather considers the implications of sounds created by First Nations peoples.

the Boundary Waters area.<sup>95</sup> However, listening (and living) practices that carefully consider the implications of sounds as part of systems of relationality may have the potential to undermine extractive processes at work in the Boundary Waters, in the sense of both listening practices and mining activities, and very well may also open space for discussion and yield opportunities to help all within the Boundary Waters soundscape figure out how to make sounds together, and ultimately, live together.

### **Bridge: Toward a Historiographical Interruption**

Where writing intended for an academic publication like in this chapter can particularly explore the nuanced ways settler colonial listening manifests in the Boundary Waters, I wrote the next chapter as a more direct and local intervention. I plan to submit it to the Minnesota Historical Society's peer-reviewed periodical, *Minnesota History Magazine*. The publication is read by a wide audience within the Midwest, including by history educators and professional and amateur local history enthusiasts. I did not include the animal issue, primarily because I did not think I could do justice to both the ways settler colonialism limits Ojibwe treaty rights and animal wellbeing in a shorter piece of writing.

The *Minnesota History* article is intended to directly intervene in the historiographical silencings I described in the environmental humanities article. As I explained, when Indigenous stories are left out of settler tellings of Boundary Waters histories, it becomes increasingly easy for settlers to further erase Indigeneity from the place and remain unaccountable for violence. The motorboat conflicts in the Boundary Waters have been covered in previous articles published by the *Minnesota History*

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<sup>95</sup> Robinson, *Hungry Listening*, 51.

*Magazine*, but they exclude Indigenous stories and celebrate the idea of silence. In my draft, I explore some areas of overlap with previous authors. Mostly, however, I focus on explaining how conceptions of a silent wilderness in the Boundary Waters are tied to ideas about the frontier rooted in settler colonial violence. I then insert stories about Heart Warrior Chosa and the US v. Gotchnik case to demonstrate how the story is more complex than it has often been told.

I would especially love to expand this chapter this with more primary source material including especially about the US v. Gotchnik and Chosa stories. This is important both to highlight firsthand stories by Indigenous people and also because *Minnesota History Magazine* publications are often narratives constructed almost exclusively from primary sources, so this is what readers expect. Such work will hopefully be safe to conduct soon.



## CHAPTER III

### A HISTORIOGRAPHICAL INTERRUPTION: SOUND POLITICS, REVISITED<sup>96</sup>

Stories of the Boundary Waters legislative protections are often told as triumphant tales of environmentalist heroes battling industry interests to protect the pristine and distinctly silent wilderness. Yet the Boundary Waters is not the silent and “untouched” wilderness that it is often framed as in oft-repeated stories. The idea of the place as a frontier wilderness is tied to the continued exclusion of Indigenous peoples from the area today, and repetitions of the story of conservation as successful erases the ways the so-called wilderness protections have and continue to erase Indigenous presence in the Boundary Waters. The history of the area is long and contested and is not as straightforward as it has often been told.

Far from being an untouched and pristine wilderness, the area now known as the Boundary Waters was heavily logged after the lumber companies took advantage of an easily defrauded homesteading system. Intensive logging practices and fire suppression created conditions for a significant forest fire problem, and after the more lucrative red and white pine species were overharvested past recovery, the North Woods timber industry quickly fell into decline. When the Superior National Forest was established by Theodore Roosevelt in 1909 to facilitate further timber sale and mineral exploration, most of the included acreage was burned or cut over. With an impending collapse of the North Woods timber industry, rampant forest fires threatening nearby towns, and heightened pressure to compete with the newly established National Parks Service for

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<sup>96</sup> This chapter name follows Mark W. T. Harvey’s excellent article “Sound Politics: Wilderness, Recreation, and Motors in the Boundary Waters, 1945-1964,” published in the same periodical to which I hope to submit this article draft. (*Minnesota History* 58 (Fall 2002): 130-145.

support, the National Forest Service turned to recreation as a possible use for public lands.

The Forest Service needed to reconcile the ravaged landscape, pocked with burned and cutover areas left behind by the timber industry, with the aesthetic goals required to market the place as a pristine wilderness. Crowds of tourists flocked to what would later become the Boundary Waters to canoe, fish, hike, snowshoe, and ski. The area had been established as a roadless wilderness area in 1926, so when residents of Ely and other former logging and mining towns in the area welcomed the increased outdoor-based tourism by building large fishing resorts, they were mainly accessible by motorboats and hydroplanes. The loud plane sounds became a major source of conflict among wilderness enthusiasts.

Historian Mark Harvey has written (in a previous issue of this publication) that the wilderness enthusiasts “generally scorned the airplanes, [believing] that motor noise spoiled the solitude that made the Boundary Waters a distinctive place to gain peace and serenity away from the sights and sounds of ‘civilization.’ They contended that, besides being noisy intrusions, airplanes violated the principle that the roadless areas were to be managed for public enjoyment.”<sup>97</sup> Decades of battles over conservation policies followed that worked to limit any human-made sounds in the Boundary Waters, eventually resulting in legislation that expanded the area, removed nearly all buildings, and drastically limited motorboat usage in the protected area.

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<sup>97</sup> Mark W. T. Harvey, “Sound Politics,” 133.

## Sigurd Olson's Silent Frontier

The idea of the Boundary Waters as a silent place was especially championed by Sigurd Olson, a bestselling writer and canoe guide in the region. Descriptions of the sounds and sights of the Boundary Waters pepper Olson's writing, but he believed true wilderness experience was best entered into and represented by silence. Olson understood a journey into the Boundary Waters as a journey into a fictional version of the past where settlers dominated an untouched wilderness, and he heard that frontier past in his present experiences of the soundscape. Olson was fascinated by the voyageurs; accounts of the voices of former settler inhabitants feature prominently in his writing. In his 1956 book *The Singing Wilderness*, for instance, he declared that someone who successfully navigates river rapids can hear "all the voyageurs of the past join the rapids in their shouting."<sup>98</sup> Olson "listened" backward in time and could hear past voyageur voices. He did not, however, similarly hear voices of the Ojibwe and Dakota people who, until the U.S. government's violence half a century earlier, had maintained thriving communities in the North Woods.

The watery landscape now known as the Boundary Waters was inhabited by Indigenous peoples thousands of years prior to European settlement. Indigenous soundscapes would have been filled with the sounds of Dakota and later Ojibwe and Dakota voices speaking Native languages, engaging in traditional ways of life, and carrying on cultural practices. When the voyageurs that Olson so admired were sent to help foreign governments profit from use of the area's abundant resources, Dakota and Ojibwe place-specific knowledge guided the voyageurs and controlled the North Woods

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<sup>98</sup> Sigurd F. Olson, *The Singing Wilderness* (New York: Knopf, 1956), 80.

economy.<sup>99</sup> During this time, a range of languages and the vibrant and sometimes conflicting ways of life between voyageurs and Indigenous peoples would have characterized the soundscape.

Olson did not hear any of these sounds in his imagined Boundary Waters wilderness. In his re-storying of the place through his writings, Indigenous peoples were erased in favor of a myth of a frontier where settlers inhabited an empty, untouched, and distinctly silent landscape. In reality, as settlers expanded into the North Woods in the early 1800s to take advantage of the abundant natural resources in the area, the U.S. government committed direct acts of violence against Dakota and Ojibwe people, failed to uphold agreements, and attempted to strip away Indigenous language and culture through assimilation programs and residential schools. The region was eventually ceded to the territorial government in 1854.

In Olson's time, Ojibwe people continued to maintain a presence within the area due to treaty-promised subsistence rights, but the government's efforts to remove them from that land were largely successful. Within Olson's present-day Boundary Waters soundscape, Dakota people and, to some extent, Ojibwe people, had been literally silenced by decades of violence and assimilation practices. The absence of Indigenous sounds in his imagined historical soundscape erases Indigenous people from that history, just as omissions of Ojibwe people from Minnesota histories erases their long histories of relationships with land.

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<sup>99</sup> Timothy Cochrane, *Gichi Bitobig, Grand Marais: Early Accounts of the Anishinaabeg and the North Shore Fur Trade* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018).

## Sound Conservation

Olson's conception of a silent, pristine wilderness, far from being a "natural" or objective reality of the place, was a part of the settler fantasy of the Boundary Waters as a frontier that many wilderness enthusiasts had developed. When the silence was made into law through legislation limiting motorized vehicle usage, the place was actually made more silent. The silent Boundary Waters may seem pleasant and has been widely celebrated as a successful example of conservation efforts. However, even beyond the figurative silencing of Indigenous people that the idea of wilderness the silence was rooted in, the silence continued to exclude Indigenous people.

Ojibwe people lived in the Boundary Waters throughout the contentious battles, even as environmentalists pushed for the motor laws using a rhetoric of the place as an untouched and silent wilderness. The Chosas, who were the last Ojibwe family living in the Boundary Waters, were allowed to live in the protected area until their homes were abandoned or destroyed, made possible by a provision in the 1978 Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness Act otherwise eliminating residences and businesses on Basswood Lake. Yet the provision was contentious, as there were efforts by the government to evict them as soon as possible. In a 1993 *Ojibwe News* article, Mike Chosa reported that the Chosa cabin where a woman named Heart Warrior Chosa resided "was burned to the ground last year [1992] by yet 'unknown' persons" – "unknown", though "on the night of the cabin fire, it was known by several witnesses that U.S. forestry personnel were in the Basswood area."<sup>100</sup> (Investigators determined that the fire

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<sup>100</sup> Mike Chosa, "Heart Warrior Begins to Rebuild," *Ojibwe News*, August 13, 1993, 1.

was caused not by lightning, as the Forest Service had claimed, “but was probably intentionally set.”)

Far from being passively silenced by the new motor laws, Ojibwe leaders fought all along for continued use and habitation. Heart Warrior ran for mayor of Ely in 1989 and Minnesota state governor in 1990 as the Earth Federation candidate on an environmental issue-focused platform which also included strong opposition to the motor laws.<sup>101</sup> After the Chosa cabins were burned and there were no longer permanent Ojibwe residences within the Boundary Waters, the place was certainly closer to the original settler visions of an empty wilderness than while conservationists and sympathetic government interests developed and enacted those ideas – but only after careful planning and centuries of violence against the place’s original inhabitants. Though the legislation banning motorized vehicles was widely lauded as an environmentalist success, the legislation valorized the earlier pristine notion of wilderness that contributed toward erasure of Ojibwe presence and limited future Ojibwe sovereignty.

### **Limiting Ojibwe Sounds**

After Ojibwe people were no longer allowed to maintain residence in their ancestral homelands, future limitation of their use by the Minnesota government became more possible. Ojibwe people, however, continued to exercise their treaty-promised rights within the Boundary Waters and refused to easily accept their continued exclusion by the government. Alongside the state motor legislation, the Minnesota Chippewa bands’ own natural resource programs, funded in part by the U. S. Department of the

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<sup>101</sup> She won neither seat, but made impressive runs in both: despite starting her campaign one month before the mayoral race, she received a third of the vote, and during the governor’s race, won 23,000 votes even while sustaining four separate attacks on her person and campaign. *Judith Ann (Heart Warrior) Chosa*, Portrait, 1991, <https://www.pbs.org/video/may-23-1991-14636/>.

Interior, concurrently developed a conservation code that did not prohibit the use of motorized vehicles or equipment to travel in the ceded territory.<sup>102</sup> The two conflicting policies came to a head in the late 1990s on Basswood Lake, a nearly 26,000-acre body of water on the border between the United States and Canada. In the spring and summer months of 1998 through 1999, four members of the Bois Forte band of Chippewa were cited as violating the federal law that banned motorized vehicle, boat, and equipment use in off-reservation national forest wilderness areas: Mark Stepec received a ticket in April of 1998 when his motorized all-terrain vehicle and equipment broke through the ice while ice fishing; three months later, David Gotchnik was cited for crossing the lake to fish with an eight-horsepower motor attached to his canoe; and in May 1999, Gotchnik, Terry Anderson, and Thomas Anderson all received citations for using outboard motors while fishing.<sup>103</sup>

The men contested the citations, asserting that their motor usage demonstrated a lawful exercise of their treaty rights. U.S. District Judge Ann Montgomery rejected the defense on two grounds: that the parties involved with the 1854 treaty would not have understood or intended the treaty rights to include motorized transportation means, and that the motor ban in the Boundary Waters was necessary to maintain the places wilderness character. After the decision was appealed and unanimously upheld, the defendants filed a petition to the U.S. Supreme Court, arguing that previous cases indicated that tribal members were not held to using only technology available at the time

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<sup>102</sup> Eric Freedman, “When Indigenous Rights and Wilderness Collide: Prosecution of Native Americans for Using Motors in Minnesota’s Boundary Waters Canoe Wilderness Area,” *American Indian Quarterly* 26, no. 3 (2002): 378–92.

<sup>103</sup> Mark Woods, “Trammeling People 1: The Imperial Argument,” in *Rethinking Wilderness* (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2017), 123–48.

of treaty signing and that legislation imposing the no-motor ban on the Boundary Waters was not intended to restrict treaty rights. Such decisions betrayed an understanding by the courts of Ojibwe people as fixed in the past, limited to historical ways of life rather than as participating in a living, changing culture.

In his study of the case, legal scholar Eric M. Freedman argued that the decision had far-reaching consequences: “The no-motor restrictions effectively render the rights reserved under the 1854 Treaty meaningless because they prevent subsistence harvesting by tribal parties to the treaty in large parts of the BWCA.”<sup>104</sup> The prosecution’s Supreme Court filing argued that the motorboat restrictions were necessary to avoid human intrusion in the congressionally defined wilderness area. *US v. Gotchnik* was the first fully litigated case that involved traditional ways of life and treaty rights within a federally designated wilderness, and thus it set an important precedent for similar conflicts. Freedman emphasized that “the legal and public policy ramifications of the *Gotchnik* decision are not limited by geography to the Boundary Waters but may apply to other public lands ceded under treaties [...] nor are the ramifications limited to disputes stemming from the specific 1854 treaty whose rights the defendants in *Gotchnik* sought to exercise.”<sup>105</sup> Similar cases have been tried elsewhere with varying degrees of success, but usually with decisions to the detriment of Indigenous people in the name of protections for federally protected wilderness areas. Ultimately, the *Gotchnik* decision functioned to enforce the historical silent understanding of Ojibwe participation in the Boundary Waters soundscape.

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<sup>104</sup> Freedman, “When Indigenous Rights and Wilderness Collide” 384.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 380.



## **A Questionable Future in the Silence**

Far from an isolated series of events, the damages to Indigenous people by Boundary Waters sound conflicts Minnesota have analogues in conservation efforts and policies elsewhere in the state and, indeed, the country. Similar practices elsewhere have likewise been used to limit Indigenous sovereignty – perhaps not always using sound like in the Boundary Waters, but certainly through other aesthetic manifestations of the pristine wilderness idea. Stories told without Indigenous people erase the ways some of the policies that we often champion as part of identity as Minnesotans are in fact deeply tied to parts of the state’s history of violence. Without confronting these histories, we miss the ways they continue to show up today.

In recent years, environmental advocacy groups have used similar appeals to an empty, silent wilderness to fight back against the threats to the area by potentially devastating mining activities. Such appeals to this ahistorical notion of wilderness continue to enact violence against Ojibwe people in the area by perpetuating myths that undermine their claims to relationships with the land. Furthermore, environmentalist approaches rooted in notions of the place as pristine obscure the ways government-sanctioned environmental damage is a continuity rather than a rupture in this history. Such efforts have limited capacity to create long-lasting change. Until those underlying logics of wilderness as untouched and thus available for the taking are dealt with, the place and Indigenous connections to it will remain under threat.

### **Bridge: Toward an Activist Interruption**

Where I intend to insert my critique of the Boundary Waters silence idea into the many publications on northern Minnesota conservation histories through the *Minnesota*

*History Magazine* article draft, the next brief chapter is much more targeted and directly focuses on the ways the historical problems I identify in earlier chapters manifest today. I intend to submit it to the “Commentary” section of the *Star Tribune*, the primary newspaper in the Minneapolis-Saint Paul metro area. *Star Tribune* commentaries are a slightly more extended op-ed.

I intend this piece of writing to address environmentalists in Minnesota, who, as I have described in previous chapters, tend to fall into patterns of using appeals to pristine wilderness to defend wild places against threats from extractive industry. The commentary is perhaps the riskiest of the three main chapters in this thesis, as the *Tribune* is widely read throughout the state by readers from a range of political backgrounds. This also feels to me like the most important chapter, as it attempts a direct intervention. However short it may be, it is underpinned by all the thinking captured in the previous chapters.

## CHAPTER IV

### TOWARD AN ACTIVIST INTERRUPTION: A PROPOSED CHANGE IN TACTIC TO MY FELLOW SETTLER ENVIRONMENTALISTS

For many Midwesterners, the Boundary Waters is a silent, pristine wilderness where paddlers may slip into a way of existing that feels far removed from regular life. However, the ideas fundamental to the place's famed silent and seemingly "natural" wilderness aesthetics – namely, the idea of the Boundary Waters as "unmarred" by human intervention – are deeply tied to histories of exclusion and violence: such an understanding not only obscures the settler government-sanctioned practices of clearcutting and harmful fire suppression, but also erases long histories of Indigenous relationships with the land as part of the ongoing system of power known as settler colonialism. Within this system, settlers move to an inhabited place, like North America, and seek to replace the original populations to gain access to land. Evidence from oral histories, historical analyses, and scientific studies tell of Dakota and Ojibwe people inhabiting and sustainably caring for the environments around Gichigamiing long before the legislation intended to "protect" the Boundary Waters violently forced them to leave. In particular, the motor vehicle restrictions, driven by settler colonial aesthetics, are often considered by area environmentalists to be a resounding success. However, they have continued to enforce settler expectations for what the place should sound like on all who enter, particularly excluding Indigenous peoples. A stark example of this exclusion manifested itself in the 2000 court case *US v. Gotchnik*, where four Ojibwe people received citations from government service officials for violating motor bans while they were exercising treaty-promised subsistence fishing rights. We settlers get to experience our ideal of a peaceful

nature setting, while continuing to limit Ojibwe food sovereignty, perpetuating ongoing settler colonial violence.

Yet settler environmental advocacy groups have and often continue to use appeals to the same idea of the Boundary Waters as an untouched, silent place to battle contemporary threats to the region. To encourage would-be activists to engage with threats from the PolyMet and Twin Metals copper-sulfide mine proposals, for example, the Friends of the Boundary Waters Wilderness ask visitors to their website to “be the voice for this quiet place” – and they are certainly not alone in strategically using the idea of the Boundary Waters as natural to battle for protections. Such appeals today obscure the ways that the copper-sulfide mines are not new threats, but rather continuations of violence on environments and Indigenous life ways.

It matters which persuasive strategies we use in our activism: how we define a problem determines which paths forward we may be able to imagine. The tactic of appealing to a pristine nature makes it seem that the problem with mining threats is that they prevent settlers from feeling as if they were reliving the days of the frontier. Those feelings are rooted in an ahistorical and racist conception that idealizes a time of enormous violence toward Indigenous peoples. Furthermore, the same logic of environments as empty and ready for human use utilized as a pro-protections strategy also underlies practices of over-extraction by mining industry giants. The root problems of violence toward Indigenous people, fragmented settler relationships with land, and vastly deregulated capitalism which allows even the most damaging of extractive industrial pursuits to thrive are formidable and will continue to pose threats toward the land and waters on which Indigenous people, and indeed all creatures sharing these

watersheds, rely. In other words, there will always be another proposal until these underlying logics are addressed, even if efforts to address individual threats seem to be successful.

I would like to suggest an alternative strategy to my fellow settler environmentalists – what if, instead of appeals to exclusive conceptions of naturalness, we considered protections against environmental threats as part of larger project of reparations for the long histories of violence our state government and our ancestors (and indeed, we ourselves) have committed and continue to perpetuate against Indigenous people in the name of wilderness protections? What if, instead of prioritizing settler experiences of peace on stolen land, we center the needs that Indigenous communities, who often are tied into cultures that have healthier relationships with land, are clearly articulating? Anishinaabe leaders in northern Minnesota, for example, are calling on us all to take action against Enbridge Line 3; they are clearly pointing the way toward more just environmental futures. Urgent action is needed, indeed, but we must move forward with care – the movements and coalitions we build now may very well determine what the futures of land and peoples look like.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

Where the Boundary Waters today may seem relatively quiet, the contemporary soundscape is the result of decades of settler policies and practices enforcing a racialized idea of what the place should sound like. Processes of silencing within the Boundary Waters have manifested in different ways over time: they have been literal through physical settler violence; figurative through cultural representations like Sigurd Olson's work; legal through settler state legislation limiting who can make sounds and what sounds can be made; and historiographical through retellings of triumphant and two-sided conservation histories. Within chapter II, I considered each of these processes of silencing as part of my examination of how the concept of silence has been used as a form of settler colonial control over the Boundary Waters soundscape and has enacted violence on the land and its inhabitants. In the third and fourth chapters, I scaled my thinking out to consider and intervene in the ways the Boundary Waters silence has manifested historiographically and within contemporary activist work in Minnesota, respectively. Both chapters address the silent, pristine wilderness idea that Olson develops within public forums, and I also intend for them to circulate in the same public spaces as Olson's work and write against his ideas.

Beyond simply functioning as a portfolio or anthology of pieces of writing, the format of this thesis is part of the same critique that forms the content of each chapter: that the ways ideas transform over time and have the potential to be activated in the world matter. I have come to realize that in justice-oriented work, the relationships between methods and content are often as crucial as the content itself. An excellent argument

toward decolonial practices published only in an academic journal may have much less chance of impact than a similar argument launched in a public setting, for example. There are, of course, benefits to both academic writing styles and public-facing work, yet both require certain trade-offs. Each of my three main chapters required adjustments in style, tone, length, and content to best address three different audiences of my intended publication forums, and because of this, repackaging similar ideas and making these trade-offs for the three different forums was immensely time consuming.

Chapter II prioritizes nuance over clear explanation of core concepts like settler colonialism and critiques of wilderness, with which I assume my audience is familiar. I wrote the two subsequent chapters intended for more public forums in a different manner. Rather than plugging my ideas into a larger body of thinking where I can assume some common ground, both of the latter central chapters required me to avoid shorthand phrases and terms that refer to those larger bodies of thought. In chapters three and four I also had to consider that my audience may not start out from a place of common political ground, which is somewhat (though not entirely) different from the academic article chapter. Because of these differences, I decided not to push certain ideas that I thought might turn readers away. For example, I avoided language explicitly calling out the idea of silence as racist in the third chapter intended for the local history magazine. Amateur historians and educators may be sympathetic to the idea, but because the language of racism still triggers defensive responses for many people, I decided not to go there explicitly. Likewise, I kept my consideration of animal wellbeing to the environmental humanities chapter, where I assume my audience is at least aware of such an argument's merits.

Though such decisions were important trade-offs, I am unsure whether these particular compromises were the right sacrifices for me to make. I think it is important to write specifically for an audience, but I do not necessarily stand by the idea of significantly softening truths that may be difficult for some to accept, and I feel uncomfortable with the fact that I left animals out of my later arguments altogether when they are so central in my thinking. I plan to continue to grapple with these difficulties and adjust future drafts of each article as I deem necessary. Despite these difficulties, however, I think the extra effort to develop my ideas derived from my institutional academic context to present them in public-facing forums was well worth it and certainly aligns with my desire to blend activism and scholarship in my work.<sup>106</sup>

### **What to Do with Sigurd Olson and His “Silence”?**

One of the difficult tasks of this project was to hold my dismay with Sigurd Olson, other Boundary Waters conservationists, and their concept of silence alongside my joy at the Boundary Waters’ continued existence largely free of significant damage by mining interests due to the very same protections I critique in this thesis. I would love to explore the idea of silence espoused by other Boundary Waters conservationists like Miron Heinselman and Ernest Oberholtzer in a more significant way and had hoped to do so as part of this thesis. In part because Olson wrote so prolifically and was influential for a long period within the conflicts, he became a more reasonable focus for my project. However, this may have skewed my critique away from being aimed at structural settler colonialism into more of an individual attack. I am certain Olson’s biographer would

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<sup>106</sup> I do not deal with another important difficulty here, which is the potential danger of presenting politically contentious issues in public forums during a historical moment of polarization and emboldenment by political leaders to use violence.



disagree with some of my characterizations of his ideas. I stand by my words, but I do hope to expand them in the future to focus less on one figure, however influential he may have been.

Likewise, I had hoped to do a bit more expansion on the ways silence is not just a settler colonial idea. I brought the set of sound complexities I address in the thesis to the brilliant group of undergraduate students in my Ecomusicology course in the fall of 2020. We discussed R. Murray Schafer's concept of a "soundmark," which is the sonic equivalent of a landmark. If silence as soundmark of the Boundary waters is representative of settler colonial listening, we discussed, what would be a better soundmark? They came up with delightful answers, all worth exploring in future work, including a loon call or the sound of a paddle hitting water as soundmark. Tossing out silence's importance as a characteristic of the Boundary Waters altogether, however, does not sit well with me. Silence is an important concept within Anishinaabe philosophy and is important for non-human animal wellbeing, both of which will be crucial threads to develop in the future. In short, a silent Boundary Waters is not the problem. The deployment of silence in the enforcement of settler colonial control in the place is.

As I was completing this project, I read an exceptional article by Anne Pasek published in *Environmental Humanities*. In the article, Pasek critiques uses of the concept of carbon vitalism in service of climate skepticism, but also explores a reparative reading of the concept. Rather than simply exposing nefarious connections between skepticism and financial interests within the concept (she invokes Eve Sedgwick's paranoid reading here), Pasek asks what can be done to conduct reparative studies of denial which

would locate the work of analysis not only in the correction of false claims about climate but also in the ways in which such claims are made intelligible and affecting regardless of their scientific merits. It requires different methodological and analytic orientations, talking to and reading with one's political opponents with curiosity and, perhaps, even empathy.<sup>107</sup>

I thought the idea was brilliant and immensely powerful. Pasek's choice resonates with thinkers like Adrienne Maree Brown, whose own work with transformative justice has been influential for me and, in fact, helped me find a way out of the spiraling reflexivity I described in the introduction. What, then, would it look like to engage current conceptions of silence in the Boundary Waters reparatively? What might be valuable to keep, and what should be left behind? Obviously, such conversations would need to happen among the many diverse stakeholders in the Boundary Waters futures.

Such an approach is also in line with Dylan Robinson's thinking. Robinson, who also cites Sedgewick's ideas, advocates not for an absence of settler listening to Indigenous music and sound art, but rather asks for a transformation: a conversation about "reparative perception" and a practice he calls "guest listening", which I explained briefly in my second chapter. The Boundary Waters, with its specific sonic characteristics and long histories, may be an excellent site through which to explore alternative readings for listening and silence. Though such a project would certainly need to be conducted in conjunction with Ojibwe communities and with representatives for non-human animals, I include here a few preliminary fragments of thoughts that may be useful in thinking through some alternatives:

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<sup>107</sup> Anne Pasek, "Carbon Vitalism," *Environmental Humanities* 13, no. 1 (May 1, 2021): 1–20.

Accounts of the importance of silence for human health complement research on the variable uses of silence as deployed for a wide range of less-nefarious purposes than I have described here.<sup>108</sup> More specifically, sound in the Boundary Waters reveals some of the faulty thinking behind settler colonial controls. The Canadian side of the region does not allow any motorized vehicle usage in their protected wilderness area, while the U.S. side allows some motor-vehicle use in select bodies of water. What does it mean to draw a border in sound? How might one legislatively control a place in the air where the vibration created on one side of that line is legal, and, on the other side, illegal? Neither do toxic flows from copper-sulfide mines stop to consider the boundaries of settler states, including the edges of treaty-protected waters that are some of the cleanest in the world and those potentially soon-to-be-polluted lakes outside the protected areas. Watersheds, like soundscapes, do not play well with geopolitical boundaries. The watery surfaces of the place magnify the sounds of motorboats, animal sounds, and the human voice alike. One has to work hard in some of the more heavily used areas to pretend that it is an untouched wilderness. The concept of a sonic “leave no trace” is particularly fascinating to me as well. It reveals the arbitrariness of a leave no trace ethos in general. It is impossible to leave *no* trace on the land, even if we do strip away the history of the philosophy as tied into the same untouched wilderness ideas I critique in this thesis. A sonic leave-no-trace policy surprisingly also acknowledges the ways that sound, for all its

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<sup>108</sup> For a summary of research on quiet and human wellbeing, see Eleanor Ratcliffe, “Sound and Soundscape in Restorative Natural Environments: A Narrative Literature Review,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 12 (April 26, 2021): 570563. Ana María Ochoa Gautier provides an excellent exploratory essay on the ways the concept of silence is used in various ways that are not racialized like I describe here in her “Silence,” in *Keywords in Sound*, ed. David Novak and Matt Sakakeeny (Duke University Press, 2015), 183–92; and editors Sophia Dingli and Thomas N. Cooke, construct a compelling case for a reconsideration of the idea of silence as a lack of agency in their collection *Political Silence: Meanings, Functions and Ambiguity* (London: Routledge, 2018).

ephemerality, can, in fact, leave material traces and impact land and living material bodies. I had originally planned to explore some of these ideas in this thesis, and am excited to do so in future work.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

I did not include any comments within this thesis on the short multispecies ethnographic trip that I conducted in the summer of 2020, so I would like to briefly address that.<sup>109</sup> The trip, though absent from my project in terms of explicit mention, was a turning point in my thinking. At the beginning of the thesis project, I thought that silence in the Boundary Waters was the problem and that silent landscapes in general betrayed control and damage. It was not until I was sitting in a canoe in the Boundary Waters on the fifth day of my trip waiting yet again to hear the famous silence that I realized the place was not silent at all and never had been: even in the quietest moments the place was still filled with sound. I felt rather foolish, because this seemed so obvious in hindsight and because I am aware that “true” silence does not necessarily exist, as is oft repeated with reference to John Cage’s famous anechoic chamber experience. However silly I may have felt, the realization helped me understand that it was not just that the silence was a form of settler colonial control, but that the *hearing* of silence by the likes of Olson and the other conservationists, particularly as enforced by law, was where so much damage was done. Because the descriptions of Boundary Waters soundscapes by those sharing in travelogues and online vary so widely and my own

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<sup>109</sup> I primarily adapted multispecies ethnography theory and methods from Eben Kirksey, *The Multispecies Salon* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014); Laura A. Ogden, Billy Hall, and Kimiko Tanita, “Animals, Plants, People, and Things: A Review of Multispecies Ethnography,” *Environment and Society* 4, no. 1 (January 1, 2013): 5-24; S. Eben Kirksey and Stefan Helmreich, “The Emergence of Multispecies Ethnography,” *Cultural Anthropology* 25, no. 4 (November 2010): 545–76.

experiences in the area are skewed by my memory, the research trip was a pivotal point in the project and was necessary for me to arrive at my conclusions.

However, the trip was ear-opening in ways even beyond this realization, particularly through its limitations. I had read much on multispecies ethnography before embarking on this trip and still realized that I had no idea what I was doing in the field. This would have been true on any first ethnographic research trip, but the experience was further complicated by my relatively limited understanding of animal and insect communication. Furthermore, logistics of the trip introduced some complications. If I were to plan it again, I would go out longer than seven days and perhaps during multiple seasons in the year. This thesis is skewed toward a summer Boundary Waters soundscape, which is dramatically different, though no less quiet, than a winter version. I also would limit the group in future work. Though my friend Caleb's backcountry skills and canoe guiding experience were invaluable on the trip and the presence of two others was necessary to make the trip financially feasible and safest within our particular circumstances, it was sometimes difficult to obtain the high-quality recordings I was looking for while camped on a small island with three other humans in close proximity. I am excited about the possibility of conducting similar research in the future armed with this new knowledge (and hopefully also some higher quality recording equipment!).

Dylan Robinson's ideas are excellent, but importantly he also wrote a book that itself challenges settler colonial forms of knowledge transmission, rooted in his belief that "forms of listening otherwise are incited by writing that composes the experience of what and how we hear."<sup>110</sup> Furthermore,

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<sup>110</sup> Dylan Robinson, *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies*, Indigenous Americas (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 15.

to challenge settler colonial perception requires reorienting the form by which we share knowledge, the way we convey the experience of sound, song, and music. In an academic setting, this involves reorienting the normative places, flows, and relationships wherein we share this knowledge.<sup>111</sup>

His writing resonates with my project in a number of ways, including my decision to write for three different publication forums. However, Robinson also points to the importance of aesthetic practices that encourage decolonial listening by settler artists so that not all the labor is on Indigenous artists. He especially points to projects which work by “aesthetically marking what has previously been unmarked.”<sup>112</sup> I am not sure I would use the language of “decolonial listening” within any project I conduct, but the project of acknowledging and working to undermine coloniality by marking previously unmarked, normative, taken-for-granted ideas is an important one to which I hope this thesis contributes.

My coursework during this degree has involved studying the ways artists have worked to aesthetically mark normative practices, and these have been wonderfully stimulating to consider in relation to this thesis. I have been nearly overflowing with ideas for how to engage this work in less linear, more creative, more open-ended modes. The idea I hope to pursue first is a critical audio tour in the manner of the Invisible-5 project along Interstate 5 between Los Angeles and San Francisco. I conducted an independent study on sound mapping in the spring of 2021 and developed my critical audio tour idea into a rough plan, which can be found in the Appendix. I would love to

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 254.

stage a “concert series” to encourage people to listen to the Boundary Waters through soundwalks and the soundscape composition tradition, particularly including participatory elements to encourage listeners to consider how they are also part of that soundscape and to think about interpreting sounds in settler colonial contexts.

I also am taken by the playful but incisive nature of projects by the LA Urban Rangers and Center for Land Use Interpretation, both of which work in different ways to interpret and mark seemingly objective or universal workings of power in landscapes. In a similarly line of thinking, I could imagine setting up literal historical markers or interpretive plaques highlighting important places or events in settler colonial control over the Boundary Waters landscape. Likewise, I would love to set up an interpretive booth or a micro museum exhibit at a frequently used portage about settler colonialism in the Boundary Waters. Like any good exhibit or informational booth, such a setup would include participatory elements, including perhaps an opportunity to listen to changes in land use over time through composed historical soundscapes as a sonic form of the traditional museum diorama. I am intrigued by Forensic Architecture and artists like Lawrence Abu Hamdan and Trevor Paglen who similarly blur lines between investigation and aesthetic practice. I would love to consider what inquiries similar to these artists’ approaches might look like within the Boundary Waters. For example, I could envision a project exploring quantification of soundscapes as a way to consider how the Boundary Waters is not literally silent and to explore what the dominant sounds are from an “objective” perspective.

This project has also been remarkably generative for my thinking about more traditional research projects. The idea of settler colonial listening has much room for

expansion as well, and don't feel like I have come anywhere close to developing and articulating my thoughts in this thesis. I hope to explore more connections between Robinson's settler colonial listening practices and white supremacy-oriented work like Marie Thompson's white aurality and Jennifer Stoeber's listening ear. The questions I wanted to ask in this thesis are dissertation-sized and perhaps may guide years of research ahead, but some of the questions I am left intrigued by at the close of this project include: How do those who are in power stay in power using sound/music/sound art and control of sound/music/sound art? How specifically does that impact those who do not hold the same power? How does sound control function in the continued enactment of racialized violence spatially? How to implement forward thinking approaches that allow for the incommensurability of the ways animals, Indigenous people, and settlers (specifically using the framework of settler colonialism) experience and influence the world including through sound, sound art, and music? There is clearly much to explore, and I have only just scratched the surface.



## APPENDIX

### PROPOSAL FOR A SOUND MAP PROJECT

The Gunflint Trail is a 57-mile long National Scenic Byway in northern Minnesota that is popular with tourists looking to experience the Superior National Forest and nearby Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness. Yet the serene landscape around the road obscures a long history of settler colonial violence through erasure and state-sanctioned corporate exploitation of non-human animals. In recent years, proposed mining endeavors have particularly demonstrated the ways that current conservation practices and legal protections for the place often operate using the same logics of exclusion that have allowed extractive interests to thrive there.

In the state of Minnesota and beyond, BIPOC activists and advocacy groups have led a growing swell of education and activism to attune white settlers to the ways settler colonialism and white supremacy have functioned to exclude and enact violence against marginalized people in ways sometimes invisible to those with the privilege to not experience the violence firsthand. Many people in Minnesota also tend to consider the non-human environment as an important component of the place's identity. Thus, there is an opportunity to address the growing eager audience of well-meaning white settler environmentalists, particularly in ways that draw connections between exclusion and environmental degradation.

My project works to address this population through a self-guided critical audio tour to accompany listeners while driving the Gunflint Trail. The tour is inspired by other soundmapping practices, including Milena Droumeva's critical soundmapping and the "Invisible 5" audio tour by Amy Balkin, Kim Stringfellow, Tim Halbur, Greenaction for

Health and Environmental Justice, and Pond: Art, Activism, and Ideas. The project seeks to intervene in the popular idea of this place as a natural and pristine wilderness through the development of a series of audio tracks highlighting the ways conservation policies have both protected the area from extractive industry as well as functioned as tools of settler colonialism, white supremacy, and anthropocentrism. Stories will center around themes including multispecies relationships; the roles of both extractive industry and state conservation policy in shaping economic, cultural, and natural histories; and Anishinaabe and more-than-human animal exclusion and silencing as well as survival and thriving.

Media will include recordings of interviews with Anishinaabe and settler leaders, activists, historians, and scientists in the area; field recordings on and around the road; soundscape compositions; soundwalks inviting listeners to consider their own place experiences; artworks centered on the place; historical recordings; and data sonifications of human and more-than-human phenomena in the Boundary Waters (see list below for more detailed descriptions). These pieces of audio will act as “the building blocks of the sound story” where “the interpretation belongs to the listener,” to quote Milena Droumeva. I have created each of these media before for various other research projects and have researched settler colonialism in the nearby Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness for two years, so I am well-equipped to complete this work.

Listeners to the audio tour may experience the place physically in a similar way as they may have normally, driving the length of the scenic road and potentially making stops along the way for hikes, meals, and stops at the several shops, but my audio tour attempts to defamiliarize and recontextualize that experience by providing context and

complications through alternative narratives. Though the intended audience for the soundmap is anyone visiting the Boundary Waters Canoe Area, I'd particularly like to orient toward encouraging settler tourists to consider their relationship to the place, possibly providing a narrative different from their expectations or previous experiences. By including speculative work like composed soundscapes, music, and sound art works, I'd also like to encourage listeners to imagine collaborative and alternative paths forward beyond ongoing proposals to use the place as a site for resource extraction.

The output of the project will be a downloadable album and an accompanying brochure. Some of the audio will be tied to specific places along the road that make sense in relation to the audio's content, so I will try to order these in such a way that listeners may hear the audio close to the actual location. Other audio may not be so easily tied to locations – these will be ordered in such a way around the locative audio to craft a collage-style narrative of the place. The brochure or program booklet will include written descriptions of the sound and location. Such a booklet could also include several more extended essays, historic photographs from area archives, copies of newspaper clippings, traditional visual maps of the area indicating geopolitical boundaries including those related to MN Chippewa Tribal treaty rights, or in a larger scale version of this project, perhaps even artistic renditions of the road, the area, and colonial histories. The audio tour will also be available to explore from a desktop computer for those who are not able to drive the Gunflint Trail in person. A related larger project that I could pursue once this audio tour is off the ground is a slightly more conventional soundmapping project with audio tied to a gridded map.

Once I have developed the audio tour, I will distribute it to a small focus group of listeners, hopefully including some of my interviewees, and collect feedback through surveys and interviews. Reported listener experiences, with particular emphasis on feedback from my interviewees, will be my primary means of assessing the success of the project, though I will also consider feedback from colleagues and mentors.

### **Possible Nodes for Inclusion in Mapping**

This is a “dream” list of sounds I think it’d be interesting to include in sound maps of the Boundary Waters. Limiting factors include especially time and funding availability, but I think a map with only some of these components will still align with my envisioned project. For each node or category of nodes, I’ve also included a few notes on details or why I’d like to include that information.

#### Field/soundscape recordings in BWCA

These may possibly include hydrophone and below-soil recordings pending access to equipment. Recordings may be edited for sound quality, but will be left as close to original as possible. I’d like to include recordings of more-than-human animals sounds; on a variety of lakes with different characteristics, ideally selecting lakes both for physical and historical/social characteristics; on land including at campsites, busy portages, and possibly also off trail where appropriate; and at other significant points in the area like canoe launch/entry points, canoe outfitters, near ecologically and culturally significant waterfalls, rivers, etc. Recordings will be helpful to make comparisons between the “silence” of the BWCA and the physical soundscape. Though my project addresses perception as a factor that changes depending on individual subjectivities, there are some sonic qualities of the BW that can be described via something that more closely

resembles an “objective” recording. I also find field recordings helpful as a way to generally “describe” a place. It could be interesting to complete statistical analysis of some of these recordings to explore – for example, comparing decibels of different types of motorboats vs. more-than-human sounds.

### Soundscape compositions

These would possibly include historical and contemporary multi-site compositions – using field recordings and editing them more significantly than previous category. How to tie in the sounds outside the Boundary Waters? Here I’m thinking of whether there might be ways to layer sounds from Line 3 protests in northern MN or nearby reservations with of BW recordings Historical soundscape compositions in the style of Sarah Eyerly’s work to aid imagination of what the Boundary waters may have sounded like at different points in time.

### Soundwalk audio

Such sounds could help guide listening exercises on stops off the road (of course, in places that are safe and minimize environmental damage. These will especially encourage active listening as an entry point into self-reflection. Guideposts for this work would be the soundwalking practice of Hildegard Westerkamp and Pauline Oliveros’ deep listening practice.

### Oral history interview audio

This audio would highlight different perspectives on the place, its sounds, and its histories, particularly prioritizing Anishinaabe stories and experiences that may contrast with settler tourist experiences, stories, expectations, and understandings of the place. Possible interviewees could include Anishinaabe activists and leaders such as Heart

Warrior Chosa; men from the US v. Gotchnik case; forest service employees; Friends of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area, Save the Boundary Waters, or other area environmental advocacy groups; historians and scientists of the area. Depending on where I am, any institutions I may be affiliated with, etc. there may or may not be a formal IRB protocol. I haven't found information on MN Chippewa Tribal guidance or rules for interviews or research, but I plan to reach out to someone at the Bois Forte Heritage Center to look into this further.

#### Sonifications of relevant area data

This data could be from the U.S. Forest Service, and I also think it would be interesting to explore quantifications of wilderness through studies cited in this thesis. An initial idea I have for this is to use logging data to try to make the scale of loss of tree species more tangible, could also involve human and more-than-human population data.

#### Music and sound art

This is probably the category that's the least feasible on a small scale but is particularly important to me. This may involve applying for grant funding to commission work, which may mean I'd need to have the project fairly far along to demonstrate to grant agency as well as artists what the project is about (depending on the grant, of course). Grant funding would likely also require me to pair with an established organization, like the Chik-Wauk Museum and Nature Center, the Gunflint Trail Historical Society, or the MN Historical Society. Prioritizing Anishinaabe art will be important. Elizabeth LaPensée is an example of someone whose work would significantly enrich the audio tour.

### Introduction or contextualizing audio

I've debated at great length whether it would be helpful to have an audio clip of me speaking a framing introduction. This comes back to big questions about ways to prioritize reflexivity while stepping back and amplifying other voices. I do think it may be valuable to include myself somehow as a node in the map, but I'm unsure as of now how much framing work I'd like to do.

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