On Hong-Kai Wang's "Quivering"

By Tobias Ewé

When an earthquake's sonic event oscillates through the air – rolling over the earth – it absorbs all objects in its wake. The sonic outline of every object in the path of the sound wave is inscribed into its signature. An earthquake produces rumbling imperceptible infra-sounds that alter the geological make-up, as well as deep bass frequencies that offer up new modes of understanding the malleability of geological strata. Movements are world-makers. As sound moves, worlds are created. As the earth quakes across its surface, new lines are drawn up.

UNGROUNDING

Hong-Kai Wang's *Quivering* contains two distinct works that draw upon significant seismological events: *This is no country music* – a performative lecture narrated and performed alongside the Polyphonic Ears Band (Nadya Isabella, Aubin Kwon and Julia Dahee Hong) as well as *Hazzeh* – documented text, video and sound of open rehearsals in the form of a specific Palestinian act of mourning for the dead performed by five women (Mai Marie, Ghazal Awdeh, Henna Haj Hassan, Ibtisam Ahmad and Raheeq Hafez) through wailing and singing. The spatio-temporal distance between *This is no country music* and *Hazzeh* is vast. The motif that connects the two, and flows throughout Hong-Kai Wang's work, is an attention to space-time scales, earthquakes, sounds, and thresholds. The thresholds of human movement are constrained by borders as a means to create an inside and an outside. Yet borders are more than human constructs that can also result from geological features created by the movements of tectonic plates. Political and social organisation can at least in part be read as human afflictions stemming from the crust of the earth. Fault lines are more than geological features that may result in earthquakes – they play a key role in structuring national borders through their production of strategic vistas and protective barriers. Land dispossession and migration is thus tied to geological time as a

result of the influence on politics by seismotectonic movements. Wang's practice offers possibilities for what she calls a "choreography of survival" through her attunement to geological movements that operate beneath the crust of the earth.

Year	Name	Areas Affected	Fault Line	Seismic Magnitude	Casualties	Depth
1 Nov 1755	Lisbon earthquake	Portugal, Spain, Morocco	Azores–Gibraltar Transform Fault (AGFZ)	8.5-9.0 Mw	60,000-100,000	20-40 km
26 Aug 1883	Krakatau eruption	Indonesia, Australia (sound and heat fluctuations registered worldwide)	Sunda Trench	n/a (6 VEI)	36,417	n/a
11 Jul 1927	Jericho earthquake	Jordan, Palestine	Dead Sea Rift (DST)	6.3 Mw	287	15 km
21 Apr 1935	Shinchiku-Taichū earthquake	Taiwan	Tiehchanshan Fault & Tachia Fault	7.1 Mw	3,276	15 km
26 Feb 2070	unknown	Pacific Northwest, Japan, Most of Southeast Asia	Cascadia Subduction Zone (CSZ)	8.0+ Mw	unknown	28-45 km
Mw = Moment magnitude scale; VEI = Volcanic Explosivity Index (0-8)						

In his book, *Spinal Catastrophism*, Thomas Moynihan shows how Immanuel Kant's thought – the modern thought of thought that we are still living – was thoroughly shaped by the 1755 earthquake with its epicentre just below the Azores-Gibraltar Transform Fault. The earthquake lay waste to most of Lisbon and its shocks were felt throughout Europe and North Africa, as well as Greenland and the Caribbean. The ripple effect not only decimated geographies and architecture, but also had a profound impact on science (the birth of seismology) and philosophy. Obsessed with the event, Kant wrote three of his earliest essays on seismology in the immediate aftermath. Written fifteen years before *The Critique of Judgement*, is it strange to imagine that the earthquake orientated Kant's philosophical rationality towards a transcendent limit? Earthquakes are, after all, bound to earth – whereas the bipedal human stretches upward and surveys the surface. In these earliest writings, Kant remarked "we 'know the surface of the Earth fairly completely,' but that 'we have another world beneath our feet with which

we are at present but little acquainted.'"[1] The mystery of the seismic earth moving beneath our feet led Kant to the horrific realisation that humans have never stood on firm ground. This schism carries through to the *Critique of the Power of Judgement* (1790)[2] where it becomes clear that the Kantian subject doubts itself and its perceptions as a response to the external quivering of the earth.

Eventually these oscillations influenced how Kant conceived of listening. He proposed that listening – just as reasoning – is a chemical process. Bypassing any notion of aural aesthetics as passing through emotions or being "about" anything, Kant ungrounded the Romantic notion that the sense of hearing would be able to represent physical objects. Aurality became data-processing, and the subject a mere medium that the sounds flowed through. As suggested by Veit Erlmann, "there existed a moment in Western cultural history when reason and resonance developed in contiguity" and this development was "a key element of modern cultural practice and at the heart of modern aurality."[3] Tying listening to a physical causal process, Kant treats the human as a seismograph measuring oscillations. However, for Kant this comes at the grave cost of a mode of listening that has no access to the aesthetic content of our experiences.

The 1755 Lisbon earthquake was not the only seismic event to shape the history of philosophy. In fact, it might be said that every radical transformation of thought has been the result of an equivalent reverberation in the surface of the earth. In 1883, after months of minor earthquakes in the region, the volcano on the island of Krakatau in Indonesia (then the Dutch East Indies) erupted. It pulverised 70% of the island into ash and created the loudest sound in recorded history,

1 Immanuel Kant in: Moynihan, Thomas. *Spinal Catastrophism*. Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2019, 47-48.
2 Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1790/2000.
3 Erlmann, Veit. *Reason and Resonance: A History of Modern Aurality.* New York City: Zone Books, 2010, 11.

which at 310dB was heard in Australia, China, and 4800 km away on the island of Rodrigues. The resulting tsunamis, earthquakes, ash clouds, and a 0.5-1.0 °C drop in global temperature affected the entire globe.[4]

That same year, German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche began publishing the first of four parts of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-1885). Is it a coincidence that the novel chronicles Zarathustra's travels to "an island in the sea - not far from [his] blessed isles - on which a fire-spewing mountain smokes continually"?[5][6] Keeping in mind Nietzsche's frequent play on the distinction between unter and über (under/below, over/beyond), he continues "the people say, that it has been placed like a huge rock before the gate to the underworld."[7] Krakatau creates the underworld beneath the crust of the earth, which extends its influence into the overworld. When Zarathustra returns from his descent into the underworld he learns that "the earth […] has a skin, and this skin has diseases. One of these diseases, for example, is called 'man.'"[8] As with Kant, it is by seeking upwards – but not *disconnected* from the earth – that thought frees itself from animality. The deafening roar of Krakatau's magmic explosion shook up Nietzsche and forced him to once again return to the question of the Christian morality encroaching on the colonised island. Rather than tie morality to religious principles, Nietzsche wanted to turn morality on its head and ground it as a metaphysical force within the world. What other reaction would be possible after the calamity of 1883? The noise of Krakatau truly killed God.

4 Schaller, Nathalie et al. "Climate Effects of the 1883 Krakatoa Eruption: Historical and Present Perspectives." *Vierteljahrsschrift der Naturforschenden Gesellschaft* in Zuerich 154, no. 1/2 (2009) 31-40, 35.

5 Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra.* Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1883-1885/1978, 130.

6 It is not. In *The Life of Friedrich Nietzsche,* Daniel Halévy mentions a passage in Nietzsche's letters to German poet Paul Lanzky in which Nietzsche recounts his admiration of the catastrophe of Krakatau and how "these movements of nature […] reminded man of his nothingness." He even hoped that perhaps a tidal wave might "do away with Nice and its [cosmopolitan flaneurs]." (Halévy, Daniel. *The Life of Friedrich Nietzsche*. London, UK: T. Fisher Unwin, 1914, 324).

7 Nietzsche. Thus Spoke Zarathustra. 103.

8 Ibid. 103.

SEISMOGRAPHS

In *Hazzeh* ('quivering' or 'shaking' in Arabic), Wang convened with a group of women as they navigated between Jordan and Palestine. With her 'open rehearsal method,' the performers traced the geological fault lines of the region. Wang encouraged them to summon rhythms and memories hidden below the crust of the earth. Developed in Amman, Jordan, *Hazzeh* echoes not only the history of land dispossession in the region of Jordan and Palestine, but also the seismotectonic histories and deep geological time. The piece was originally commissioned by the MMAG Foundation (Amman, Jordan) as a part of a group show that took French vagabond and novelist Jean Genet's final book *Prisoner of Love* (1986) as its point of departure. Through her research Wang found the following quote by Edward Said,

"[Jean Genet's] movements through Jordan and Lebanon had something like the effect of a seismographic reading, drawing and exposing the fault lines that a largely normal surface had hidden."[9]

The movement of the nomad can be likened to that of a seismograph. The nomad is not a seismologist, since a seismologist can never be anything but an observer and interpreter of movements. The seismograph is an instantiation of the oscillation itself. In this movement, the seismograph enacts the hidden strata by drawing up the fissures that were otherwise imperceptible to the seismologist. The purpose of the seismograph is the creation and identification of thresholds. Becoming a seismograph is thus an ongoing critical practice of seismo(logical) undoing. The seismologist measures space-time oscillations, whereas the seismograph becomes them.

9 Edward Said on Jean Genet in: Said, Edward. "On Jean Genet's Late Works." *Grand Street* 36 (1990). http://www.grandstreet.com/gsissues/gs36/gs36c.html.

The term ‘Hazzeh’ is also a colloquial name for a specific shaking that struck the short-lived geopolitical entities known as Mandatory Palestine and the Amirate of Trans-Jordan in the 1927 Jericho earthquake. Its epicentre was in the northern area of the Dead Sea in the Jordan Rift Valley. As Wang recounts from her trips there, several Palestinians of an older generation use ‘Hazzeh’ – the event of the earthquake – as a temporal marker. Rejecting universal Aeonic time, ‘Hazzeh’ became the centre from which everything else vibrated. Everything now happens before or after the ‘Hazzeh’ earthquake.

GEO-PHONICS

The organisation of people into a patchwork of bordered nation-states functions as an overlay onto an existing geological and social non-static smooth space. The national citizen is often bound to a rigid zone, whereas the stateless person moves from zone to zone with no regard for the thresholds that separate them.

The composer Koh Bunya existed in this ‘stateless’ space at various times throughout his life. Born in 1910 in Taiwan under Japanese colonial rule and living in China as the People’s Republic of China was founded, Bunya’s work came to embody the complexity of this region. He spent his adolescence in Xiamen, China, which at the time was occupied by Japan. In 1923, he moved to Japan and studied under the Russian composer Alexander Tcherepnin. In 1936, he represented Japan in the Berlin Olympic International Music Competition with the work *Formosan Dance*. He soon thereafter moved to Beijing, but after the People’s Republic of China was founded in 1949 he suffered severe persecution during the Cultural Revolution, which consequently ended his musical career. It was not until the early 1980s that his works resurfaced in Taiwan, and began to be “heard”.

This is no country music takes the form of a performative lecture and collective listening session around his work. In a flurry of voices from performers and recorded interviews, a sonic fiction emerges. Whilst based on the real movements of Koh Bunya, the performance uncovers more than just sheet music and recordings. Another work of Bunya emerges by tracing the historical oscillations of the 1935 Shinchiku-Taichū earthquake with its epicenter in Sansa's (三叉) Shinchiku Prefecture, in Taiwan under colonial rule. With a Richter magnitude of 7.1, the Shinchiku-Taichū earthquake was the deadliest earthquake in Taiwan's recorded history, killing at least 3,276 people. The fault lines created a difference of up to 3 metres between its two sides. This geological threshold shaped Koh Bunya's compositional practice. Just as Kant became obsessed with the Lisbon Earthquake, so too did Koh Bunya become obsessed and allegedly wrote an *Earthquake Relief Song* for the Earthquake Relief Concert at the invitation of Taiwan People News. Yet despite its popularity at the time there is no record of a complete score, nor any recordings.

If Kant's 1755 Lisbon earthquake ushered in a transcendent modern aurality, then Koh Bunya's 1935 Shinchiku-Taichū earthquake records the moment where modern aurality is fractured into disparate granules. Transcendent rationality is replaced by immanent uncertainty. Koh Bunya's modernist music and transnational life (as well as almost two centuries of seismological research) allows him to regard the earthquake as less of an epistemological catastrophe, but (after World War I and the industrial revolution), as a recognisable mode of being. The earthquake does not shake Koh Bunya to his core, but allows him to compose geo-phonically. Tracing the fault lines, he becomes a speculative hybrid seismograph through the complexity of his experience in a region with shifting political and geological boundaries.

INFRASOUND

When fault lines start to writhe and quake they create infrasonic sounds that travel across earth, sweeping up the sound of other objects in their path. The infrasounds are those sounds that oscillate just below 20Hz – the limit of human aurality. Although these infrasonic frequencies cannot be heard in any aural sense, they can sometimes be felt as vibrations on the skin. The frequencies just above and below the infrasound (and ultrasound) threshold are part of what sonic researcher Steve Goodman (Kode9) has coined as 'unsound'.[10] Sound beyond our audio-social predeterminations, non-cochlear infra- and ultrasounds, as well as not-yet audible rhythms all fall into the unsound category. Goodman grounds the unsound in his bass materialism as a way to expand the notion of what sound can be, and access sound's virtuality. More than a mere threshold of hearing, the infrasound inhabits the seismographic space of an infra-world with its own infra-politics.

Both *Hazzeh* and *This is no country music* grapple with statelessness, borders, bodies and lived experience (in short: nomadology).[11] Wang's methodological approach engages voice, vibration, and practices of listening combined with geological histories of natural disasters. Throughout her work, Wang engages in what she calls a 'critical listening' – a mode of listening that attempts to untangle the multiple socio-cultural layers encoded in music and cultural practices. In Wang's praxis of critical listening it is not enough to listen to music as sonic events or evidence of a composer's work. One must expand one's listening to even the sounds heard and imagined by the composer. For Wang, listening is a process that understands sounds as never fixed. Listening to the past cannot be singular, hermetic and specific, but

10 Goodman, Steve. *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear.* Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2012.

11 Deleuze, Gilles & Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994.

must emulate the act of listening itself as an expanded, aleatory and situated activity. For Wang, when we listen to Koh Bunya's music, we cannot separate his compositions from the sounds he heard when he was alive.

In tracing out this speculative method of critical listening, the Polyphonic Ears Band lays out a list of opposites to show that critical listening must exist in a tension between these without ever being resolved.

"In between remembering and forgetting
In between present, past and future
In between modernity and pre-modernity
In between cosmos, ocean and land
In between human and non-human
In between modern nation-state and colony
In between home, guest residence and exile
In between transnationality, settlement and diaspora
In between nativity, ethnicity and country
In between what can be heard and what cannot be heard
In between what can be touched and what cannot be touched
In between what can be felt and what cannot be felt"[12]

Critical listening is thus a practice of ungrounding the presumed stability of listening. To listen critically is to realise the shaking ground beneath our feet, and the quivering uncertainty within our sensory apparatus. In pulling together earthquakes, voice, vibration, critical, geological time and deep history in her search for Koh Bunya's *Earthquake Relief Song*, Wang creates what François J. Bonnet calls an infra-sensible network.[13] A network of interaction that exists in

12 Wang, Hong-Kai. *This is No Country Music.* Vancouver, 2019. Performance at Artspeak, as part of *Recollective: Vancouver Independent Archives Week*, https://archivesweek.ca/

13 Bonnet, François J. *The Infra-World*. Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2017.

an infra-world inaccessible to humans under normal circumstances. The infra-world is defined as a remainder, as surplus that runs through us and becomes a part of our relation to the world without ever submitting itself to identification. There is no sensory access to the infra-world. Just as the ground beneath Kant's feet, it is a world that withdraws from the world of perception.

Hong-Kai Wang's work on Koh Bunya's lost music, and the relationship between fault lines and critical listening, is still ongoing, as witnessed in her 2019 project at Artspeak in Vancouver, BC. Off the coast of Vancouver begins the Cascadia Subduction Zone (CSZ) – a convergence of tectonic plates that run along the Pacific Northwest. The CSZ has been predicted to have a 37% chance of causing an earthquake of magnitude 8.0 or higher,[14] which would create tsunamis that could travel across the pacific to the eastern coast of Japan. In fact, the CSZ is only one segment of the enormous belt of seismic activity surrounding the Pacific Ocean, aptly called the Ring of Fire. This ring connects Cascadia to a vast vibratory network of land areas, including Japan, Taiwan and the latest host of *This is no country music*, Singapore. Wang's work has no end in sight, but is an open-ended exploration of the infra-politics of the seismograph.

She suggests that by learning "how to resonate, or not resonate" we might begin to "detect the infrasound, as if we were building a seismograph."[15] *Earthquake Relief Song* is not a song that can be found in the world of human perception. It exists in what James C. Scott calls the infra-political sphere of the infra-world. A minor politics for the people to come, "made up of thousands of small acts, potentially of enormous aggregate consequence."[16] Finding the infrasound is the task

14 Lovett, R. "Risk of giant quake off American west coast goes up." *Nature* (2010). doi:10.1038/news.2010.270.

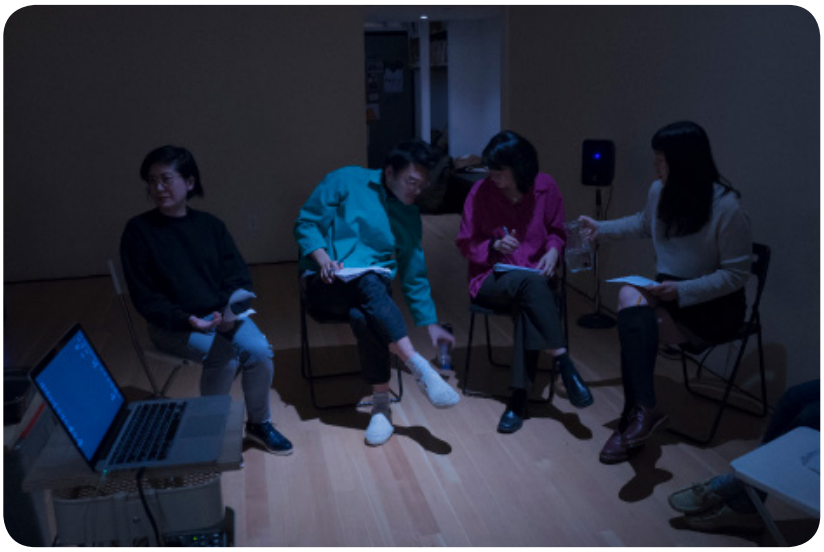
15 Wang, Hong-Kai. *This is No Country Music*. Vancouver, 2019. Performance at Artspeak.

16 Scott, James C. "Infrapolitics and Mobilizations: A Response by James C. Scott." *Revue française d'études américaines* 131, no. 1 (2012).

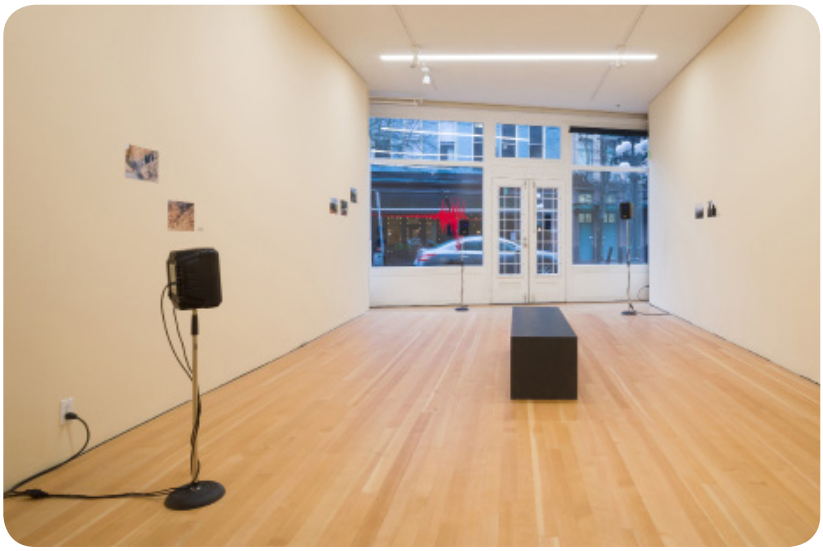
of a seismograph that must learn how to read, draw and expose the fault lines of the earth. Lines that consist of subterranean tectonic movements below the “borders of human-made nation states.”[17]

END

17 Wang, Hong-Kai. *This is no country music*. Vancouver, 2019. Performance at Artspeak.



This is no country music by Hong-Kai Wang with Aubin Kwon, Nadya Isabella and Julia Dahee Hong. Event documentation. Photo by Sungpil Yoon. Courtesy of Artspeak.



Quivering (October 26–December 7, 2019). Hong-Kai Wang. Exhibition documentation. Photo by Dennis Ha. Courtesy of Artspeak.

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