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Stephanie Schuurman-Olson

THE GRASS IS LISTENING

The late June sun offers diffused light through aspen leaves above, leaving a speckled pattern on my bike helmet that rests in the long grass. The low hum of traffic nearby is occasionally interrupted by a pedestrian crossing alert signal, loudly buzzing dragonflies, or my four-year-old, Gretel. I sit on a paint-stained picnic blanket, my elbows resting on my knees, engaging as many of my senses as possible as I absorb the moment.

"Mom, Mom, Mom!" Gretel pulls on my jeans. "It's crawling on me!" The tiniest of tiny lady bugs races up her vertical index finger and perches momentarily on her pink nail polish before spreading its wings to catch a ride on the breeze. My seven-year-old, Ingrid, who has been wandering nearby, approaches.

"I heard the strangest thing!" Ingrid says as she flops down beside me on the picnic blanket. "Have you ever noticed the way that the grass sings when it thinks you're not listening?" She asks us to hold our bodies as still as possible. "Don't make eye contact with it or it'll know you're listening!" We hesitate to do so much as breathe as the three of us look in myriad directions, straining our ears to hear the song of the grass.

"It just told me that I'm supposed to sing with it!" says Gretel through a hot and breathy whisper in my ear that makes me squirm away. Encouraged by my smile and by her own reflection in my polarized sunglasses, Gretel begins vocalizing in gentle hums, shushes, and eventually nonsensical vocables. Ingrid, now laying face up beside me and fixated on the billowing clouds above us, follows Gretel's lead. Ingrid offers her hums and shushes in canon with Gretel, initiating a kind of musical

conversation. Their voices get louder, the melodic contour more dramatic, and their tempo accelerates until they both erupt in giggles, rolling on the blanket and gasping for air.

"We sounded just like the grass, Mom. I think they like our song." Ingrid sighs a deep breath, rises to her feet, and wanders off to inspect a dandelion that has grown as high as her knees.
(Schuurman-Olson, 2023, p. 34)

THE ASPEN GROVE/SINGING IN DARK TIMES

In the summer months of 2021, my children (then ages 4 and 7) and I engaged in a series of "singings" in a green space in our small city in rural central Alberta, Canada. What started out as a casual family practice—animated by the desire to spend both more time together and more time outside—quickly became a sort of ritual and the beginning of much larger observations, reflections, and questions. The three of us would ride our bikes a few short blocks to a hidden city park sandwiched between two narrow roads and out of sight from any main thoroughfare, spread a picnic blanket in the long grass, and lay on our backs.

Following the *deep listening* practices of composer and sound theorist Oliveros (2005) and considering the posthuman assertion "What I hear is thinking, too" (Murphy & Smith, 2001), we would first enter this space as aural recipients. I would begin by asking my children some guided listening questions (inspired by Loveless, 2017)—some thoughtful, some silly. *What is the loudest sound you hear? What is the quietest? What do you think is making that buzzing sound? What is the sound that is the furthest away from you? Listen for sounds along the ground. What is your least favorite sound that you hear? What is your favorite?* My children would chime in with their own questions and comments to guide our listening. Sometimes as simple as "Mom, what was that?" and sometimes as reflective as "That crow really sounds like she misses someone."

We heard, intricately woven together and often indistinguishable from each other, the sounds of the city, the sounds of the park, and the sounds of our own bodies. Voices of all kinds singing together as part of a unique, constantly shifting sonic ecology. As we returned to the aspen grove three days within one week, my reflections and observations began to point to some specific questions about our experience. These moments of listening had been so reflective and grounding and had affected the way we heard our spaces even when we were outside of the aspen grove. Considering my love of singing, I wondered if adding our own voices singing together in collaboration *with* the voices that we heard (the human, nonhuman, more-than-human) might generate further understandings, questions, and relationality.

I wondered:

- What ways of knowing emerge when children sing in-and-with their environments?
- Does engaging in music-making with "natural instruments" (i.e., the voice and more-than-human sounds) change children's perceptions of their places/spaces?
- How do children's relationships to their environments change after engaging in improvisational singing in-and-with their environments?
- How can this developing relationality between child and environment contribute to the immediate concerns of addressing climate change and related injustices?

Our listening practice continued through the week. As we lay on our blanket amid the dandelions (that stood nearly as high as my 4-year-old's knees), we took time and space to observe our surroundings. We always grounded ourselves within the space by first listening. Eager to explore how my children might use or reject the use of singing in this practice, I asked them a new series of questions. *Can you sing what*

you see? Can you sing what you hear? What is singing to you? Can you sing with it? Each time, we would lie in the grass for upwards of 40 minutes, singing in-and-with our surroundings.

What became of these singings was intimate, almost sacred. This intimate, emergent research practice challenged us as research-creators to consider reciprocity and relationality within the artistic process itself. At times we would stop and chat—sometimes to reflect on the singing that had just happened and sometimes to talk about our observations of the goings-on around us (and sometimes to ask for another squirt of bug spray).

Though our singing began as a narration of sorts, in which our improvised lyrics described or imitated our surroundings, there were moments when I felt fully immersed in creation and conversation through song, both with my children and with the other voices around us. My children's candid commentary through the process both excited and challenged me. To listen wholly—to both the children and the sonic ecologies (of which, of course, we are already always a part)—demanded a certain slowing down, a patience, and a reflexivity that I was not in the habit of exercising. To investigate my wonderings, I found it necessary to articulate my own foundational understandings about this practice.

I understand that:

- *All* agents within our ecologies (or treescapes) can sing, and that singers can be human, nonhuman, and more-than-human.
- Children are *already* capable musicians (rather than musicians-in-training), observers, and collaborators, and their autonomous and agentic voices are not only valid but necessary as we address issues of climate emergency.
- *Voice* is not something that can be given, but is something that every human, inhuman, and more-than-human possesses.
- Affecting change within a time of ecological crisis needs to be addressed relationally.
- Inhuman and more-than-human voices need to be a part of the ongoing conversation about climate change and ecological justice.

By the end of the summer, our week in the aspen grove had turned into "Singing in Dark Times." In its final-for-now version, it exists as a 10-minute video that includes audio recordings from one day of our week in the park: our singing voices, conversation, and the sonic ecology in which we were present. Audio clips that are used within the video are all taken from one day. This was done to immerse the listener in as complete an experience as possible. Rather than hearing a "highlight reel" from across the different days, it is important that the listener sits with the awkward moments, the perceived silences, the slowing-down. The video footage is a time lapse of the sky above us (filmed on one day)—the view that we had while lying on the picnic blanket in the middle of the grove. The choice to not include more varied video is intentional, made in order to challenge a positivist ocularcentrism—so the listener's ears are opened to the sonorities of the space, and the listener doesn't make assumptions about what is heard based on what is seen. Our singings (by which I also mean to include listening) in the aspen grove (contextualized within our current ecological crises) concern issues of human impact, multispecies communication, greater conceptualizations of what constitutes "music," and how "hope," through shared song, becomes a verb. Hope, through singing, becomes an action point for me, my children, and all our relations.

CHILDREN AND HOPE IN THE ANTHROPOCENE

In the Anthropocene—the current geological epoch defined by human impact on our planet (Crutzen & Stoermer, 2007, as cited in Loveless, 2019)—the responsibility of addressing the climate crisis lies heavily on the individual, who stands at the junction of failing government policy and corporate

inaction. While governments and NGOs set goals to decrease greenhouse gas emissions to net-zero amounts, invest in carbon-alternative energies, and create policies to limit the rise of the global temperature to 1.5°C (Government of Canada, n.d.; United Nations, 2015; The White House, n.d.), critics are quick to point out that these policies and actions, while desperately needed and long overdue, are not aggressive enough to reverse the effects of human impact on the planet (Shukla et al., 2022). Governments and media are equally quick to point out the everyday actions that individuals can take to mitigate the climate crisis—small-scale actions such as recycling, reducing levels of consumerism, and shopping locally. Individuals demand that government and industry be the ones to act on a far more impactful scale by addressing issues such as regulating industrial environmental impact, industrial and residential development, and population growth. As individuals and governments criticize each other (and themselves) for not taking aggressive enough action, humanity continues to hurtle at an alarming speed toward what will likely be the sixth mass extinction event (Cowie et al., 2022). From within this tension, those concerned with issues related to these crises are asking "what's the point?" and struggling with climate anxiety, apathy, and despair (Nairn, 2019).

In 2021, researchers surveyed over 10,000 young adults ages 16–25 from 10 different countries about the intensity of their climate-related anxiety and found that "more than 50% [of respondents] reported [feeling] sad, anxious, angry, powerless, helpless, and guilty," and more than "45% of respondents said their feelings about climate change negatively affected their daily life and functioning" (Hickman et al., 2021, p. 863). Many youths cited "dissatisfaction with government responses" to the climate crisis and believe their governments have "failed" in responding effectively to climate issues (Hickman et al., 2021, p. 864). Adults, suspended in the tension between failed government response and individual responsibility, often turn to children as a source for generating hope for the future (Guardian, 2019). While adults demand hope from children, who are of a "diminished status in society," and "inferior compared to adults" (Janzen, 2022, p. 2), it is children (not the hope-demanding adults) who will be most impacted by the current ecological crisis. Children, while always excluded from policy making (even though they share the same anxieties, fears, and frustrations as adults) (Hickman et al., 2021), are still expected to be a beacon of hope for adults as we race toward unattainable government benchmarks and an almost certain extinction event. Historically, children have been understood as "passive participants" in an adult world, in which adults have a "clear vision of how children's participation should look" (Ergler, 2017, p. 5). Adults place an unethical imbalance on children that demands children carry hope in times of despair, yet adults bar children from climate-emergency-related decision-making that affects them more than anyone else.

ACTIONABLE HOPE FROM DESPAIR

There is a growing body of literature that considers despair as a site of generative action, rather than simply positioning it in opposition to hope (Huber, 2023; Solnit, 2016; Stonehouse & Throop, 2023). Nairn (2019) speaks of the power in collectivizing hope and despair: it is when there is a collective imbalance of the two that apathy emerges. Where there is a surplus of hope, there is no immediacy for action. When there is a surplus of despair, there is no urgency to act since there is "no point" (Huber, 2023). "In guarding against certain pitfalls of false hope," Huber (2023) writes, "… despair can help us to hope (and ultimately act) well" (p. 81). He reconceptualizes hope, not as only the opposite of despair, but also as the action that arises from despair. From within "a hopeful politics, one based upon a vision of generalized global prosperity and sustainability, [we can] best [address] the problems of climate change" (Huber 2023, p. 81).

It is here, at the intersections of hope and despair, adulthood and childhood, government (in)action and individual responsibility, and active participant and passive participant that the foundations of my own work begin to take shape. When I position myself—as a White, cisgender female, (invisibly) disabled,

hetero-presenting, first-generation settler—at the intersection of these issues, I am met with a different kind of confrontation that renders me at times immobilized (perhaps with apathy, perhaps by feeling overwhelmed). I benefit from immense privilege as I occupy my body, space, and time. These privileges allow me to engage in climate activism and advocacy work largely without fear for my own personal well-being. Yet, when I consider my vocational skills, I have many times felt unequipped to participate in meaningful activism. I am a musician-educator. My singing voice is my main instrument. I work with young children (preschool–grade 6) and undergraduate university students. I have regularly asked myself how my set of skills can be put to effective use within climate activism work. Concerned parents, educators, policy makers, and activists are asking themselves the same questions as we all consider the skills we possess and how these skills can best be employed to help humans adapt, mitigate, and respond to the immediacy of the climate crisis. I ask myself what role singing and young children have in addressing climate-related issues.

THEORIZING SINGING IN THE DARK TIMES

In the above, I outline a research-creation event, "Singing in Dark Times," that I engaged in together with my own two children as we explored our own individual responses as we (continue to) wrestle through the aforementioned tensions. This project is situated within research-creation (both as methodology and theoretical framework), borrows from feminist materialisms and posthumanism, and engages artistic undertakings which are process-driven rather than intended to create an artistic product. As a concerned climate activist, parent, educator, and musician, I humbly add my voice—alongside and informed by those of my children and the more-than-human voices around me—to the conversation that considers how engaging in artistic, emergent, and nonrepresentational practices inform the way that we carry on through the Anthropocene epoch.

RESEARCH-CREATION AS A HOPEFUL METHODOLOGY

Research-creation, as defined by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (n.d.) is "an approach to research that combines creative and academic research practices and supports the development of knowledge and innovation through artistic expression" (n.p.). It is a research methodology that embraces the practice of doing art *as both* research and analysis. It is "non-linear, emergent, and immersive" (Groten, 2023, p. 7), and asks questions that emerge from the "middle" (Stewart, 2007) rather than from a fully conceptualized beginning or a well-articulated end. Research-creation attempts to unsettle, wrestle, and sit in-and-with the discomfort of questions-that-are-not-yet and is concerned with wondering what ways-of-knowing-emerge-when. It is my hope that the research-creation event described in this paper can serve as a model for others, encouraging readers to bring a similar process into family and classroom practice. I call on the reader/teacher to examine their own teaching and learning contexts to consider the potential this kind of project holds for them and how it allows them to explore and build these stories-that-matter between child, environment, voice, and actionable hope. I invite the listener and viewer of "Singing in Dark Times" to enter our curated sonic ecology and witness for themselves the relationality and knowings that emerge both for me and my children within the moments represented in the video and in the moment of the listener viewing from within their own sonic ecology within the space and time that they watch and listen to our experience.

EMERGENT BEGINNINGS AND FUTURE PROVOCATIONS

As my children and I lay there in the tall grasses, day after day, I wondered how this ongoing practice of singing with all our relations would affect my children's perceptions of both their own voices and their environments and the voices within. What songs and stories were my children hearing and participating in through this process? How does this practice contribute to a reciprocal narrative of this place? As

Haraway (2016) tells us, "It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with… (Haraway, 2016, as cited in Springgay, 2021, p. 212). What matterings did my children and I contribute to in our singings? What implications could this process have for developing relationality between human, inhuman, and more-than-human singers, and how could this relation-building play a role for us and our children—who will deal with the immediacy of climate change in a more urgent way than we will—within the greater context of the global climate crisis? As Loveless (2019) states, "to do research—of any kind—is not simply to ask questions, it is to tell stories-that-matter" (p. 54).

Through the course of a week, both children showed a deeper interest and understanding of the sonic ecologies around them (and that they are always-already a part of)—not just in the park, but in the moments of "everyday," such as in the grocery store and driving in the car on the highway. Their sense of hearing, of listening, had been heightened. The reciprocal nature of this research-creation event was of great significance to me. Not only were my children and I listening to—and then in turn more aware of—the sounds around us in other spaces, but we also became freer with our voices. Our speaking voices in our home were gentler, softer. My children could be heard from other rooms in the house imitating sounds like the forced air in the furnace, our cat's meows, the doorbell chime. There was a freedom, or perhaps even a permission, to experiment and engage with listening-and-singing that had previously not been present. By the end of our week of listening-and-singing-in-place, we were moving more slowly. We were more connected to our sonic ecologies. We noticed when things changed within them (the construction must have stopped for the weekend/the highway sounds busy today, it must be rush hour/the fridge's buzz has shifted slightly and is humming a bit lower than usual/I've heard that house wren make six different types of calls just in the last few minutes!). We were more "in tune" with our spaces, our own singing potentialities, and our human, nonhuman, and more-than-human collaborators.

I ask you, the reader, to consider for yourself what adding your own singing voice—in a shared or private practice, in a classroom or family space—might reveal about your own sonic ecologies and how you are also always a part of them. Through singing, there is actionable hope. Through actionable hope, there is understanding. Through understanding, there is a potential for moving forward within the Anthropocene alongside all our relations.

In the dark times, will there also be singing?
Yes, there will be singing. About the dark times.

—Bertolt Brecht, "Motto"

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Stephanie Schuurman-Olson (she/her) is currently completing her PhD at the University of Alberta under the supervision of Dr. David Lewkowich, where her research involves ecoliterate music pedagogies, collaborative post-qualitative research methods, and singing with young children. Stephanie is a K-6, early childhood, and undergraduate music teacher. She lives with her two children, partner, two cats, many houseplants, and other living things (to be sure) in a 112-year-old house that is filled with all kinds of singing. Stephanie is a recipient of the prestigious 2023 Izaak Walton Killam Memorial Scholarship and is supported by the Killam Trusts.