

SOUNDWORK

Listening in Relation: Soundscapes from the Listening Room

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The soundwork files are openly available online on the UBC Library
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Raven calls in descending notes against a crackling drip of melting snow

I soundwalk in acoustic response to the demands of crows

*Through a forest, Ravens travel and speak amidst the pulses of
morning birds*

Insects hum ambient tones inviting listeners to dream

COINCIDING WITH the fall and spring equinoxes of 2024–25, I was part of a team of researchers on a project called *Listening in Relation*, a collaboration between the Canadian Association for Sound Ecology, The Only Animal Theatre Society, and the Basically Good Media Lab at Emily Carr University of Art + Design.¹ The team was investigating how listening, sound-making, and material art practices, combined with decolonial approaches, can help foster care for more-than-human lifeworlds. We programmed a variety of public events designed and led by IBPoC artists: Rita and Zoe Kompst, Toni-Leah C. Yake, Anju Singh, Adrian Avendaño, and Lara Felsing. These included presentations, listening sessions, improvisational sound-making workshops, readings, discussions, seasonally informed natural dye workshops, and botanical printmaking. The overall intention was to explore listening, sound, and material practice as embodied experiences in relation with the land.

¹ For more information on the *Listening in Relation* events, please download the open access *Listening in Relation: Final Report* at <https://palette.ecuad.ca/bgml/2025/08/18/listening-in-relation/>.

At the end of the project, the team convened an event called the Equinox Roundtable at the Emily Carr campus on the unceded lands of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm, Skwxwú7mesh, and səliłwətaʔ Nations. The roundtable included a listening room of soundscapes compiled from field recordists and soundscape composers who participated in *Listening in Relation*. Inside the listening room, people could relax with plants and low lighting and be gently immersed in soundscapes reflecting experiences of listening with more-than-human life. This contribution to Soundworks includes four soundscapes that were part of the listening room. They share experiences of listening on the lands of the southwest coast of so-called British Columbia. They indicate how soundscape composition can grow out of listening, soundwalking, and field recording practices, but more crucially, they present ways of listening that connect with the land and its more-than-human inhabitants.

The contemporary practices of soundwalks, field recording, and soundscape composition grew out of the fields of acoustic ecology and Deep Listening from the 1970s and '80s. Beginning with the World Soundscape Project at Simon Fraser University, practices of situated listening, field recording, and soundscape studies emerged as experiences and records of place.² Composer Hildegard Westerkamp was part of the World Soundscape Project and led the development of soundwalking as a method for both listening and soundscape composition.³ Around the same time, listening as research was explored by Pauline Oliveros in her Deep Listening practice, blending full-body sensory awareness and movement with acts of listening and sound-making.⁴ These historical explorations inform contemporary soundscape composition that uses soundwalks and field recording to attend to human and more-than-human acoustics as social and ecological relating.⁵

More recently, xwélmexw (Sto:lo/Skwah) scholar Dylan Robinson has critiqued aspects of Western listening practices as forms of colonization alongside industrial extractive systems exploiting “forests, the water, and

² Acoustic ecology has its beginnings in the 1970s World Soundscape Project at Simon Fraser University with R. Murray Schafer, Barry Truax, and Hildegard Westerkamp, among others. Milena Droumeva and Randolph Jordan, eds., *Sound, Media, Ecology* (Palgrave Macmillan Cham, 2019).

³ Westerkamp describes her development of soundwalking in “The Disruptive Nature of Listening: Today, Yesterday, Tomorrow,” in Droumeva and Jordan, eds., *Sound, Media, Ecology*. For more about Hildegard Westerkamp, see her website at <https://www.hildegardwesterkamp.ca/>. For examples of early soundwalks informing soundscapes, see “A Walk Through the City” (1981, <https://www.hildegardwesterkamp.ca/sound/comp/3/walkcity/>) and “Kits Beach Soundwalk” (1989, <https://www.hildegardwesterkamp.ca/sound/comp/3/kitsbeach/>).

⁴ Pauline Oliveros, *Deep Listening: A Composer's Sound Practice* (iUniverse, 2005).

⁵ Elena Biserna, ed., *Going Out: Walking, Listening, Soundmaking* (Umland, 2022).

of course the land itself.”⁶ He argues that practices prioritizing capture – music notation, reproduction, and recording – promote a view of listening as a fixed experience with imperatives of reproducibility and certainty. Instead, he proposes attending to the affective experience of sounds’ touch, feel, and texture, for anticolonial listening as unbound from fixed forms of attention and, importantly, constituted in lived experience “in relation with land.”⁷

Each of the soundscapes included in this Soundworks contribution weave human and more-than-human listening and sound-making as relationship. The works of Westerkamp and myself are soundscapes from field recordings of experiences listening with Ravens, while the soundscapes of Julian Evans and Toni-Leah C. Yake are complex compositions led by the acoustics of more-than-human life. Each soundscape includes a short accompanying text written by the composer. While each portrays an individual listening experience, together they invite Soundworks readers to consider their own relationship to listening with more-than-human life, forests, water, and seasons – the land.

—Julie Andreyev

Ravens and Snow Melting, Hildegard Westerkamp, 2007, 06:20

Saltspring Island, British Columbia. 29 November 2007, around ten in the morning. A thin layer of snow covers the pasture and trees. I step outside – my recorder running, headphones on – and am stopped in my tracks by a deeply sonorous raven call that I had never heard before, two throaty tones, descending. Another raven responds with a call that is much more familiar to me. It is the beginning of a long exchange between these two birds, with varying expressions and subtle changes in reverberance, as they fly in and out of the nearby forest across the field just underneath the steep cliff of Mount Maxwell – Hwmet’atsum (Bent Over Place), as it is called in Hul’qumi’num’.

Led by Crows, Julian Evans, 2021, 01:51

In the summer of 2021, I moved to the Vic West neighbourhood on Southern Vancouver Island. Adjacent to Victoria’s downtown core and bordering Esquimalt, it’s a vibrant mix of residential, industrial, and

⁶ Dylan Robinson, *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sounds Studies* (University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 49.

⁷ Robinson, *Hungry Listening*, 53.

commercial areas that is undergoing rapid development and change. The neighbourhood is also located on the ancestral lands of the ɫəkʷəŋən people, represented today by the Songhees and Esquimalt Nations, whose historical relations to the lands and waters are ongoing. There's a waterfront footpath called the Songhees Walkway that borders the area and ended up being a short walk from my house. This walkway thus became the site of frequent soundwalks and field recording sessions during the three years that I lived nearby. What struck me immediately about this urban path was the opportunity for encountering animals – river otters, seals, great blue herons, hawks, oystercatchers, kingfishers, seagulls, crows – and for meandering through a variety of acoustic environments where one can listen to both the distant din of the city and the calls and songs of the local bird life with intimate proximity.

In 2020, I began to practice Deep Listening after taking an online seminar with the sound artists Tim Shaw and BJ Nilsen and being directed to the many illuminating works of Pauline Oliveros.⁸ Then in 2021, I had the good fortune to attend soundwalks by the artists Jennie Schine and Jacek Smolicki.⁹ With this new-found attention to sonic experience, equally advanced by my research into embodiment, acoustemology, and ecological philosophy for the dissertation I was writing at the time, I practiced near-daily soundwalks and sit spots along this path.¹⁰ I visited sites along this path frequently to be attentive to the more-than-human world and to experiment with techniques of creative field recording using a handheld Zoom recorder and omnidirectional mics from LOM Audio.

In 2019–20, I had developed a practice of recording bird calls and songs as a way to catalogue species in the ecologically sensitive urban areas of London, Ontario. This began as a personal project to improve my own ability to identify these bird species by ear, and to learn something about the communicative meaning and complexity of their songs and calls. As I walked the waterfront path a few minutes from my house, exploring the intertidal zones and the rocks, wooden bridges, and nearby industrial and residential areas, I can only describe what I experienced during

⁸ Oliveros, *Deep Listening*; Pauline Oliveros, *Sonic Meditations* (Ministry of Maat, 2022); Pauline Oliveros, *Quantum Listening* (Spiral House, 2024).

⁹ Jenni Schine, *On Growing, Rocks*, August 6, 2021, soundwalk at the fifty fifty arts collective. The walk I attended by Jacek Smolicki was the second iteration of "Intertidal Room"; see Jacek Smolicki, "Intertidal Room: A Soundwalk Through Timescapes of Vancouver's Coastline," *BC Studies*, no. 210 (2021): 101–6.

¹⁰ A sit spot is a contemplative method of repeated visits to a singular place that cultivates attention to the more-than-human world and encourages a sense of belonging to place via a personal relationship to the living Earth.

these years as a kind of awakening to the wider acoustic world. The soundscape of the Songhees Walkway exists at a relative distance from the bustle of traffic and construction, although it's always discernable in the distance. During precious quiet walks along this path, I became attuned to the subtle sounds of wind through leaves, footsteps, the breath of passing joggers, and the most gentle waves crashing on secret sandy coves. The walkway also borders the Matson Conservation Area, a small but significant place of ecological restoration that has been stewarded by the Habitat Acquisition Trust and flourishes with the boisterous songs of wrens, thrushes, sparrows, kinglets, and finches.¹¹

One early morning in May 2022, I set out from my house to make some field recordings along the walkway. As I came to one of the parks that meets the path, I noticed an immense flock of crows gathered beside the tennis courts, their caws seeming distressed and agitated. I got out a shotgun mic and followed them carefully along the edge of the forest where I then heard the sharp calls of a Cooper's hawk. I followed the crows and managed to record the hawk calls from a relatively close distance, and witnessed a kind of battle between crow, hawk, and hummingbird as the smaller birds mobbed and pestered this potential predator. When I listen back to the recording, what I love about it is the documentation of this wonder-filled encounter with urban wildlife, but also the range of distant and ambient sounds that are captured. Listen carefully and you can hear oystercatchers in the background. After a fulfilling morning of sound recording, I walked into the city and got lunch at a tiny dosa restaurant in the mall downtown. I recorded on street corners and inside the mall because I wanted to emphasize that this precious moment of beholding animated animal interactions did not happen in a far-off wilderness, but was interwoven with the daily rhythms of my urban life.

The following year, I cut up and mixed these recordings using Ableton, creating a short composition to play in the middle of a paper I presented at a conference on the philosopher Gaston Bachelard's sense of home and the importance of sound and listening in his poetic cosmology. Bachelard writes in *The Poetics of Space* that finding belonging in the universe can come from simple attention to the birds in one's backyard; the intricate and intimate architecture of a nest can inspire a welcome confidence in the cosmos.¹² I accompanied my recordings with samples

¹¹ "Matson Conservation Area," Habitat Acquisition Trust, accessed 21 October 2025, <https://hat.bc.ca/matson>.

¹² Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Beacon Press, 1969), 103.

and synths to extend the idea that precious encounters with animals exist in a continuum with cultural artifacts that try, with varying degrees of fidelity and truth, to help us remember why these surprising meetings matter.

Pender Island Ravens, Julie Andreyev, 2023, 04:23

This soundscape is from a field recording I made during an early August morning in the forest of Beaumont Park, Pender Island, British Columbia, the unceded lands of the WSÁNEĆ people. As I entered the forest trail and walked the trail, I noticed how quiet it was. I found a good spot, set up my field recorder, stepped back from the trail, and sat down on a log. My intention was to be still and listen to the life of the forest. Slowly, the conversations of nuthatches and brown creepers grew louder as the birds accepted my presence. A few moments later, a Raven couple flew by calling in phrases of three or four low pulses. As they travelled through the canopy, I could hear their wing beats and feel their powerful presence. From deeper in the forest a third Raven called back. I listened as they conversed over time and across distance, their voices moving amongst the Cedars, hemlocks, and fir trees.

Chorus of Absence, Toni-Leah C. Yake, 01:56

Woven together from cicada and grasshopper recordings gathered across physical and digital landscapes, *Chorus of Absence* is a world built of implicit and explicit memories. Through the voices of lands, waters, and other-than-human kin, as well as subconscious and conscious emotions, it is a speculative ecosystem where absence communes with the permeability of presence. It invites listening that imagines what is lost, and what continues to resonate through more-than-human time. Practice here is informed by ideas articulated in “An Invitation for Black and Indigenous Artists to Dream” by Alisha B. Wormsley and Kite.¹³ That dreaming and memory are not private interiorities but portals – that dreaming is an act of care, reclamation, and relation – echoes within *Chorus of Absence*, where memories and sound hold thresholds for communication, allowing a way to what has been disappeared. The article frames dreaming as relational, communal, and generative; it offers a model for how artists might dream across rupture and erasure, engaging with ancestors, land, and more-than-human kin in acts of imaginative repair. *Chorus of Absence* reflects

¹³ Alisha B. Wormsley and Kite, “An Invitation for Black and Indigenous Artists to Dream,” *c mag*, 15 August 2021, <https://cmagazine.com/articles/an-invitation-for-black-and-indigenous-artists-to-dream>.

relationships to land and its interconnected memory to humans. When we remember the land, the land is remembering us. This work emerged from a year-long practice. In its making, environmental and temporal rhythms were attended. It was composed during full moons, new moons, snow, rain, windstorms, thunder, lightning, meteor showers, and the aurora borealis. Through field recordings gathered on x^wməθk^wəy̓əm, Sk̓w̓xwú7mesh, and səlilw̓ətaʔt territories, digital traces, and artifacts of sonic manipulations, *Chorus of Absence* operates as a ritual of dis-orientation. It invites and maintains distance. Submersion and abrasion gestures toward the limit of human perceptions, suggesting that not all worlds are ours to fully inhabit. In dialogue with “An Invitation for Black and Indigenous Artists to Dream,” *Chorus of Absence* proposes that memory can be liminal and akin to dreaming; that communication with non-human kin does not require immediate presence; that memory is permeable and alive. That loss does not always annihilate – it resonates.