

This place is a classic underground spot: falling apart at the seams, bohemian quirkiness of the fake wood walls reminiscent of a postwar Middle American home bar in the basement, fan spinning creakily above us, all sorts of random swaying things hanging from the ceiling. But it feels like something special is going on tonight as two musicians begin jamming their equipment together, hurriedly plugging distortion pedals into tape echoes into amps, shoving guitar cases and suitcases behind the bathroom door, as the room fills to overflowing. A fire hazard for sure. People standing all over, more in back by the bar than the twenty or so lucky enough to cram into mismatched chairs around a handful of tables in front of the stage. There're only fifty people here at most, but it feels full, packed to overflowing, and the energy is charged. A young woman asks one of the performers if she can take his picture—sure, of course—a recording of harsh ringing sounds, crashing metal (a bowed cymbal?) plays over their setup. Though the lights are still up and people continue to talk, one performer seems as if he is beginning to play, shaking his table to create static, triggering buttons on a homemade electronic instrument. Crackles of filtered electricity begin emerging from the PA speakers suspended above

the stage, really just a carpeted area that might ordinarily fit a set of drums or a piano. Someone quietly hoots in preparation from the back—one of the performers nods—are they are ready? Is this still the CD? They stand and poke at their pedals; nothing happens. Is it broken? Is this on purpose? An intermittent crackle continues in the background, one performer replugs his pedal and makes some noises, testing, testing. The other continues adjusting a broken Korg “Stage Echo” tape delay and smacking a few more sounds out. He asks for more sound in the monitor, and turns, pushing a CB mic up against his amp to squeal some sharp feedback. In the brief moment of stillness before the blast of Noise begins, he finally turns to the audience, and stone-facedly announces “Konban wa”: “Good evening.” (We’re about to start.)



Japanese Noise legends Hijokaidan are crammed into the tiny broadcast booth of CHRW, an independent radio station in London, Ontario. The group is in town for a rare overseas appearance at the 2003 No Music Festival, an annual event hosted by the long-running local troupe Nihilist Spasm Band (NSB), who have brought Hijokaidan over from Japan to play alongside a roster of important North American Noise acts in this small Canadian city. “I’ve been playing Hijokaidan all day,” the DJ announces; “people are probably crashing their cars all over town!” Actually, it had been a fairly laid-back morning in London. After breakfast at NSB member Art Pratten’s house, everyone posed for photos in the backyard with his pet snake, and then piled into different cars to drive through the snowy streets to the anonymous university building that housed the CHRW studios. Inside the studio, the host begins his interview with a typical opening gambit, inquiring about the origins of the band. It’s a reasonable place to start, since most listeners of this quite experimental station probably don’t know much about the twenty-year history of Hijokaidan; even the otherwise well-informed host repeatedly mispronounces the band’s name. But Mikawa Toshiji, serving as the group’s informal spokesperson because his English is best, claims that he can’t remember exactly when they met. A long time ago, anyway. Instead, he speaks of his own discovery of free improvisation, punk rock, and German “krautrock” records, discussing his favorite groups and pointing out that a common interest in these recordings is what brought the members of Hijokaidan together. The host turns

the conversation back to Japanese experimental groups like Kosugi Takehisa's important group Taj Mahal Travellers and saxophonist Abe Kaoru. Weren't these influences for Hijokaidan? Wasn't there an important local music scene? But Mikawa says that they weren't listening to those Japanese groups. "Maybe years later, after we started, then we heard about them." The host asks several further questions intended to elicit some kind of historical narrative about the group's development in Osaka, the invention of the Noise genre in Japan, and their connections to a local Japanese Noise scene. Mikawa talks about one of Osaka's baseball teams. A half hour soon passes, and the host's well-intentioned attempt to introduce these legends of Japanese Noise to the radio audience is almost over. "Well," he announces into the mic as he cues up a track, "if you want to know about Hijokaidan, you'd better come down to the Forest City Gallery tonight and check 'em out for yourself." Then he leans over to press play and slides the fader up on a wall of Noise.

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"Now that it's everywhere, how do you decide whether a piece of noise-rock is good or bad?" This was the question posed by "Aestheticizing Noise," a panel at the 2005 CMJ Music Marathon in New York City, a independent music industry conference where critics, label owners, and promoters gathered to discuss the future of Noise. For the panelists, most of whom had been involved with promoting concerts and circulating recordings for many years, the growing recognition of Noise was both exciting and confounding. The genre, everyone agreed, was becoming increasingly popular, although no one seemed to know exactly what to call it—"noise-rock," "noise music," or just plain "Noise"—or could predict if the buzz might lead to anything more than chatter. Detroit's Wolf Eyes were now on the cover of international music magazines; New York's No Fun Fest was gathering unprecedented crowds. For some, the rapid pace of its current circulation meant that Noise's day had finally come as a new form of extreme music. For others, its exposure practically guaranteed that it was all over. People weren't going to get it, and Noise would no longer exist in a way that really mattered. Whatever was happening now wasn't real Noise.

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A sheet of paper flutters against the door of a dive bar on a deserted downtown street in a mid-sized Northeastern city. The 8.5 × 11 flyer, crudely designed with hand-drawn black-and-white text, announces a live Noise show featuring two performers from the area, as well as a Japanese artist on a brief tour of the United States. Inside the bar, two distinctly separated groups of people are clustered in the small space. On one side, a motley group of college-age stragglers are scattered around the room, some standing directly in front of the PA, others leaning against the walls. On the other side, some regulars are huddled together wondering what’s going on, trying to get as far away from the amplifiers as possible, and obviously ruing the invasion of their local watering hole by these ear-blasting misfits. The Japanese performer is climbing up a pillar in the center of the room, directly above a tableful of random electronic gear that has filled the room with screeching feedback for the last fifteen minutes. He leaps from the pillar onto the table, falling backward as his equipment scatters across the room, and slowly stands up as the Noise fans applaud and roar their approval. In the sudden silence, someone sitting in the back of the bar shifts his weight on his stool, swiveling over and cupping his hand against his mouth to shout: “We don’t understand what the hell you’re doing!” One of the local performers looks up from another small table, where his gear is already half-plugged together in preparation for the next set, shoots a grin at the Japanese performer, and yells back: “It’s Noise — you’re not supposed to!”

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I’ve got my headphones on, listening to “Electric Peekaboo” from the 1993 Merzbow record *Brain Ticket Death*, trying to make sense of the sounds I hear. The track begins with a one-second blast of sound, which shifts sharply downward in pitch before abruptly cutting out, as if taking a breath before releasing the long, harsh, continuous scream of Noise that follows. Sounds are split between the left and right speakers, creating two separate but interrelated layers of texture; other sounds are quickly panned between the two speakers to create a sense of movement in the flat landscape of the stereo field. Filters sweep across the distorted sound field, rippling through a stream of harsh frequencies. Beneath these timbral changes, there is another loop of sound, which repeats a two-second fragment of muted static. The distorted feedback begins to break up as some amplifier

in the chain reaches the limit of its capacity. A microphonic feedback is introduced in the background, and the sound begins to short out as a thin hissing sound momentarily fills both channels. A new loop lurches into both channels at once, emitting a spitting chatter for two seconds and then submerging into a low hum. A vocal sound, like a moan, appears underneath the layers of feedback; it is unclear to me whether this is actually the sound of a human voice or some resonance created in the feedback process, or by a filter, or another pedal. Suddenly the Noise just ends, leaving me suspended in the buzzing stillness. A final burst blasts through the system, as if I've been unplugged from myself. But none of this really describes it at all: the overwhelming feeling of it, the shocking effect of the transitions between sounds, the shiver that runs up your spine when the Noise cuts out. It's been three minutes, forty seconds—or a decade of listening, depending on how you look at it—and I am still struggling to hear what is going on.

FROM MUSIC TO NOISE

Over the last two decades of the twentieth century, Noise became a musical discourse of sounds, recordings, performances, social ideologies, and intercultural affinities. It connected a spatially and culturally diverse network of musicians and was embodied through the affective experiences of listeners. It was exchanged as an object of transnational musical circulation that touched down in particular places and eventually came to be imagined as a global music scene. Noise, too, is connected to many contemporary histories of aesthetic form and ideology, especially in new electronic, experimental, and underground styles of music. In short, Noise has become a kind of music, but one that remains distinctly and compellingly different in its circulation as “Noise,” “Noise Music,” and “Japanoise.” In this book I tell the story of Noise as a circulation of popular music. This Noise I write with a capital N to identify the specific sounds, places, times, and people that I have tuned into in my ethnographic work, all of which taught me to recognize its cultural presence.

I write this particular story of Noise out of my encounters with practitioners and listeners in extended fieldwork in Japan and North America from 1998 to 2008.¹ In Osaka, Kyoto, and Tokyo, I conducted interviews with musicians, listeners, and club and label owners; observed and participated in performances; and talked about recordings in the places where

they are produced, sold, and heard. I also learned through fieldwork (and several preceding years of informal contact) in experimental scenes in New York City, San Francisco, Providence, and London, Ontario, that connected with North American musicians and listeners.² The description of Noise in this book, then, is neither a general term of discourse nor an abstraction of critical theory. It is directly informed by my experiences in these times and places, in encounters with people and close observations of musical production and reception in practice. All of this brings me to relate how Noise has taken shape as a cultural force on the ground, even through the displacements of transnational circulation that often make it hard to identify. Over the years, I heard many different accounts of its creative purpose and historical origins, recorded disputes about its cultural and musical status, and listened to its changing sounds as it moved on the margins of many different styles. I learned about techniques of Noise performance, production, and distribution, about aesthetics of listening and ways of describing sound. Noise was more than a theoretical catchall for any musical or cultural idea that exceeded the boundaries of representation. It had become a world in itself.

Although my perspective was rooted in these particular moments, events, and dialogues, I also recognized that it would be impossible to compress my view of Noise into an ethnographic depiction of a contained musical community, whether local or transnational. Despite the fact that people described it as a mode of pure sonic experience, I found no way to isolate Noise to a singular musical form—a “Noise-in-itself” that might be hermeneutically unpacked as a consistent stylistic project. Its aesthetic history was continually submerged in layered cycles of mediation, always reemerging changed, somewhere else. Listeners and musicians created different biographical, historical, and aesthetic narratives. Some stories connected a certain group of actors, though not always in the same place and time, and others were isolated in their own individual versions of Noise. A coherent picture of Noise sometimes appeared when these particular views lined up with one another; they inevitably glided apart soon after these rare moments of convergence. My project, then, was to describe this feedback and attempt to follow its subjects through all of their movements and changes. Noise, I discovered, can only exist in circulation.

Noise displaces the home ground of ethnographic research as much as it challenges the representations of musical history. It does not settle in a distinct place or group of people, and its fragmented mediation makes

it difficult to depict its ethnographic terrain, even as global or multisited. Practitioners change their names and sounds often, and local audiences rarely coalesce into consistently recognizable scenes, even in a single city. Noise is bound to other histories of style that draw its sounds, if only temporarily, into their sphere of influence. Beyond Noise's consistent loudness, it is just as challenging to describe the sonic features of Noise as a musical form. It is often unrelentingly harsh, but also ambient and dynamic; it can be improvised and freely played or deliberately prepared, edited, and through-composed; it can include recognizable elements of other musical practices and use existing instruments, or be entirely non-referential in the invention of original live electronic sounds. Wordless Noise has no original linguistic center, and even its names—the English loanword *Noizu* in Japan and *Japanoise* in North America—conspire to attribute its source somewhere else.

I entered this loop by attempting to follow the flow of Noise between North America and Japan. But the circulatory centers of Noise shifted many times from the late 1980s through the turn of the millennium. In these rapid fluctuations—from place to place, impulse to impulse, person to person, moment to moment—Noise became a wave. Its movements resonated with the overlapping hopes, demands, and desires of friends and strangers scattered across the world, even as their exchanges amplified the cultural distortions, breakdowns, and delays that I describe in these pages. Taking a definitive authorial position within this circuitry is impossible. So, to begin, I turn back to an earlier point on my spiraling path into the feedback of Noise.

A PLACE I CALLED "JAPAN"

I first traveled to Japan in 1989, having dropped out of college to teach English, study Japanese and *koto* performance, and find the culture that I had only just begun to encounter in my texts on Japanese history, literature, and religion. The best way to really find out about these things, I thought, was to live in Japan and discover them for myself. I moved to the former medieval capital of Kyoto, a bustling mid-size city known as much for its modern arts and contemporary intellectual culture as its cultural and religious history. I found a tiny apartment, and began to search for informal English teaching work and to explore this new place, armed only with the Japanese language I had crammed in a summer intensive

course at UC Berkeley. Kyoto was and is a spectacular city full of historical landmarks and markers of traditional Japanese society. But it was also a bewildering mix of cultural materials that I already knew from home. Many of the things that immediately captured my attention were already familiar, if somehow transformed in “the Japanese version.” Many highly particular local practices were deeply embedded in the surround of transnational capitalism (i.e., the recent custom of eating at Kentucky Fried Chicken on Christmas Day). Common sources of media, especially music and television, seemed to create a similitude between my own experience and the cultural frames of modern Japan. Some points of coincidence even triggered deeply held memories, though I hadn’t known that my existing knowledge of media would be intrinsic to my daily life in Japan.

For example, I quickly rediscovered the *Star Blazers* animated TV show, with which I had been obsessed as a child in late 1970s Buffalo. I had watched these cartoons after school on our black-and-white TV in full ignorance of their Japanese origin. But in Kyoto, the familiar characters and images appeared everywhere in new detail, and I felt a strange rush of unwarranted nostalgia for this native production.³ In Japan, *Star Blazers* was *Uchū Senkan Yamato* (*Space Battleship Yamato*). It had been one of the first full-fledged smash hits of Japanese anime, beginning as a TV series in 1974, years before I began watching in grade school. In the anime-obsessed corners of Akihabara in Tokyo or Den-Den Town in Osaka, or pasted into the corners of flyers for punk rock shows, a bewildering proliferation of images from *Uchū Senkan Yamato* appeared: acetate stills, comics and retrospective books, models and representations of the series’ characters (whom I knew under their Americanized names of Derek Wildstar, Mark Venture, Dr. Sane, General Krypt, and so forth). I had come to Kyoto to learn about local culture, but most of my social connections began through some kind of mutual—or perhaps merely overlapping—knowledge based in transnational channels of popular media. From the shared-but-different childhood memories of *Uchū Senkan Yamato* / *Star Blazers*, my acquaintances might move to a discussion of computer software, to debates about favorite Beatles songs, to obscure independent films, books, and recordings. Even language was a mix of familiar and new; with some friends I spoke in Japanese, whereas others preferred to speak in English. Perhaps these mediated contexts were natural points of contact for cosmopolitan intercultural communication. After all, we were, I thought, part of a global network that sought out naturalized connections in popular

media and technology. But perhaps equally naturally, our shared experiential ground did not always line up.

Despite familiar things in my Japanese surroundings—ideas and images, social and technological frameworks, and even my own language—there were also many things that remained out of my field of perception. Unknown things filtered back in, forcing me to reconsider how I sorted out those aspects of culture that I acknowledged as Japanese. Certainly, I recognized the fascinating difference of Japan, embedded in Kyoto’s history and traditional aesthetics. But I began to focus on other, noisier, aspects of cultural representation that had escaped my recognition. In my own fandom of *Star Blazers*, I hadn’t known the show as Japanese, although its starcraft kept the imperial name *Yamato*. The futuristic narrative of *Uchū Senkan Yamato* transformed the famous World War II warship, excavated from the ocean floor, into a star cruiser that traveled the galaxy to save Earth from imminent self-destruction. *Yamato* had been the lead ship of the Imperial Navy, sunk in a suicide mission off the coast of Okinawa in the closing months of the war. This complex reference to wartime Japan had remained submerged in its new sites of reception, even as the battleship was dredged up, resurrected, and made into a science fiction epic for a new international audience.

As the mediated galaxies of “Japanimation” expanded further in the 1990s, new narratives of contemporary Japanese culture slowly came to the surface. Media studies scholar Iwabuchi Kōichi describes the 1990s as a shift from the cultural “odorlessness” that marked the early entry of Japanese media and consumer technologies into global circulation (Iwabuchi 2002, 2004). Japanese hardware had revolutionized the world market for electronic commodities in the 1970s and 1980s, including sound technologies like transistor radios, FM synthesizers, and the Sony Walkman, all of which carried little scent of Japan into their transnational markets. The cultural software of Japanese animation, comics, video games, and other audiovisual materials in the 1990s, on the other hand, began to bear more than a whiff of Japaneseness to faraway places.

What was specifically Japanese about these products, and what it meant for them to be recognized as distinctively cultural, remained unclear. But as “Cool Japan” penetrated the global market, attributions of cultural origin were fed back into a whole range of Japanese popular media—even, as I show here, into a seemingly cultureless Noise. Like anime, which is embedded in a history of foreign film technologies but has come to repre-

sent a distinctive local style, Noise’s Japaneseness is the outcome of a specific transnational mediation with the United States that shaped Japan’s “long postwar” (Gluck 1993; Harootunian 2000). Japanese anime became “Japanimation,” Japanese pop became “J-pop,” and Japanese underground music began to be circulated overseas as “Japanoise.”

This cultural feedback was a long time coming. In the 1980s, Japan was both the apex and the enigma of global modernity, especially among North Americans transfixed by the contrast between the nation’s emerging economic power and its idiosyncratic local practices. Japan was a fascinating and threatening landscape of extremes that juxtaposed traditional culture against ruthless technological efficiency. Symbols of Japanese difference abounded, from group calisthenics in auto plants to futuristic relationships with personalized robots, as well as more absurd and unsettling contexts of fetishistic cuteness and violence, reduced cartoonishly to the consumer excesses of mechanized toilets and the public perversions of sexually explicit comic books. Japan was reported as a retrograde society steeped in state corruption and corporate control of individual subjectivity, twisted by its own national repression of wartime violence into a rationalized nightmare of technocapitalism. It was the site of an idealized foreign tradition, but also a bizarre world of arbitrary postmodern hybridity. Japan became the “mirror of modernity,” whose avant-garde refractions of the West filtered out through the incommensurable prism of the “Japanese version” (Vlastos 1998). Like so many others, I glimpsed this fantastic imaginary Japan through the images, objects, and sounds that spun out of its seemingly untraceable media mix. But it was not until I came back to the United States that I discovered Japanoise.

BIG IN AMERICA

The genre of Japanoise emerged around 1990, as transnational systems of media distribution were undergoing significant change and expansion. On my return from Japan that year, I was surprised to discover that a musical aspect of “Cool Japan” had begun to be invoked in the United States by the names “Noise,” “Noise Music,” “Japanese Noise,” and eventually “Japanoise.” Japanese music had finally become a force in North American media, and Noise was rapidly becoming known as its central genre. Still, I had never heard of Noise or any of these seemingly new groups, although most were located in Kansai, and even in Kyoto, where I had been living

for a year. What was happening here? There were certainly other Japanese productions that might have been more likely to cross over to foreign audiences. In fact, most popular music in Japan already sounded very much like Western pop music. Many rock and pop artists used English phrases in their songs, while some others (e.g., Matsuda Seiko) recorded albums entirely in English, with North American producers and guest stars, in a deliberate attempt to court an overseas audience. But Noise, which finally broke through where so many attempts had failed, trickled in through underground channels far from the mainstream of corporate J-pop that dominated the mass media. Japanese underground music had begun to enter into North American reception several years earlier, with a steady flow of experimental cassettes building up throughout the 1980s. The expansion of transnational media distribution in the early 1990s became a confluence for a stream of Japanese independent recordings. By the turn of the millennium, Japanoise had come to define a new transnational music culture.

Japanoise surfaced in North America from within a larger framework of reception that included not just Noise but “noisy” Japanese music. A host of recordings by strange Japanese groups had begun to filter into independent distribution: Boredoms, Haino Keiji, Melt Banana, Omoide Hatoba, Ruins, Ghost, Grind Orchestra, Acid Mothers Temple, Ground Zero, Space Streakings, Zeni Geva, and others. Many recordings picked up by North American fans in the 1990s were by punk, hard rock, and hardcore groups from the Kansai region, especially Osaka. Osaka’s citizens have historically been recognized within Japan for their outspoken aggressiveness, direct local language, hedonistic enjoyment of leisure, and outrageous sense of humor. Given this outgoing expressive character, it was not surprising that extreme, intensely performative musical styles were associated with the city. Osaka encouraged edgier, more experimental attitudes, as well as amateur performance spaces and recording projects. But the region was also a logical site for transnational connections to the Japanese underground because it was isolated from the centralized national media in Tokyo. Although domestic distribution remained difficult for Kansai artists into the 1990s, overseas networks of independent music had begun to mediate the development of a local underground scene in Osaka.

Shonen Knife was one of the first groups to fire the imagination of North American listeners. The Osaka band featured three Japanese women—reportedly “office ladies” who seemed as remote from any punk rock scene

as possible—singing songs about public baths, Barbie dolls, bison, chocolate bars, and goblins called *kappa*, using the three-chord stripped-down punk form of the Ramones. In North American reception, Shonen Knife seemed to be the perfect musical example of modern Japan’s paradoxical mediascape; something about them was wonderfully off. While the trio approximated familiar styles, their songs were quirky, amateurish, and somehow fundamentally “alternative” to the more familiar original. The group simultaneously reinforced and confused Western stereotypes, both of Japanese women and of one-way models of intercultural imitation, with their absurdist-but-genuine version of outsider punk rock. Shonen Knife’s first official U.S. release was the reissue of their LPs *Shonen Knife* and *Pretty Little Baka Guy / Live in Japan* on U.S.-based Gasatanka/Rockville Records in 1990.⁴ But this snapshot of the “new” Japanese underground had already been released twice, first in Osaka on Zero Records in 1983 and then again as an informally copied and circulated cassette tape on the tiny U.S. indie label K Records in 1986. This was newness amplified by a time lag, a musical difference ordered within the cultural imaginaries of global media. The sounds of the Japanese underground were familiar, but excitingly mysterious. They were recognizable, but somehow unfixed and somewhat unintelligible. They were ready to turn into Noise.

By the early 1990s, recordings by Hijokaidan, Incapacitants, C.C.C.C., Solmania, Masonna, Monde Bruits, Astro, Aube, Government Alpha, Pain Jerk, K.K. Null, K2, MSBR, Geriogerigegege, Violent Onsen Geisha, and Merzbow had swept into North American reception. College radio stations and independent record stores circulated releases from Osaka’s Alchemy, Public Bath, Japan Overseas, and New York’s Shimmy Disc and Tzadik labels. Underground fanzines like San Francisco-based Mason Jones’s *Ongaku Otaku* informed fans of the archetypal examples of Noise and helped them assemble a rudimentary map of its generic boundaries in Japan. North American tours, especially by Merzbow and Masonna in the mid-1990s, allowed select fans to experience Japanese Noise live and relate legendary stories for those who missed the chance. It was increasingly possible to talk about a “Japanese Noise scene,” and maybe even see some of its representatives in live performance. By the time I really began to tune into what was going on, the layers of feedback from North American reception—in which almost any Japanese underground music had come to be described as Noise—had already shifted the ground for Japanese musicians.

“Noise Music” was already widely in use as a general term of difference in North American underground music. But new confusions between the overlapping terms of “Noise,” “Noise Music,” and “noisy music” became crucial for bringing Japanese media into North American reception. In the 1980s, “Noise Music” described a broad range of “noisy” artists that could also be described as “experimental,” “industrial,” “hard-core,” “postpunk,” or “no wave” (e.g., the NYC-based bands Sonic Youth, Suicide, Glenn Branca).⁵ “Noise Music” was a loose, metageneric term for all of these diverse underground sounds that were too noisy to be absorbed into a commercial mainstream or recognized as a distinct musical movement. Noise was everything on the margins of musical genres: recordings with no consumer market, sounds that could never be confused with any kind of normal music. But with the sudden appearance of Japanese Noise, much of what had previously been called Noise became “noisy music,” to be distinguished from a purer form of Noise, which was represented by new sounds from Japan. Japanese recordings were increasingly differentiated from local “Noise Music” by the phrase “Japanese Noise Music,” and finally the neologism “Japanoise.” In the alternative media networks of the 1990s, Noise was now something that came from Japan. The invention of the term *Japanoise* further supported the North American belief that the distant Japanese Noise scene was bigger, more popular, and more definitive of the genre.

Many Japanese artists argued that their music was not, in fact, Noise and began to distinguish their projects from other Japanese work that could more properly be described as Noise.⁶ Osaka’s Boredoms, for example, became one of the most widely known examples of Japanese Noise in North American reception, although the group has argued vehemently against being considered a Noise band. Still, those hearing their first U.S. release, *Soul Discharge* (issued in 1990 by Shimmy Disc) could be forgiven for thinking that “Noise” was a pretty good description. The recording was a Dadaist cut-up of pop music styles, performed at top speed with an absurdly aggressive, over-the-top energy. Lead singer Eye Yamatsuka (now Yamataka) babbled nonsensical sometimes-Japanese sometimes-English vocals over warped guitar, bass, electronics, and two drum sets in a montage of hard-core and *musique concrète*. The cover depicted a ragtag band of both women and men dressed in scuba gear, draped with junk electronics, long hair and shaved heads, toy sunglasses, and multicolored fluorescent clothing. Boredoms’ absurdist play with their musical influences and even

their names—Eye, Yama-Motor, Yoshimi P-we, God Mama, and so on—reiterated their unknowability.

Boredoms began touring the United States, playing tiny clubs for in-the-know aficionados of experimental rock. Eye connected to New York’s experimental music scene through the downtown composer John Zorn, first in Zorn’s group Naked City and later in the duo project Nani Nani.⁷ The band collaborated with underground legends Sonic Youth and opened for Nirvana at the height of their major-label exposure. In 1994, Boredoms played the hugely influential Lollapalooza tour, bringing their intense, cacophonous stage act to crowds of young concertgoers across the United States at the apex of alternative music. The group was signed to Reprise, a division of Warner Bros., for the U.S. release of *Pop Tatari* in 1993, and their older Japanese releases were reissued overseas. Over the next decade, Boredoms left their major label distribution in the United States, changed their name to Vooredoms, then back to Boredoms, then to Boadrum, and splintered into several side projects with an ever-more confusing discography.⁸

Boredoms is certainly a very noisy band, and many members of the group had strong social and creative links with local developments of Noise in Japan. Before forming Boredoms, Eye had been part of the influential Noise duo Hanatarashi, whose performances in 1980s Kansai have become legendary.⁹ Although individual members had strong connections to Noise projects, they did not consider Boredoms as Noise. Eye began to inform North American audiences of the differences, insisting that Boredoms was not Noise, just “noisy.” In explaining the distinction, he occasionally mentioned groups like Merzbow and Hijokaidan, which, he explained, *could* accurately be described as Noise. Of course, Eye had no intention of explaining Noise. But the term spun out of his surrealistic deflections of inquiries about Boredoms’ relationship to Japanese culture, to other forms of music, and to contemporary subcultures in the United States. His vague references demanded further knowledge of the elusive category, and listeners began to seek out the real Japanese Noise.

NOISE IS DEAD. LONG LIVE NOISE

The North American reception of the 1990s opened a brief window for Japanese musicians and listeners to imagine a new Japanese underground back home. Local Japanese receptions of overseas success are often characterized by the phenomenon of *gyaku-yunyū*, or “reverse importation,” through

which Japanese artists become validated at home after gaining status on a foreign stage.¹⁰ International success sparked a brief surge of interest in the local Kansai Noise scene, even to the extent of briefly putting Noise artists on national television in the mid-1990s. For a hyperindividualist, largely amateur, and secretive group of performers, the sudden demand for exposure was potentially devastating. Japanoise connected Japanese artists to an audience they would never have reached without the intervention of North American reception. But they had to position their Noise within explicit claims of cultural authorship. As overseas feedback looped back to Japan, local musicians and listeners again shaped their cultural boundaries around a foreign Noise.

When I returned to Japan in 1998 to begin my ethnographic research, I was surprised to hear that Noise was already dead or had never existed in the first place. Many prominent performers, along with fans, record store and club owners, writers, and other participants, told me that there was no use attempting to search for it, explain it, or even bothering to describe it. They continued to produce and release recordings and put on regular performances for a core audience of long-term listeners. But they claimed that the idea of Noise was a misunderstanding generated by confused fans who had taken things too seriously. Still, over the course of that initial research trip in Osaka, I attended electrifying Noise concerts; had long conversations about the history of the Kansai Noise scene in the 1980s; met first-, second-, and third-generation performers; and flipped through the bins marked “Noise” at local record shops, where owners wrote lists of important recordings and groups and customers joined in with their own advice. I strained to make sense of a chorus that seemed to speak with two voices: one shouting, “Noise is dead,” the other whispering, “Long live Noise.”

Any story of Noise must account for the transnational circuitry of its subjects, and also acknowledge their dogged pursuit of antisocial, anti-historical, antimusical obscurity. This multisited struggle against cultural identification makes Noise extremely difficult to place. Despite a concentration of exceptional performers, Noise is by no means exclusive to Japan. Noise is practiced in pockets of the United States, Canada, Europe, Australia, and Latin America; in recent years, there have been Noise festivals in China, Taiwan, and South Korea. Some link the historical development of Noise to earlier British industrial music (Whitehouse, Throbbing Gristle, SPK), American experimental rock (Velvet Underground, NYC “downtown,” Los Angeles Free Music Society, “No Wave”), and free jazz

(Albert Ayler, the late John Coltrane, and several 1970s improvisational collectives), as well as European postwar electronic synthesizer composition and tape music, contemporary projects of sound art and experimental music.¹¹ Performers have often described Noise as a global form that transcended specific cultural influences, spinning out of a primordial human creativity. But for two decades, Japan was where Noise stuck—not because Noise was invented there, but because it was driven home in transnational circulations that continually projected its emergence back onto Japan. Although there are many other contexts, I focus on North American receptions, largely in the United States but also in Canada. These are not places where the products of Japanese Noise artists were merely “received.” Japanoise, I argue, could only have been produced through this mediated feedback between Japan and North America.

For the relatively scattered and isolated population of North American listeners and musicians, imagining the Japanese underground was deeply significant. The idea was ripe with potential for experimentation and international camaraderie, as well as the challenges and surprises of cultural difference. Meanwhile, a lack of local recognition had driven Japanese recording artists to bypass regional distribution in search of a transnational audience. Listening from afar, North Americans imagined the Japanese Noise scene as a cohesive, politically transgressive, and locally resistant community—in other words, a version of their own ideal musical world in an unknown cultural space. But its Japanese subjects lived in different cities, often did not know of each other’s work, and were more oriented toward overseas reception than the constructions of a local cultural identity.

Japanoise represented a global music scene forged in circulation. Its fragmented publics were connected through miscommunications, distortions, and established channels of intercultural “untranslation.”¹² Eventually, the “grass is greener” projections of North American and Japanese participants *did* cultivate a long-term exchange, as each side imagined—wishly, and often wrongly—that the other had a larger, more engaged, and somehow more real Noise scene. Even as Noise loosened the links between musical sources and local cultural origins, it began to represent an original project of global culture in itself. But its feedback also questioned if there could be such a thing as culture at the roots of circulation after all.

FEEDBACK: CIRCULATION AT THE EDGE OF MUSIC

Circulation lies at the theoretical center of this book. Even as I describe Noise through its circulation, I want to challenge the comparative models of exchange that represent circulation as something that takes place *between* cultures. I privilege the concept of feedback to emphasize that circulation itself *constitutes* culture. Feedback is a critique of cultural globalization, a process of social interpretation, a practice of musical performance and listening, and a condition of subjectivity. By focusing on the transnational context of popular music, and the specific case of Noise, I show how technological mediation transformed the global scale of cultural exchange, even as it undermined its historical continuity. Ethnographies of media affirm that culture travels and also demonstrate how people experience its movements, and how different interpretations feed back to creative sources.¹³ But describing circulation does not mean merely showing how cultural forms enter into production in one place and emerge changed in reception somewhere else. Output is always connected back to input in transformative cycles of feedback. Seeing the cultural power of media in circulation means recognizing the mediation of culture by circulation. Feedback, in turn, shows how circulation always provokes something else.

Circulation typically describes the distribution of material goods and currency, but its models of economic production and exchange are embedded in a discursive framework that extends to the dissemination of social knowledge, news, ideas, and other productions of cultural content. Increasingly, *circulation* is used to characterize intercultural relationships, paths of migration, aesthetic and expressive forms, and ideologies and imaginaries of cultural globalization. Global “flows” and “scapes” seem to correlate all of the multisited transactions of the contemporary world as interrelated networks of goods, people, and images across space and time (Appadurai 1996; Castells 1997). But circulation can sometimes appear as a transparent background for exchange, rather than a cultural production in itself. Against this, Benjamin Lee and Edward LiPuma have argued that circulation is not just the “movement of people, ideas and commodities from one culture to another.” Instead, circulation represents “the performative constitution of collective agency,” and a distinct “cultural process with its own forms of abstraction, evaluation, and constraints” (2002:192–93). Circulation is not just movement and exchange, but performance and process. Its forms do not simply progress from one place, person, or sociocul-

tural context to another. Circulation is a nexus of cultural production that defines the things, places, and practices within its loops.

If circulation is a culture-making process, what kinds of culture does it make, and what kinds of cultural subjects? What happens when circulations break down? Or, more accurately, what happens when they break down, start up, and break down again in an irregular off-kilter trajectory? What happens to things that are not swept into the paths of intercultural dialogue, to the incremental differences that disappear or hide away? Is everyone always already “in sync” with circulation, simply by being within reach of its ever-expanding grasp? Circulation can easily be compressed into a totalizing entity of global culture. But the feedback I describe in *Japanoise* shows that its circuits can never be fully contained in networks of collective agency or communication. Instead, Noise performs circulation as an experimental force, which is compelled to go out of control.

The cultural movements of circulation reproduce historical relationships of power and trace out the institutional routes of center-periphery formations. Circulation also generates powerful forces of newness and difference that change these structures, and sometimes fundamentally shift their meanings (Urban 2001). Global networks can seem to extend space and place “beyond culture,” to reshape conceptions of self and other, home and travel, contact and adaptation, continuity and change (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). In this, circulation depicts the cultural politics of globalization as an ever-adapting framework of interactive relationships. But the subjects of circulation are not so easily discovered. They are always moving somewhere else, changing situations and being changed by them. Sometimes they reappear where they were before, and sometimes they are diffused into unstable patterns that spread out into a field of differences. Although most circulations cannot accurately be described as purely local or national, few are truly global. They aren’t always communicational and can be difficult to characterize in terms of interaction, dialogue, expression, or agency.

Circulation is full of “missed encounters, clashes, misfires, and confusions” in what Anna Tsing calls the “friction” of global interconnection (Tsing 2005). These circuits are hard to trace because they do not move smoothly or include everything they might seem to. They don’t complete their revolutions; they break down or spiral off into the distance. Some cycles cannot endure the erosion of repetitions; others were never linked in in the first place. It is crucial to recognize that these irregular exchanges

go on even as they fail and their objects are transformed or destroyed. People discover other meanings in culture as it unravels, disconnects, and folds in on itself.

Feedback is circulation at the edge. An edge is a special kind of being-in-place; it marks the transition between something and nothing. Edges are limits, and also shape-defining margins. To be at the edge, as Edward Casey puts it, is to exist in the “in” of the “in-between,” in the instant between one time and another (Casey 2008).¹⁴ An edge cuts and changes whatever it encounters. It is where movement must stop or turn in a different direction; it is where people plummet into the abyss, or learn to fly. Things end, and begin, at this place—but nothing stays at the edge forever. Edges mark the boundaries of empty space, but they also represent the transformational places where new possibilities open up again.

The edges of feedback are temporal as well as spatial. In any given circuit of exchange, “to reintroduce uncertainty is to reintroduce time; with its rhythm, its orientation and its irreversibility” (Bourdieu 1980:99). A time lag can radically change the meaning of circulation: it can turn music into Noise and back again. Michael Warner describes how the “punctuality” of circulation orients publics toward their own mediation. Newspapers, for example, are printed, reviewed, and cited at a given frequency; this repetition brings individual readers into a specific relationship of reception. Each particular media cycle creates its own self-reflexive social knowledge, turning a history of “exchanges into a scene with its own expectations” (Warner 2002:66). Postmodern media theory has focused on the global simultaneities created by the ever-increasing speed of circulation (e.g., Harvey 1990; Jameson 2001 [1991]; Lyotard 1984; Soja 1989). But temporalities of exchange depend as much on slowdown, interruption, and mutual exclusion. New media pile up to the point of overload, collecting in bottlenecks that strain the capacity of public distribution. Local infrastructures radically distort transmissions by adding more and more noise to the signal (Larkin 2008). Feedback, then, does not reduce to dialogue between cultures. It shows that circulation defers and distorts communication, even as it enables new possibilities for connection.

Noise spins out of its productive miscommunications. The historical concept of communication included a range of meanings, only a few of which related to interaction between discrete subjects. As John Durham Peters has pointed out, communication could include indeterminate acts of reception (e.g., partaking in Holy Communion, which made the recipi-

ent part of a religious body without any personal expression); it could involve the transfer of a sourceless energy or the unconscious appropriation of an idea for another use. In the twentieth century, broadcast and recording media recast communication as a dialogic world system that could connect different cultural voices through an ever-improving technological network.¹⁵ But the copresence of global connection also involves miscommunication, confrontation, and mutual breakdown. The mistake of communication theory, Peters argues, is “to think that communications will solve the problems of communication, that better wiring will eliminate the ghosts” (Peters 1999:9). In fact, the wired world generates more spectral voices than ever, and more Noise.

MUSIC AS MEDIA

One aim of this study is to complicate historical narratives of popular music through the repetitions, delays, and distortions of technological mediation. I show how the jagged distribution of Noise set the stage for new waves of musical creativity, as its recordings were discovered and re-discovered by scattered listeners around the world. Noise’s perennial newness is generated by its irregularity in the time frames of popular media. It is out of sync with the speedy schedules of corporate industry, and also with local scenes of independent music and histories of avant-garde aesthetics. The newness of any musical genre is determined by the time it takes to become familiar, as it “breaks” in different sites of reception. Music is produced and distributed; it is heard and then named, identified, and placed in comparative relationships with other styles. The clock starts again as a new style is slowly broken into the world. It becomes known as it is distributed, historicized, diversified, and then, perhaps, lost, buried, and recollected in nostalgia.

But as media circulation opens access to an increasing catalog of global forms, its time lags and delays continue to amplify the effects of cultural difference. Distance and isolation are exploited to create separate markets within the misalignments of transnational distribution. When an American musician or band is described as “big in Japan,” this means that their music has run its course everywhere else. It is surprisingly popular in this unlikely place only through some sort of unnatural accident or coincidence, which seems to spring from the gaps between its original culture and its foreign reception. But global popular culture is not staged on a uni-

directional timeline, like a telephone game in which a message radiates outward, slowly losing its original authority and meaning in its expansion to distant, separate contexts, from which it never returns. It is constantly remediated through the transformations of feedback. As time lags and inequalities become part of circulation, they break new ground for musical creativity and generate new forms that are folded back into the loop.¹⁶

Mass-mediated genres of popular music are increasingly recognized as productions of cultural difference, as well as hegemonic objects of transnational capitalism. Social critics have long feared that the spread of technological media would eliminate global diversity. For ethnomusicologists, the rapid postwar expansion of recorded and broadcast music threatened a “cultural greyout” of the world’s musical resources (Lomax 1968). As media influenced the content of local knowledge and traditional instruments were replaced with electronics, separate music cultures might even cease to exist, as distinct expressive forms are consolidated into a homogenous global mass. In fact, the opposite has occurred: cultural difference has fed back into musical circulation with a vengeance. Popular music remediates local identity, sometimes as a fusion of transnational musical aesthetics adopted by ethnic and subcultural groups, and other times as an unfused essentialism of cultural nationalism.¹⁷ Regional pop stars symbolize new political movements; “world music” channels the transcultural creativities of urban cosmopolitanism; and hybrid pop genres are heard as sonic hallmarks of mimetic influence and intertextuality.¹⁸ Recorded music has become integral to contemporary senses of place and identity. Recordings inspire local revivals and provide material for emerging archives of cultural memory even as their sonic contents are remixed into new forms and alternative interpretations of history. In this feedback, it is difficult to describe any popular music as distinctly local, original, or independent. Local musical cultures have not disappeared. But they are constantly reproduced and remediated in dialogue with other new projects of listening, performance, emplacement, and selfhood.

To illustrate how musical cultures are formed in circulation, I describe a diverse range of listening practices that brought Noise to the ears of a transnational audience. These creative receptions are not necessarily exclusive to Noise or to its audiences in the United States and Japan. As recordings became ubiquitous to musical knowledge in the twentieth century, listening was transformed on a global scale. The “audile techniques” of recorded sound—the technological isolation of listeners, the construction

of private acoustic space, the introduction of historical forms into mass culture, and the complex relationships of sonic “fidelity” between copies and original sources—were particularly crucial in forming the aural subjectivities of “alternative modernities” (Gaonkar 2001; Sterne 2003). Charles Hirschkind, for example, has described how cassette-recorded sermons in contemporary Egypt constructed a political public sphere of “ethical listening,” and Amanda Weidman discusses the impact of phonographic listening on transmission and performance practices in South Indian Karnatic music (Hirschkind 2006; Weidman 2006). Recordings generated new discourses of collection and connoisseurship, as well as diverse contexts of mediated performance (e.g., remixing and reperforming recorded music in dub, hip-hop, karaoke, mashups, and so on).¹⁹

Narratives of global media often focus on the displacement of circulating forms from their original sites of creative production. But audiences bring music back to place through their own sonic explorations. Noise fans create maps of recordings—guides to record stores, lists of essential tracks and albums, indexes, charts of performance sites, and collections of sounds—that chart the underground networks connecting Tokyo to New York to Osaka and point to distant horizons of creativity. Recordings become points of access to a hidden world of sound that echoes beneath the surface of everyday life and moves scattered listeners to imagine the space of a global music scene. Through their geography of consumption, they transform the creative landscape of Noise: fans become musicians, receptions become productions, and techniques of listening turn into frameworks of performance.

In *Japanoise*, I trace the feedback between recorded media and performance in contemporary musical experience. Sensibilities of recorded sound are an especially crucial common ground for audiences separated by geographic, linguistic, economic, and cultural divides. To close the distances of global circulation, listeners and performers alike become deeply invested in the personal embodiment of sound. Absorbed in sound, they bring recordings into their senses, and then feed their experiences back into public discourse as a mediated form of musical knowledge. Live performances of Noise create an intensely powerful sonic atmosphere that inhabits public space with a private emotional sensibility. The sheer loudness of Noise can produce sensations of interiority, and live shows are valued for this immersive experience, especially in the tiny “livehouses” of urban

Japan, where audiences are suffused in an intense environment of overwhelming volume. But Noise's "liveness" emulates the sonic production of recordings, which create an equally powerful aesthetic of "deadness" in individual experiences of sound. Listeners identify the special qualities of Noise through its embodied sensations (e.g., "harsh"), which are incorporated into special techniques of production and mastering that can make Noise recordings sound loud at any volume.

Another goal of this book is to examine the role of technology in the formation of cultural subjects. Here, feedback stages the technocultural subjectivity of Noise, which takes shape in its sonic practices of creative destruction. In Noise, disparate things get plugged together. Outputs go back into inputs, effects are looped together, and circuits are turned in on themselves. Sounds are transformed, saturated with distortion, and overloaded to the point that any original source becomes unrecognizable. Controls no longer do what they are supposed to; each discrete function is tied to the next in a fluctuating, interrelated mass of connections. Sound seems to generate itself. In the next moment, the circuit is overturned, the gear is wrecked, and the network is destroyed.

Feedback generates a powerful ambivalence around the terms of musical authorship.²⁰ Individual practitioners began making Noise in isolated experiments with consumer electronics, which eventually overlapped in performance systems based in "circuit-bending," overload, and distortion. In the process, they bent the linear narratives of musical history into an unpredictable, self-reinforcing network. But if performers celebrate the inventive possibilities of technological participation, they also debate its violent effects on individual sensibilities. Their electronic feedback embodies a human-machine relationship that is uncertain, excessive, and out of control. Noisicians forced their listeners to witness the technological overload of individual consciousness in consumer societies. The millennial narratives of Japanese extended the aesthetic modernisms of futurism and surrealism to the symbolic power of 1980s industrial music and postapocalyptic anime. This technocultural critique fused Noise to Japanese culture through a global imaginary in which postwar Japan has become iconic of the destructive impact of modern technologies. In this process, Japanese was linked into Japanese cultural politics through geopolitical histories that are anything but random.

Japan has been particularly important for enculturating the sourceless feedback of Noise, particularly in overseas reception as Japanoise. But how is Japanoise Japanese? Throughout this book, I contextualize Noise in Japan, usually among particular individuals and communities in Osaka, Tokyo, and Kyoto from the mid-1980s to the mid-2000s. I conducted the bulk of my fieldwork with Japanese musicians, fans, producers, and other social agents, and I observed particular local networks and documented particular practices of performance, recording, and listening in Japanese sites. My narratives of Noise generally document its creative developments in Japanese contexts and its subsequent receptions in North American ones. Because of this ethnographic focus, it might be possible for readers to think that I am arguing that Noise is, in fact, a Japanese genre with a discrete local origin. Foreign reception may have merely distorted its true native voice, which remains buried beneath the static. Or, given its place in a history of intercultural mistranslation, Japanoise might be a pure invention of Western Orientalism: even the name recalls the appropriation of Japanese traditional culture in the “japanoiserie” of turn-of-the-century French aesthetics. But I am not arguing that Japanoise is a singular local entity or that it was generated only by foreign misappropriation. Its cultural character reflects an intricate historical relationship with the United States, through which Japan has been constructed as an antisubject of Western modernity.

Japan’s modernization is deeply linked to the military and political interventions of the United States, but its popular cultural forms are often represented as if they had been spontaneously generated in situ. As Iida Yumiko has stressed, the particularizing realm of the aesthetic has been central to Japanese national identity. Japan’s modern status was mediated through Western appreciation of its art and culture, so that “Japan” “became an aesthetic construct of the modern universal world” (Iida 2001:14). Narratives of postmodern Japan as an aesthetic surface provoked the search for its deep structures of cultural origin, even in its most derivative commercial forms. Even Japan’s most blatant borrowings and imitations of Western culture could be perceived as reflective of a unique native subjectivity.²¹ Janimation, J-pop, and other forms of J-culture have helped American audiences reimagine Japan within a global technological commons that connects modern publics even through their differences. But

even as Japanese products are spread across the world in music, cinema, food, games, and technologies, Japan has not reappeared. What emerges instead is *Japanoise*.

Encounters between the United States and Japan have historically been unequal, but unequal in particularly repetitive, cyclical ways. Japanese cultural productions constantly affirmed the constitutive influence of the West while insisting on an autonomous unique status. The particular asymmetries of Japan's "off-center" perspective became embedded in its modern intellectual and literary development (Miyoshi 1991). Consumption of American goods was politically institutionalized in postwar Japan, promoting a fantasy of "bilateral" relations within the hegemonic power of the United States (Yoshimi 2003). As a result, the Japanese public is deeply familiar with American-made popular culture, but even as Japan's powerful media industries find a growing market in Asia, crossovers to the United States have been rare. *Japanoise* seemed to reverse this lopsided movement, even if its flow from Japan to the United States was irregular, enigmatic, and untranslated. My extension of Japan studies into a context of transnational reception, then, is also a step toward globalizing American studies through the circuits of Japanese media.²² In both contexts, distinct projects of cultural and subcultural identity emerged from shared but separate loops of consumption.

Scholars of popular music show that Japanese productions of jazz, rock, hip-hop, hardcore punk, and reggae have generated transcultural critiques of race and ethnicity, cultural authenticity, consumerism, and national politics (Atkins 2001; Bourdaghs 2012; Condry 2006; Hosokawa 1994; Matsue 2008; Sterling 2010; Stevens 2007). Japanese forms valorized American constructions of postmodernism, minimalism, and technofuturism. Contemporary Japanese art was strongly influenced by overseas selection of its most exceptional avant-garde forms—the fashion of Miyake Issei, the striking and bizarre performances of Butoh and the Gutai group, and the "superflat" art of Murakami Takashi—even as its reception often covered over historical relationships of influence and political interconnection (Kondo 1997; Looser 2006; Marotti 2013; Murakami 2000).²³ America's "Japan Panic" of the 1980s inspired deeply productive fantasies about dystopian futures in cyberpunk novels and films, which influenced productions of Japanese manga and anime (Brown 2010; Morley and Robins 1995; Napier 2000; Tatsumi 2006). "Millennial monsters" such as Pokémon and toys like the Tamagotchi reflected the absorption of Japa-

nese cultural forms into “enchanted commodities” of flexible capitalism, which triggered a wave of participatory identification among postindustrial youth in the United States (Allison 2006).

In tracing these bidirectional movements of “Japan,” I do not claim that Japanese culture does not exist or that all local differences have been completely saturated in Noise. But Japanoise must be glimpsed through these reflective relationships, which project its global adaptations against its radical cultural incommensurability. Japanese modernity is haunted by narratives of disruption and displacement, which produce infinite speculations about what is or is not still present of its culture. “Discourses of the vanishing,” as Marilyn Ivy puts it, raise endless questions about whether an autonomous Japanese culture can still exist, or ever existed in the first place. The newness and constant emergence of modern Japan are the flip side of this anxious inquiry, as the inexplicability of Japanoise creates “a crucial nexus of unease about culture itself and its transmission and stability” (Ivy 1995:9).

FEEDING BACK INTO ETHNOGRAPHY

Ethnographic writing, too, can be as much a force of ambiguity as of explanation. The displacements of feedback are essential to how I write about Noise, even though they contribute to an unsettling mode of ethnography. I will not touch down in particular sites for long. I do not break down its forms into separate Japanese and American components or distinguish its publics through frameworks of class, race, and gender. I have not attempted to give complete accounts of the historical relationships between groups or to synchronize Noise as a timeline of events within the boundaries of a local music scene. Even as specific individuals become recurrent presences that loop through the text, I do not recount their biographies or profile their stylistic contributions within a larger repertoire of Noise. Although I describe Noise on the level of sound through its intricate performance and recording practices, this book does not explain the irreducible sonic particularities of “the Noise itself.” In taking this dislocated position, I am complicit with Noise’s unstable circuitry of cultural representation.²⁴ My story of Noise is fragmented and partial; it is marked as much by what it occludes as by what it reveals. It is a strange moment to author a monograph about a hidden form of popular culture, as even its deepest underground flows appear to be laid bare in an age of open ac-

cess, crowd-sourced information, and participatory media. After decades in which Noise was a powerful mystery, its forms are now widely available; it is easy to search for its sounds and find some version of its history. The continuous transformation of Noise has made an ethnographic approach essential in my account of its movements, as it surfaced and submerged back into circulation over two decades.

Japanoise describes the productivity of an experimental culture whose scattered subjects privilege distortion and disintegration over authentic sources of expression. To take Noise seriously in its creativity—rather than compressing its diverse forms into a theoretical abstraction—means paying attention to how people create it, listen to it, and experience it in their lives, without freezing its dynamic movement in place. I enter into Noise through performance, recording, and listening; through talking to people about their goals and personal sensibilities, and then discovering the ways their experiences have and have not lined up with others; by tacking back and forth between different places and returning over years to recognize how things have changed. I often zoom out to look at these points of contact from a distance. This is not to authorize a global perspective on Noise as a whole, or to provide a long view of its historical development, or to inscribe its generic boundaries. Instead, I spiral into the particular sounds, sensations, and things of Noise and spin back to its scenic networks and stories. If not ethnography “on the ground,” then, this is ethnography “in the circuit,” following Noise through the overlapping, repetitive channels of its social and sonic feedback.

It may seem strange that I have chosen this marginal experimental form as a frame for the broadest scales of cultural globalization. But Noise shows that many central ideas about global culture are formed on the fringes. My intention is not to give Noise authority through its mystical position of obscurity. On the contrary, I argue that Noise, despite its marginality, lies at the heart of global media circulation. We have begun to listen to Noise. What we hear is not just a short-circuited interruption of local cultural meaning or an echoing stream of random postmodern static stripped of its communicative possibilities. Noise is a feedback loop of deep and multilayered significance, which brings the sounds of a distorted world back into earshot.