

WHAT DOES CLIMATE CHANGE SOUND LIKE?

HOW ONE PERSON CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

By

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Statement of Acknowledgement

This project could not have been possible without the guidance from the faculty at McMaster University. As a crucial acknowledgement, this project and its components were created on the traditional territory of the Haudenosaunee, Attiwonderonk and Anishinaabe people. While researching the sound of a place throughout this project, I am reminded that the Indigenous lands that have been stolen hold ancestral sounds, and the privilege I have as an uninvited guest impinge on my creation process and understanding of what climate change sounds like to different communities. I also wish to thank those who have guided me through this project, those who informed, shared, and listened to this project and guided me to the finish line.

Introduction

In 2023, the world yet again broke new climate records as being the hottest year ever recorded. Canada endured more extreme and rapid wildfires than ever before, with more than 6,132 fires burning over 16.5 million hectares of land (Government of Canada, 2023). This is a clear indicator that climate change is becoming more of a long-term threat to both our physical and mental health. With more extreme weather events occurring every year, humans are experiencing heightened emotional, mental or somatic distress in response to dangerous changes (Dodds, 2021) otherwise known as climate anxiety (Hickman et al., 2021). As the climate crisis worsens, strategies for managing climate anxiety are becoming more imperative for sustainable and meaningful ways of maintaining stable mental health conditions during climate disaster. Eco-therapy practices, which recentre our bodies in the outdoors, has been shown to increase mood, concentration, creativity and to lower stress levels (Climate Atlas of Canada, 2023).

This major research project explores eco-therapy practices to manage anxieties about the climate crisis through sound studies and musical creation. By utilizing creative practice-based approaches via music, I have aimed to demonstrate what climate change sounds like through my own individual perspective. The human body utilizes the five senses to make us aware of any sights of danger— and it is through our senses that we perceive, respond and are affected by our environment (Bosca, 2023). Our sensory experiences are crucial to understanding climate disaster, but it is more common to focus our attention on how the weather feels or how the wildfire smoke smells when we are outside. Exploring what climate change sounds like reinforces one of the senses that tends to be forgotten about in the climate conversation, and how it can aid us through our climate anxiety.

I used musical creation combined with personal experiences to explore my own climate anxiety through this research and find ways of coping through climate disaster, which resulted in my creation of a four-song extended play (EP). The EP will be distributed digitally for public consumption for free on streaming platforms. I will also share it on Bandcamp for those who wish to make a monetary contribution to own the digital wav files of the songs. All proceeds made from this EP will be donated to the David Suzuki Foundation, a Canadian science-based non-profit environmental organization.

Artistic Statement

This major research project explores the relationship between climate and self. As the climate crisis continues, so does my anxiety about it. As an independent artist, creating music has been an outlet for my already existing anxieties about the world and my personal life. The act of creation helps to ground my thoughts, listen intently, and explore new perspectives. My vision

for this four-song EP was to find a way of working through my anxieties about climate change by documenting the sounds of nature and capturing my own interpretation of climate change. I aim for this project to demonstrate to listeners that an individual can share their voice on discussions of climate change, and that everyone's unique experience with it is valid, impactful and important to the climate change discussion. I also hope that this project will inspire other individuals to create art as a coping mechanism to work through their own climate anxiety.

This major research project utilizes traditional songwriting methods, field recordings, sampling, vocal textures and sound-walks and soundscapes to portray the environment that surrounds me. Many other artists influenced the creation of this project including Joni Mitchell, Hildegard Westerkamp, Julianna Barwick, The Beach Boys, Adam Melchor, and Pauline Oliveros. For this project, I analyzed the songwriting and recording techniques that these artists used to capture the sounds of nature and their unique perspectives about it. Field recording and deep listening techniques were important to the project from the start of the creation process, but towards the end they were essential as a meditative practice as well. Sonic meditations are the basis of deep listening (Oliveros, 1968) and are based on patterns of listening. Our patterns of listening change with every second that passes, and deep listening allows for a more focused form of giving attention back to nature. This allowed me to determine what locations to record in, when to capture a sound and when to be present in nature before recording with a microphone.

This project also adds to the question of accessibility and who can contribute to the conversation. I am privileged to be able to have access to recording equipment to make this project, as well as the educational background to learn about the process of writing and recording music. But this project should not deter listeners from attempting to create or trying out deep

listening practice. Deep listening can be as simple as not wearing headphones on your next walk outside. Towards the end of this project, becoming more aware of our surroundings and connecting with nature via intent listening is one strategy to cope with on-going climate anxiety.

Literature Review

This literature review explores three areas of research that informed my creative process while making this project. First, I analyzed songs with environmental lyrical content and music that utilizes experimental recording techniques. This served as a framework to begin my own creative process and understand the best ways to capture my emotions when experiencing climate anxiety, as well as capturing the sounds of nature accurately and creatively. I then examined sound studies research and different recording techniques to inform my listening, recording, and production strategies. This allowed me to better understand how to get to my end goal with each song and how to position myself as both the producer and listener. Lastly, I engaged with academic literature on climate change and music to better understand how music can be used as a tool for climate activism. By considering these three areas of research, I was able to incorporate eco-therapy into my creative practice and use my musical capabilities to contribute to climate activism.

1.1 Songs

Musicians have been contributing to climate conversations for decades. Here, I discuss examples from the 1970s, a time when more musical artists engaged with social change. The intersections of music and politics can assist in the participatory culture that climate activism invites (Draisey-Collishaw, 2023).

Artists convey environmental messages through lyrics in various ways. Joni Mitchell did not rely on complicated metaphor. In her 1970 hit *Big Yellow Taxi*, she illustrates how urban development has “paved paradise” with parking lots (Mitchell, 1970). Her lyrics are the focal point for her climate activism, and her audience can interpret her words to their own experiences with climate change. The Beach Boys also used music to protest mass pollution in the 1970s. Brian Wilson fought to release the song, *A Day In The Life Of A Tree* (1971). The song uses personification tools to give life back to the tree with lyrics like, “feel the wind burn through my skin, the pain the air is killing me” (The Beach Boys, 1971). More recently, Adam Melchor released, *Life On Earth*, a song that describes Earth becoming uninhabitable. He poses the question, “If there’s life on Mars, are they gonna have to learn, to ask if there’s still life on Earth?” (Melchor, 2020). The lyricism in these songs provided guidelines on how to build lyrical structure, metaphor, musical syntax, and creative diction. They model how to respond lyrically to factors outside of our control and utilize human senses like sight and sound to contemplate the effects of climate change.

While these artist’s and their approach to music on climate change has been quite straightforward in terms of traditional songwriting practices, other artists have taken more experimental approaches to their environmental music. Julianna Barwick’s album, *The Magic Place* (2011) explores nature’s ambience via soundscapes and vocal textures. *Kit’s Beach Soundwalk* (1989) by Hildegard Westerkamp utilizes field recordings to showcase the sounds of Kits Beach in Vancouver. The artists capture opposite ends of the eco-music sound spectrum—the sounds of nature and the sounds of urban life—modeling how to capture a larger landscape. This became interesting during my process to see what these artists have chosen to amplify or diminish in their editing processes.

During my own creative process, I noticed a gap between the artists I have referenced. Some artists use environmental imagery through lyrics to portray their thoughts and feelings towards climate change, while others solely rely on the sounds of nature to inform their understanding of their emotions (i.e. deep listening practices or soundscapes). What is lacking is a combination of these two practices, which is something I aimed to do while writing and producing this EP, like the first song off the EP, *Cranes By The Creek*. These artists helped to inform my creative practice and blend the strategies among different genres and decades to build a cohesive project centring environmentalism.

1.2 Sound Studies & Recording Practices

Sound studies scholars, composers and producers have researched how sound affects numerous aspects of the human condition. Collectively, the works of these authors offers artists an alternative positionality when capturing nature's soundscapes and demonstrate the importance of noticing the sounds around you.

Deep listening is a practice that Pauline Oliveros developed in *Some Sound Observations* (1968), when narrating the sounds she heard while engaged in deep listening. In her book, *Deep Listening: A composer's sound practice* (2005), she discusses the best ways to listen intently and how to use sound in the creative process. Her theory on multi-dimensional listening (Oliveros, 2005, p. 26) notes that when sound is being made, whether through conversation or nature, there is always an intimate dimension of overlapping sound space that humans do not tune into. Seán Street's *The Sound of a Room: Memory and the Auditory Presence of Place* describes urban sounds as "soups of noise" (Street, 2020, p. 68). He claims that soundscapes allow visual memories to be unlocked and to understand the sound of a place one must remind themselves of when they are not listening.

My creative practice is also be guided by Rick Rubin's, *The Creative Act, A Way of Being* (2023), a deep listening meditative manifesto. Rubin's techniques include deep listening practices to immerse yourself in nature. David Kolber reiterates the importance of soundwalks because they challenge listener to re-evaluate important sounds within their own acoustic soundscape (Kolber, 2002, p. 41). This is especially important when recording sounds within nature. *The Music Producer's Survival Guide* by Brian Jackson asserts that *creativity, relevancy, innovation and production* are the four components to creativity. These studies assisted me in my research project to better engage with deep listening practices, and to understand what sounds are relevant in conveying my feelings towards climate change. By inserting yourself back into nature, the human body then becomes a receiver of messages from its surroundings. Deep listening practices ask you to focus on which sounds/messages are crucial to share.

The songs I created for this project rely heavily on the research and actions of these scholars, but I implemented a very practical way of utilizing sound studies to cope with climate anxiety. Although I have access to a recording software and a musical education, someone who does not have these resources will always have nature available to them. The bones of my project are not about the technical production or even the songwriting techniques, but rather the integration of our bodies with nature. The addition of this EP to the sound studies field of research is a component of accessibility and practicality. I wish for people to use my project as an example of climate related art and replicate it in their own best creative method. This project could have various interpretations and creations by others by simply going outside and listening to nature, then writing their thoughts down with a pen and paper or creating a drawing from what they hear.

1.3 Climate Media

Eco-therapy practices (Climate Atlas of Canada, 2023) will continue to grow as the battle against climate change continues. Eco-therapy provides strategies for individuals coping with climate anxiety. Wodak's research on *Conveying Climate Change in Popular Music* (2018) and Kerr's *Climate, Music and Culture: Coping in the Anthropocene* (2018), agree that music is a valuable tool for working through climate anxiety and for inviting greater engagement with the environment. To increase the number of climate activists, Cooley's research suggests that we give more attention to fandoms and their alternative approach to environmental communication (Cooley, 2020). No matter the size of the artist or fandom, using music to spark discourse about environmental practices brings people together and helps shift their anxiety about climate change into activism. Music offers stories, cultivates empathy, increases solidarity and provides emotional release towards climate anxiety (Kerr, 2018). Furthermore, the reason that music is crucial for climate activism is that it helps listeners interpret a moment in their lives or understand a governing concern (Mounsey, 2023). Music operates as an interface between the meta-narrative of climate-as-science and its cultural significance (Wodak, 2020).

The act of creation can also assist in regulating emotions towards climate change. Britta Sweers finds that music making can be a coping mechanism for climate anxiety and provides access to typically unconscious ideas of nature (Sweers, 2020). Not only does nature provide the physical materials needed to create instruments, but natural resources also provide the foundation for sound-based ideas and the subject for musical compositions (Sweers, 2020). Bringing the human body back into nature reminds us that our connection to nature needs to be redefined as climate change continues. Sweers suggests that ecofeminism, the study on the relationship between women and nature, can also be a unique perspective to view the human body

recentering itself back into nature (Prior,2020). According to Simon Kerr, music in the Anthropocene can help ask new questions about climate change and our world for humans to look at things differently from what they are/were (Kerr, 2018). My project will join a growing community of environmental music makers and help other manage their own climate anxiety. By studying the songs, research, and creative writings outlined in this literature review, I gained tools that informed my creation of a cohesive collection of songs into my EP. These creative models and research help me better understand the climate crisis, execute my creative vision and engage with global environmental activism. My EP is a contribution to climate media because it is a climate related artwork that will be distributed and consumed entirely online or via live performance. I utilized climate research as a tool for a creative approach to sharing information. While my research is extensive, the average listener can still listen to these songs and understand the subject matter no matter their level of understanding towards climate change. I took on the role of both researcher and creative so that the listener does not need to be burdened with overwhelming climate statistics, and instead can have these songs lead them to new questions about climate change.

Goals

While I had many goals for this project, my main goal was to follow my emotions within every aspect of the creation process. During the writing process I relied on past, present and future experiences with the climate to inform my lyrics or songwriting structure. For example, the 2023 Canadian wildfires were a major influence on this project, and I reflected on how I felt in those moments to write the lyrics for this EP. Additionally, I wanted to experiment with different writing and recording techniques. As an artist, it is important to practice methods that

are outside of your comfort zone, and it was especially important to this project so that I could accurately depict my emotions, and the sounds of nature combined. This EP uses field recordings, vocalizing textures, sound sampling, and soundscapes. These methods allowed for the EP to be cohesive throughout all four songs, but for each song to also have its own unique musicality and story. By the end of the project, I felt as though I met the goals I had set out for myself and could implement these practices into future creative projects.

Methods

1.1 Deep Listening

Following the deep listening practice of Pauline Oliveros, the basis of my creative research stems from the observing the sounds of nature. Where Oliveros would listen to her environment and write about it, I listened and pressed record on my field recorder or the microphone on my cellphone. This practice ensured that I was mentally present during the creative process and less concerned with recording the sounds I was hearing accurately. Some sounds that were captured via field recording were incorporated directly into the project while others were done from memory or the feelings I had while immersing myself in different spaces. The sourcing of these sounds came from both my surroundings, in places where I could find solitude from the ongoing climate crisis, as well as online free sound websites like *freesound.org* (2005). The deep listening method influences the four songs on this EP in various ways. For example, it was used to begin the creation process by finding a place outside and just listening. It was also implemented during the recording process via field recordings, and in the production and editing process to ensure the sonic landscape represented my emotions.

Deep listening involves understanding the auditory wave forms that are continuously present in our everyday lives and is prompted by experience and learning (Oliveros, 2005). Oliveros states that “listening is not the same as hearing and hearing is not the same as listening” (Oliveros, 2005), which is a statement I would bring myself back to while practicing deep listening. Whilst exploring different settings, deep listening can expand the perception of the sounds around oneself, and brings forth context from the place you are in. Whether that be the way your other senses call to your attention, knowing the history of the place you are in, or simply allowing yourself to feel an array of emotions, deep listening can teach us more about our individual experiences with our environment than other methods. The inclusion of deep listening methods was crucial to this project and provided new ways of exploring the senses in relation to the ongoing climate crisis. Being the sole participant in this project, my experience with deep listening is very personal and allows for the songwriting and production of the corresponding music of this project to feel very authentic to my own experiences.

1.2 Creative Practice-Based Approach

My background as a classically trained violinist and singer-songwriter plays a vital role in the making of this project. It is through creative practice-based approaches that I was able to implement the events of the climate crisis with a focus on Canadian climate events and represent these events melodically. This nuanced task required a framework to ensure that I would remember the sounds, feelings, and thoughts of the climate events I was experiencing and researching, which would enable me to create a relatable and accessible project. The framework within this creative practice-based approach is as follows:

1. Translating my findings from local and national news outlets into personal thoughts and remarks on the climate crisis at hand.
2. Utilizing syntax, metaphor, alliteration, double entendre, and other strategies to bring my songwriting skills to a level where listeners could understand my emotions and/or interpret their own emotions towards climate change.
3. The recording and production of the songs utilized field recordings, sound sampling, sound walks, vocal synthesis and traditional Western instruments to portray a soundscape that resembles that of the environment around me and the artificial world these songs led me to.

The creative, practice-based approaches used within this project were useful to this creative project as it pushed my artistic abilities outside of my comfort zone and reinforced that practicing these techniques helps to better understand the emotional impact of climate change. This method builds strategies for eco-therapy practices and how to utilize them when the climate crisis can feel too overwhelming. The advantage of utilizing this research method was that I could continue to use my own lived experience as a form of research. During the process of studying the effects and dangers of climate change, I began to feel quite small. Since music is frequently used for mood regulation and to enhance our experiences of everyday tasks (Prior, 2022), the process of creating the songs felt like a release of the tension I had when researching climate change. I translated the statistics and burden of the climate crisis into song to extinguish the anxiety that builds up whilst not only researching about climate change but living through it. The advantage a creative practice-based approach had within my project was that it could provide a personal narrative to the music. The songs are rooted in my own experiences and the climate data I sourced for creative material to lead this project to fruition.

While climate related art is not a new form of creation, many cultures, artists and composers have questioned the connection between humans and nature within their works. The disadvantage to a creative practice-based approach to a project like this, which dwells on the relationship between humans and nature, is that you will quickly discover humans drive the consequences that nature endures (Sweers, 2020). This can negatively influence the creative process and discourage the artist to continue making climate related art. My experience with climate change is a gendered experience, and the interconnection between the environment, and being a person who identifies themselves as a female, naturally influenced how I wrote about my experiences. This can be both an advantage and disadvantage depending on the listener the scale of relatability to the music they find themselves on.

My experiences with a creative practice-based approach were multifaceted and complex as each step of the process was a learning curve. It was difficult in the beginning to understand how to listen to nature and reinterpret my anxiety into song, but after a few failed attempts I discovered a writing process that worked well for myself. The recording process was where I let go of my traditional Western music education and allowed the songs to take shape in their own way. I did not rely on music theory or songwriting structure, and instead I relied on the narrative of the song and what message I was trying to convey, whether there were lyrics in the song or not.

Towards the end of the creative process, I felt myself becoming more empathetic towards nature. Following Prior's research, I believe it is possible to use a creative practice-based approach, more specifically music, to encourage empathy among large groups of people and potentially influence and convert their environmental behaviours (Prior, 2020). This project took

on a “naturalist narrative” (Kerr, 2018) that demonstrates the culmination of power between humans and nature within the Anthropocene. This narrative tells the stories of our planet, and in this instance, the stories of an individual’s experience with climate change that now stands as a geological footprint. In creating a project that focuses on sharing stories related to climate issues, it forces humans to navigate the world in a new way by shaping feelings, emotions and beliefs in face of the climate crisis (Kerr, 2018). This creative approach is also inherently an ecofeminist approach (Sweers, 2020) since I have decided to reflect on how climate change has affected my anxiety, and being a woman plays part in this personal experience. This radical approach questions female sensitivity to nature and focuses on the exploitation of our environment with the repression of women (Sweers, 2020). I aim for creative practice-based approaches to continue to influence my musical practice and to be a valuable tool when conducting climate research during times of climate anxiety.

Creative Process

To begin my creative process, I knew I had to focus on what specific climate events to reflect on and discuss within the EP. To narrow down what events I wanted to cover, I rooted this project in personal experience. Therefore, I predominantly discussed Canadian climate events, such as the 2023 Canadian wildfires. The creative process also involved journaling when I began to feel anxiety about the state of Canada’s environmental future. For example, there are journal entries from time spent walking at Bayfront Park in Hamilton, Ontario, and later that day when I read about how “Hamilton air pollution is equivalent to smoking a cigarette a day” (CBC, 2023). Journaling aided my songwriting process when thinking about the subject matter for the songs. The 4 songs encompass different songwriting and recording techniques, and they navigate

my own anxiety towards climate change. While some songs on the EP remain simple in nature by using only an acoustic guitar and my voice, others incorporate field recordings and sound samples to build a soundscape that reflects my emotions.

Cranes By The Creek

I initially began writing this song during August of 2023 on a drive to Guelph, Ontario. During my drive, I noticed a construction site with had numerous heavy equipment machinery stationed by clear blue water creek. The reason for the development is unknown, but I was able to remember the site and the irony in its visual. There were cranes by the creek; bright yellow and tall cranes, digging up the ground by the water. I remembered to write down the phrase “cranes by the creek” once I arrived at my destination. The lyricism behind this song relies on the double entendre of what cranes by the creek can represent. It can represent a crane bird secluding itself to its natural wetland habitat, in this case a creek. It can also represent, the construction cranes that are becoming more and more prominent in my surrounding communities. In the first verse, I blended both these interpretations of what cranes by the creek means.

Cranes by the creek, water stand still

My memory's with the landfill

Breathing in deep, breathing in deep

Cranes by the creek, digging up the ground

Who gets to say what has to be found

Let it all be, let it all be

This parallel between the two different images continues throughout the song. The reason I chose to discuss both visuals throughout the song because both versions coexist in the world. Whereas the verses of the song serve as a visual representation of my drive to Guelph, the chorus of the song shares the emotions I felt when I reflected on the creek I had passed.

And I don't see the codes in the clouds anymore

And I feel like there's nowhere to keep me from danger

Now I fear from the outside I'm always looking in

Trying to find where I can begin again

The song began on an acoustic guitar with my voice. The $\frac{3}{4}$ time signature came out quite naturally because I wanted the song to feel cyclical, evoking wildlife being born and then destroyed by human activity. The production called for intricate placement of vocal harmonies, ad-libs, field recordings and sound samples, to highlight the importance behind the destruction of wetlands. I recorded harmonies in places where I wanted the listener to focus their attention more closely on the lyrics. Throughout the verses you can hear a crane call accompanied by a field recording of a high-pitched beeping from a truck reversing into a construction site. There is an airy synthesizer that is being arpeggiated throughout the entirety of the song, and at times is brought forth in the mix to bring texture to the sonic landscape. During the chorus I brought this synthesizer down in the mix to the point of it being almost undetectable. I wanted to highlight instead the sound of both the flowing of the creek and the fire truck siren to simulate the “danger” the cranes are in.

My memory is in the landfill

Breathe it in deep, breathe it in deep

I choke on my breath, I spit it all out

Repeating the words I taught to myself

These lyrics from the second verse are mixed with the sound of me choking on my breath to demonstrate the smog humans and animals are inhale daily. I state phrases, such as “everything is going to be okay” and “climate change isn’t real”. *Cranes By The Creek* was the first song I created for this research project, and it allowed me to explore several recording and production techniques to better emulate the ongoing irony that nature presents itself with to humans.

Spencer Smith Soundwalk

After researching Hildegard Westerkamp’s composition *Kitt’s Beach Soundwalk* (Westerkamp, 1989) I knew that I wanted to enhance and exaggerate a series of field recordings to evoke an emotional response rooted in the basis of one setting. Spencer Smith Park in Burlington, Ontario, is a place that I often go to for solitude as it is situated on Lake Ontario. The boardwalk located near the park is known for its beautiful landscape, cultural events and for family gatherings. But the park is also situated near many busy roads and a major highway, Queen Elizabeth Way. I have visited this park since I was a young girl, and as the years continued to pass, I noticed more noise pollution in the place I once found solitude in. Westerkamp’s recording of Kitt’s Beach in Vancouver, British Columbia, is accompanied by a narration of the sounds she recorded on her soundwalk. I decided not to insert a narration into my soundwalk at Spencer Smith Park as I wanted the sounds of nature to be the only source of information for the listener to decipher and interpret from.

The process for recording this soundwalk was surprisingly tedious and time consuming. On three separate occasions I visited the boardwalk to begin the recording process, and the wind presented to be a challenge with both my H4N Zoom field recorder as well as the microphone built into my cellphone. I attempted the walk anyways as I thought I could edit the sound of the wind out from the recording in post. I listened to the recordings and noticed the wind was overbearing and not capturing the other sounds that were present during my walk. I decided to continue to edit the wind as well as I could but also keep it within the recordings as it is authentic to what the walk sounded like.

Listening to the track, you can hear the sound birds chirping and a dog barking. The shuffling of my footsteps provide context that this is truly a soundwalk and that the microphone was not stationary during the recording process. Since Spencer Smith Park is located by the water you can hear the ripples of the water against the sand and in the background the sound of traffic passing nearby. I blended the three different days of recording into one track as I wanted it to feel continuous. At times you can hear voices from other pedestrians on the boardwalk and then a quick siren from a boat on the water. The absence of any sort of narration forces the listener to really listen to the sounds of nature and think of nature as something musical.

There is no melody, rhythm, harmony or any other traditional songwriting sequence within this piece. *Spencer Smith Soundwalk* gathers sonic information and directly reflects the sounds of a singular setting for the audience. This recording process was a bit of a challenge due to the wind and the battery on my field recorder. But this song also serves as a sound experiment like John Cage's *4:33* where there is nothing but "silence" or rather the sounds in the room (coughing from an audience member, the buzzing from overhead lights, etc.). I took inspiration from Cage's composition as I was intrigued by the audience's interpretation of the piece and

what they could gather from it. Although *Spencer Smith Soundwalk* does not include singing or any instrumentation, the sounds captured can be heard as musical.

The soundwalk was the song most rooted in eco-therapy and deep listening practices as it forced me throughout the recording and production process to listen intently to my surroundings. The process of creating this song reminds me during times of climate distress that there are other living creatures suffering through the climate crisis and still finding ways of surviving and creating beauty around them.

Until There's Nothing Left

The third song from this EP came into fruition after listening to Julianna Barwick's discography with a special focus on her album *The Magic Place* (2011). Barwick's work explores nature's ambience via soundscapes and vocal textures. I made the decision to create a song for this EP using only an instrument most people can access, their voice. When researching what climate change sounds like, I concluded that the sound of climate change can vary by person and not one singular sonic interpretation of climate change can be the same. The choice to only use my voice for this song allowed for leeway in the recording process. Unlike the other two tracks, there was no plan before the recording process, or any lyrics written before I began recording.

I decided to follow my stream of consciousness throughout this song. That becomes evident with the lack of a time and key signature, the dissonance between notes in the overlaying vocal tracks, and the repetition of phrasing throughout. I did not prep my voice for recording through warm-up exercises, and I did not find the need to treat the room to record my voice. I wanted this song to feel very raw and authentic to how I felt in the moment. The title for the song

comes from a state of anxiety that I was feeling on the day of recording. I kept questioning the severity of our climate crisis and focusing on the future of Canada's environmental state. *Until There's Nothing Left* demonstrates the mental distress I continuously feel towards the climate crisis.

Although the recording process of this was seemingly simple since I followed a stream of consciousness, the editing of the song is where I had to experiment with different effects to portray the sound I wanted. I used echo, reverb, and linear sound design effects to make this song feel very disorienting. There are different phrases I sing that are overlayed over one another, making it difficult to decipher what exactly I am singing until you are listening intently. That was my goal with this song, as it reflects the thoughts I have about the climate crisis and how these thoughts can become overwhelming until they are finally said aloud. The lyrics to the song are:

I'm still here I'm stuck here

I didn't listen, It's my own fault

I was glued to the news I didn't look up

Now the sky's filled with red and my tears burn my skin

I cry I cry I cry

I didn't listen, Is it my fault?

No one told me that the rain falls

Harder and harder harder and harder, Until there's nothing left

Harder and harder harder and harder, Until there's nothing left

I reflected on these lyrics after I recorded them as I did not want to disturb the original lyrics my stream of consciousness created. I noticed that there was a feeling of being glued or

stuck in place with the lyrics I had recorded. I did not change the lyrics because I felt that my stream of consciousness provided me with the most authentic interpretation of my feelings via song. This was an interesting way to explore my emotions without overanalyzing metaphor or structure and helped to develop my eco-therapy practices more.

Song 4

The fourth and final song of the EP is simply titled *Song 4* as no title seemed to fit the overarching themes this song captures. Song 4 was difficult to write about because I wanted to discuss themes of climate change through a feminist lens. I decided to approach the songwriting process via pen to paper. I did not pick up an instrument until I wrote down each passage and then fit a melody into the structure of the lyrics afterwards. I took inspiration from a Norwegian-American songwriter named Okay Kaya. She has a song called *IUD* (2018). The song is asking her partner to go to Planned Parenthood to get birth control saying to her partner “baby you’re so baby but I don’t want your babies” (Okay Kaya, 2018). I thought that this topic of conversation has always been viewed as very taboo and was inspired by Okay Kaya to discuss female reproductive rights and feelings within the context of climate change.

After listening to *IUD* numerous times, I wrote down the following passage:

I don’t ever really talk about it, but I’m living in my dreams

Outside is getting scary and I don’t want to perceive

My whole life from the windowsill

I don’t ever really talk about it but what if I can’t conceive

From all the dirty clouds I am breathing and I don’t wanna make babies

In the world we created now

Where the beginning of this EP started with the sounds of the outdoors, the ending of it takes place indoors where I can feel secluded and safe from the outside world. The song talks about not wanting to have children in the twenty-first century because the climate crisis continues to worsen for each upcoming generation. This is a very real conversation that many women and families have planning for their futures, and that is the reason I wanted to preserve that conversation via song. I did not want to produce or edit this song to sound like anything more than myself inside my room. There is a single guitar track on the song and one vocal track to represent the isolation that comes with anxiety towards climate change. In later passages I state:

I don't ever really get to listen

To the music in my home

It always starts in the kitchen

And then it travels on its own into my backyard

I forgot what it's like to listen

I forgot how it feels

To believe and start convincing

The great big sky I'm just as real

Yan I might not have the power

Ya I might just have to talk

Cuz everything down here's ruined and it's not just one man's fault

It's all of us, it's all of us

The focus in the later passages turns to be about how one person may not have all the power to reverse government decisions on climate change, but our voice is enough to share with one another. The song begins in a state of isolation and ends saying “it’s all of us” meaning that even when you feel alone, you are never truly alone in the climate crisis.

Reflection

Climate change has become something that infiltrates both our physical and mental health. This EP consists of four songs can be listened to in any order but are intended to be listened to in the order discussed in this paper. The EP opens with outdoor sounds, including the cranes by the creek, where I reflect on the visual changes initiated by climate change and my emotional response to it. It then transitions into a soundwalk with no dialogue, illustrating how desolate our surroundings are and the feeling of loneliness it can evoke. Following this, my overlaid voice conveys that even in solitude, our thoughts and feelings can navigate us through our emotions. The final song represents a retreat indoors, where I refocus on my sense of self and body in the context of dealing with climate anxiety. Despite the contrasts among the four songs, they share similarities. Each song emphasizes emotions and leverages the power of nature to maintain cohesion throughout the EP.

Discussions on climate change often overlook the importance of sound. By isolating sound, we create an abstraction that detaches us from reality while focusing on a specific moment (Street, 2020). Through this research, I found that answering the question, “What does climate change sound like?” is a personal endeavor. Our personal experiences shape our interpretation of sound because we are generally familiar with the sounds of our

environment (Street, 2020). As Kerr notes, “stories do not make the weather, but they do shape our experience of it” (Kerr, 2018). The stories I share in these songs have influenced my experience with climate anxiety. For example, the lyrically driven song “Cranes By The Creek” was inspired by Adam Melchor’s use of shifting perspectives in his song “Life on Earth?” (2020). I alternated between my own perspective and that of the cranes. By adopting the cranes’ perspective, I was able to step away from my personal experience of climate change and consider its impact on the birds instead.

The production process taught me to “allow time and space for internal adjustments, and to acknowledge them when they occur” (Street, 2020). I gave myself time between writing and producing the songs. Listening to "Spencer Smith Soundwalk" after the initial recording was initially confusing, but I allowed myself to listen before making creative decisions, avoiding edits based on preconceived notions (Street, 2020). Similar to Barwick’s “The Magic Place” (2011), this project is abstract and experimental, though our themes differ. Barwick’s album is open to interpretation due to its lack of lyrics, while my EP invites reflection on daily observations of climate change.

I believe I achieved my goals with this project, navigating my emotions and facing new challenges through the strategies implemented during its creation. This experimental sound project has helped me manage my climate anxiety through various recording and production techniques, as well as deep listening. I plan to continue using deep listening as a meditation practice outside of the climate context.

After undertaking this experimental project, I learned that nature is always trying to share a message with us, but humans must be open to listening. The deep listening approaches to creation taught me how to better understand the difference in interpretation from myself as a

person, my emotions and experiences, my surroundings, and my place within a larger context such as the climate crisis. I wish to continue building and learning about how to better portray nature via song to bring these projects in front of larger audiences such as an art gallery or conference. The limitations with this project that prevented me from being able to create visuals was the amount of time necessary to practice deep listening and create the songs, as well as the funds to properly capture visuals that are cohesive to the overall narrative of the EP. This experimental project can lead to future opportunities in fields of sound art and climate activism. While this project will be shared with audio only, in the future I hope to expand on this research with accompanying visual aids that could be presented at climate conferences or screened in art galleries.

This EP serves as a fossil of the climate events happening from 2023 to 2024 and can be used to show how one individual coped through their climate anxiety. I hope to continue creating music that discusses climate change, not only because it helped me to better prepare for emotional regulation when disaster does strike but because it embeds my ecological footprint in the conversation for a very long time.

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