

# Bird Language and Contemplative Education in the Anthropocene

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## Abstract

As a biologist and educator, this essay weaves together personal experience with pedagogical exploration through narrative and academic prose. First, we explore bird language, nature attunement, and what shadows can teach us. Bird language is an aural blessing and soundscape that, to the attuned ear, reveals storm, predator, and wonder alike. We consider the Ecology in 1m<sup>2</sup> study I co-developed for remote teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this place- and inquiry-based project, students contemplate, in silence, a microsite several times a week over the course of a month. Then we go on a soundwalk in the city, where habituated noise pollution dulls our senses to the more-than-human world. Finally, we bear witness to Takaya's tragic story, the lone wolf who lived for eight years on an island just outside a metropolitan city. Through storytelling and philosophical consideration, alongside more academic modalities, I explore the importance of active listening beyond the anthropocentric babel. If we can hear the downstroke of a raven's wings, the creak of an old alder, the warning trill that goes *Chickadee-dee-dee*, perhaps we can better attune to the more-than-human world and both recognize and atone for our destructive actions towards the Earth.

**Keywords:** bird language; sensory engagement; more-than-human; place-based learning; soundwalk; Takaya

*I still remember my Dad playing "I spy" with us. Something that is grey. We guessed everything—the lamp, books, sofa chair, ceiling—and eventually gave up. The answer? Shadow. My brothers and I cried out, Not fair! It never crossed our mind to look for this. A shadow wasn't an object, because you can't touch it. It wasn't a subject, because it wasn't living. We saw it as flat and two-dimensional. And yet, there it was, moving when we moved, responding to the light, an inescapable presence in the room. We weren't listening to what was right in front of us.*

Shadow and sound curve around objects, and both can disappear on a whim. Sound shadows are areas where sound transmission fails due to an obstruction between the sound source and the non-transmitting object. Sometimes, as we will see, creatures usually detectable by sound are best found through their shadow. To the astute observer, the most subtle grey or whisper of wings can reveal secrets of the unknown.

## Listening to the Unnamed

We are literally silencing the natural world. Every tree cut, river paved and species pushed to extinction in the Anthropocene also exterminates specific harmonies and other-than-human voices,

recalled only as stories or digital memories, as prophesized in the BBC Radio 4 podcast series ‘Forest 404.’ Yet even our densest concrete jungles reveal more-than-human sounds: rain that thrums the glass, horse chestnut conkers that smack sidewalks as they fall, crows mobbing an eagle (Abadi et al., 2019). Bird language (Young, 1999; Young & Gardoqui, 2013) is an aural blessing yet also a soundscape that, to the attuned ear, reveals storm, predator, and wonder alike. What can we learn from the feathered song-gifters?

This paper, via the dual lenses of a biologist and educator, braids together personal experiences with pedagogical explorations. First, we explore bird language, nature attunement, and what shadows can teach us. Then we go on a soundwalk in the city, where habituated noise pollution dulls our senses to the more-than-human world. We consider the Ecology in 1m<sup>2</sup> study I co-developed for remote teaching this year. In this place- and inquiry-based project, students contemplate, in silence, a microsite several times a week over the course of a month (or longer), and compose reflections and a cross-disciplinary exploration of ecology and stewardship. Finally, we bear witness to Takaya’s story, the lone wolf who lived for eight years on an island just outside a metropolitan city.

Weaving between narrative and more academic modalities, I elucidate the importance of active listening beyond the anthropocentric noise pollution. If we can hear the downstroke of a raven’s wings, the creak of an old alder, the warning trill that goes *Chickadee-dee-dee*, perhaps we can better attune to the more-than-human world and both recognize and atone for our destructive actions towards the Earth.

## A Prelude to Shadow

The robin screeches. Her high pitched call, loud, distinct, and insistent, pierces the lazy morning. A clue to danger. Not for myself—excepting humans, Mayne Island, British Columbia is not home to large predators; raccoons and bald eagles top the bill. This robin call serves to warn birds, small mammals, and other denizens of the temperate rainforest: *a hunter lurks in our presence*.

She persists. Inside, I make and eat breakfast. The robin’s shrill cries continue, neither rhythmic nor harmonious, clearly intended to irritate. Intrigued, I sit in the moss-carpeted backyard. Other songbirds join the ominous chorus. I try to discern their whereabouts, but a breathing wall of cedar leaves, undulating to a hidden breeze, acts as a sound shadow while obscuring feather and beak. A raven arrives to inspect the commotion, seems satisfied with what he sees, and darts away, wings beating the air like low thunder. I settle back into my chair and wait.

The shadow hits me first. My senses snap into awareness.

There is a certain power to shadow, this “disruption of the sun’s dominion, a disturbing power that we hold in common with boulders and storm clouds and the corpses of crashed airplanes” (Abram, 2011, p. 19), not to mention whatever is directly above me. A sign of something both there and not there. This grey wraith morphs with the land, holding no matter yet revealing a presence. Abram describes shadow as secreted by our bodies. They are not flat, but a “voluminous being of thickness and depth” (p. 16). As Abram points out, when a bee buzzes past your lee side, it is moving *through* your shadow.

A large, moving shadow elicits both terrific wonder, and (for smaller creatures) wondrous terror. There is, at first response, a sense of mystery, a delight in unravelling this aerial riddle. But if

you're small enough to be eaten, a swift shadow means that something is above you, has likely seen you, and could be predatory. Being a large primate, whose species has eradicated most large carnivores, I need not fear this situation—other than, of course, the ego and hubris of *Homo sapiens*, accelerating species extinction and leading us steadily towards complete ecological collapse (United Nations, 2020; World Wildlife Fund, 2020). We sometimes find ourselves jumping at our own shadows, perhaps a subconscious guilt in our refusal to admit that humans lurk in the shadows of nature, preying on species more vulnerable.

Can you hear a shadow? Despite its inert grey, there is a multisensory response to shade. The ghostly touch of penumbral darkness. A slight, mobile drop in temperature. An eclipse of the light. And often sound: thrumming wing beats, squawks of a gull, the roar of an engine's plane. Not in this case. The shadow that passes over me is silent as rain in mid-flight.

Sitting in my backyard, my body and brain tighten their focus. From its direction, I know this being flies from the east, the late morning sun bathing its tail feathers. A raptor shadow. Utterly soundless.

The owl swoops over my head. Wings outstretched impossibly far, in an effortless glide, like a manta ray through shallow water or a puck across ice. She sails past without a twitch, her striped feathers almost within reach. This seemingly effortless and noiseless flight is in stark contrast to the parade of bird species that madly flap after the barred owl to her new perch, a cedar branch a few feet from our back fence.

I call my family over to unfold the mystery. The robin and other avians pestered this nocturnal bird of prey into movement, and the owl fled her winged kin's cacophony. Her serrated and downy feathers break sound waves, allowing the owl to hunt prey in complete silence. Yet right now things are definitely *not* quiet.

One by one, five different bird species converge to harass the owl: a supervisor crow, some nondescript songbirds, an audacious divebombing robin, and finally another avian that clings to the far side of a trunk, invisible to my eyes. [Click here to hear a recording, taken at this moment, of these birds' warning calls]. Yet its call—a swift, repetitive chirp—is clearly discerned. I ask my seven-year-old son what it is.

“A northern flicker,” he says, not skipping a beat.

A minute later, when the spotted medium-sized bird makes its appearance, his auditory identification is confirmed.

Undeterred by the thrush, corvid, wrens, and woodpecker, the barred owl nonchalantly cleans her feathers. What have I learned? That birds are harbingers of both dawn and doom. That many species can work together to remove a common threat. And that I know only a fraction of what is happening right in my own backyard. My son has an ear for bird language. What difference does this make in the Anthropocene?

## **Bird Language and Backyard Biology**

Birds draw us a map of the landscape through sound. That birds possess language, far older than our own, is clear: a study in *Nature* revealed that European starlings differentiated the grammar

among different songs (Gentner et al., 2006). Bird sounds are by far the most dominant and omnipresent living sound in many natural habitats, yet the words heron, kingfisher, magpie, pelican, raven, starling, stork, thrush, and wren were removed from the Oxford's Children Dictionary (Macfarlane & Morris, 2018).

Humans often show the most interest when birds (such as parrots) mimic our language. If we are quick to label such a bird as 'smart,' why do we not extend this praise or intelligence label when animals speak their native language?

More than just a hobby, nature attunement may be a lifeline. Learning to listen may inspire—or even demand action from—hearing the booming cracks of calving glaciers, the fracking that injects benzene and other carcinogens into underground waterways that feed our wells—or the felling of a 1,000 year-old Douglas-fir. Despite only a fraction of old growth temperate rainforest remaining, logging continues for ancient, irreplaceable trees. A recent survey concluded that “Productive old forest has almost vanished across BC” (Price et al., 2020, p. 46). We've barely scratched the surface of what we know about old growth forests (Luoma, 2006). But we do know they have the greatest biomass—that is, the greatest amount of living material—of any terrestrial ecosystem. Our land's greatest life is what we are tearing down. Can we attune our hearing to this destruction? Or have our ears been deafened by synthetic sound?

Whether teaching, learning, engaging with the natural world, or witnessing climate injustice, active listening is a vital practice toward relationship building. Why? Because hearing the voice of the other is a first step toward understanding and empathy. Though as Young and Gardoqui (2013) point out, “*Empathy*: that's a dangerous word in science, of course, because it's taken to entail a loss of rigorous, critical objectivity” (p. xxvi). Academia applauds rigour, and resists embodied speak. When I pitched the course IDEA 2100, “Ecology, Creativity, and Nature Experience,” co-developed with Ross Laird, we sat before the curriculum committee, nearly thirty people. Like being in a bathtub with piranhas, they nipped away at our proposal. In particular, the committee balked at this learning outcome: “Learning to listen in the forest.” What does this mean? Why does it matter? Could we be more specific?

I explained how this contemplative practice is important for both science and art students. That when my biology students find a quiet spot, and listen without distraction, learnings emerge from the forest that no textbook can teach. As Robin Wall Kimmerer (2016) puts it, “We need to listen to the land, not merely for data, but for wisdom” (p. 49). The curriculum committee seemed wholly unimpressed with my answer. They wanted something objective, measurable, and prescriptive.

In summer 2020, because of COVID-19, I had to redesign field trips for Kwantlen Polytechnic University (KPU) students. In collaboration with Amy Huestis and Carson Keever, we developed the Ecology in 1m<sup>2</sup> study, where both science (ecology) and art (colour theory) students each choose and visit the same site near their home. This can be their backyard, a local park, university campus, or other green space. The goal? To cultivate a connection with place, note the ecological and visual patterns, and reflect on the experience, largely done in silence. That is, students become receptors for the more-than-human world.

The general experience for students followed this pattern: (a) uncertainty at what they were supposed to see or experience, (b) curiosity at what started to reveal itself, (c) repetitiveness that was either irritating and/or rejuvenating, and (d) a deepening into this practice. For many, sound served as a primary sense.

Students were not asked to name every species. As Young and Gardoqui (2013) explain, “it’s not as important to know every bird by its scientific name as it is to know that the robin over there is an individual like you and me” (p. xix). This type of listening is what Jim Macnamara (2016) refers to as ‘recognition,’ the first of seven canons of listening. This is followed by acknowledgement, paying attention, and interpretation. Whereas *hearing* is receiving sound waves into your ear, *listening* involves truly understanding another’s feelings and perspectives, which requires careful interpretation (fifth canon of listening), followed by consideration and responding (Macnamara, 2018). The Ecology and 1m<sup>2</sup> study facilitated these conditions for listening through contemplative practice, repeated visits to the same site, encouragement to put devices away, and multi-sensory engagement. How these seven canons of listening translate to interspecies communication would be a fascinating subject to investigate further. In this case, participants used careful listening to interpret the presence and behaviour of various species, and speculate on how these other-than-humans might experience the world.

For some students in the inaugural Ecology in 1m<sup>2</sup> study, this was the first time they heard the full ecosystem of organisms with which they share their backyard or larger biotic community. The chattering of eastern grey squirrels, the junco’s dawn chorus, the joyous cacophony of children playing on the trampoline next door, the lawn mowers that, in some cases, sheared their sites down to grass nubs. Yet only a matter of days later, students watched—and heard—life re-emerge.

Students settled into place, asked curious questions about invasive species, and pondered threads of connection amongst seemingly divergent species. They also noticed how early morning was conducive to quiet observation, as rush hour drowned out many other-than-humans voices. By attuning their focus, they were starting to understand, as Kimmerer (2013) writes, “that we have something to learn from intelligences other than our own. Listening, standing witness, creates an openness to the world in which the boundaries between us can dissolve in a raindrop” (p. 300). Our anthropocentric worldview can blind (and deafen) us to the wisdom and reverence of the trillion other species with which we share the planet (Locey & Lennon, 2016). When the species boundary dissolves, nature can become our most powerful teacher.

One day, walking with my men’s group, the guttural cry of a raven commanded my attention. This trickster’s hollow croak rang out like the voice of the forest. I commented on bird language, and the mosaic of learnings their calls afford: who has hungry nestlings, shifts in season, if the salmon are soon to spawn, and other ecological indicators. Ravens have been known to assist wolves in the hunt as aerial guides to prey. I added that we have lost this skill of attending to bird language. To which a friend replied: “We don’t need it anymore.”

He’s right, of course. As we go about our day, we don’t need bird voices in order to check our email, order from Amazon.com, drive our car, and work in our cubicles. In fact, when I’ve taken students into the forest (which is often), and asked them what we can learn from bird speak, the response, more often than not, is negative. *They wake me up in the morning. They crap on my car. The stupid woodpecker makes a racket pecking at the metal lamp post!* Birds are seen and heard as a nuisance. (Except when they speak at our command to be seen and heard as our entertainment.) It’s not the birds, I want to argue, that erected that metal monstrosity, whose bulb pollutes the darkness with constant light and electric drone.

Is checking email, consuming manufactured goods from afar, commuting to work, and staring at a screen the pinnacle of human existence? Or do we derive greater meaning from relational experiences, especially those that occur through direct-sense engagement? When we see, hear,

smell, even touch the other, this visceral and multi-sensory exchange enlivens us. When our lifestyles don't require birds, we can pave over salmon-bearing streams where the kingfisher flits like an arrow, build coal ports where the heron once hunted, and clear cut where the spotted owl nests. When bird language matters, so do the forests, the mountains, and the rivers. Bird language may be "crucial for the evolution of [the] human brain" (Young & Gardoqui, 2013, p. xxii). Perhaps now, more than ever, the avian alphabet is our litmus test for how well we care for the natural world.

## Soundwalk in the City

"Birds are vocal because birds are listening" (Young & Gardoqui, 2013, p. xxvi). As humans have evolved into insular beings increasingly segregated from the outside world, what have we lost the ability to hear?

Even the densest cities are home to numerous species of bird. Last year, I participated in the interdisciplinary graduate course, *Creative Ecologies: Reimagining the World*. We learned about land as teacher, reciprocal capture, The Animist, and the karrabing (that moment when the tide is about to shift from ebb to flow), all while sitting in a classroom with no windows to the outdoor world. Compelled to put these theoretical philosophies into practice, in a later class we ventured outdoors for a soundwalk.

The soundwalk idea originated with Murray Schafer and the World Soundscape Project in Vancouver, the same place I was soundwalking. Hildegard Westerkamp (2006) elaborated on the soundwalk, defining it as

any excursion whose main purpose is listening to the environment...its effects on the participating listener are immediate, whether a walk is done for the first time or the listener is a veteran soundwalker: it opens ears to the sounding details of a place and listeners notice the unique soundscape characteristics of a location.

Soundwalks have been successfully implemented in educational contexts, urban planning, and artistic practice (Behrendt, 2018).

Led by Jorma Kujala, we are invited into silence. We walk into the cacophony of Vancouver's downtown east side. I live on Mayne Island. There are 1,000 full-time resident humans, and twice that many deer. There are no stoplights, no buses, no chain stores, and a handful of streetlights. I commuted from here in the morning, to disembark in the maelstrom of this discordant city. The pair of ravens that commute over our property traded for jet planes. Fern alley replaced by dumpster alley. Ancient cedar shadows substituted for skyscraper. Carpets of moss swapped for endless concrete. Yet moss still pushes between the cracks in the sidewalk, and thousands of crows take flight daily into and out of the city. Even owls have habituated to hunting prey on busy Vancouver streets (Givetash, 2017). Certain animal species, such as peregrine falcons, can thrive near and in cities (Barkham, 2017).

While soundwalking, I am content with being silent. Amidst the competing traffic of people and vehicles, streams of stoplights glaring down every street, I retreat within to find a certain peace, whereas some of my classmates find the experience excruciating.

Initially, the blare of noise and light overpowers me. Because the instruction for the soundwalk is to notice, this is what I do. I notice the flashing signage demanding attention, the human footsteps and chatter like ten radios being on at once, advertisements selling lies to my brain, cars spewing fossil fuels, the ambulance siren fading just as a police siren starts to blare. Stark contrast to the Gulf Island solace. Even the birds are louder here, shifting “their songs into higher registers amid traffic noise” (Haskell, 2018, p. 192). Yet after the consumeristic explosion of International Village mall, I find an inner solitude when we enter Andy Livingston park. The sound of children playing on artificial turf and the murmurs of the artificial stream offer some respite, while I try to overlook the people using drugs (or so my paranoid mind might mistakenly presume) sitting nearby.

Psychologists refer to nature’s ability to capture our attention as soft fascination. Flickering leaves, waves rolling onto a shore, and murmurations of starlings hold the power to focus and simultaneously restore our attention. Conversely, hard fascination is harsh synthetic stimuli: daylong pile driving and merging rush hour traffic both draw our attention and sap our energy. Nature stimuli can be a stress reliever, perceived and integrated by our nervous system in such a way that we regain the ability to focus and concentrate, or “recover the capacity to direct attention” (Joye et al., 2013, p. 2). The distinction between hard and soft fascination is clear: the former are stimuli that provoke emotional distress or other negative responses, while the latter are unthreatening environments, such as a park or forest walk where we feel safe. The noise, lights, and concentrated humanity in a city require deliberate effort to block such overstimulation, which hinders our ability to direct attention, leaving our neurons overtaxed.

On our soundwalk, we pass a skateboard park, and then approach an electric buzz that intensifies with each step. My curiosity frames this experience like a scientist. I wouldn’t *choose* to stand next to a giant buzzing power station, so I nudge this annoyance aside and replace it with inquiry and wonder. I observe how others respond to being here, not realizing at the time how disquieted some were feeling, with no sound shadow to take refuge in. One classmate told me later she wanted to run away and scream.

Where I had revelled in this contemplative exercise, able to relax into not speaking, and peaceably slowing down my day, she had a waking nightmare. The tortured and visceral nature of her experience unsettled my version of events. Is this my survival mechanism? To tolerate what others might deem intolerable, so I can tune out into complacency?

I feel safe when I know I do not have to speak, and that others will not speak, content with the knowledge that I can avoid overt judgement. In my school days, from kindergarten to undergrad, I was painfully shy and self-conscious. I remember days at high school where I didn’t speak a single word. In a way, it was easier to be silent. If I didn’t speak then others could not contradict me. During recess and lunch, I put on headphones and drowned myself in music.

Yet today, the climate crisis demands more. We can’t afford to be silent, because we can’t afford not to act. My optimistic complacency serves my well-being, but it doesn’t offer much (if anything) to the world.

It’s ironic, yet perhaps pertinent, that an experience with silence helped bring me to this conclusion. There is something to be said for quiet reflection, deep pauses, and contemplative inquiry. However, the current state of the world demands more active resistance and naming that which is destructive. Isolation and alienation are inherent in our industrial-exploitative economic system. Capitalist modes of production and neoliberal ideology that casts citizens as consumers are directly

responsible for environmental destruction. To not speak is to be complicit. Yes, it is important to reflect, pause and contemplate. Then take thought into action. Scholarship can provide data, social media can inform, and our careful consideration can offer philosophical and ethical clarity, yet our daily actions are what model behaviour for others. How we spend our money, speak against oppressive ideology, and obstruct the construction and transportation of fossil fuels are what makes a difference in a world being stripped of wonder as the biotic landscape is defiled for consumeristic growth.

Right now, there is an unprecedented dying off of birds, attributed to wildfires and the climate crisis (Weston, 2020). We must act, not for just the birds' sake, or for our own, but rather for the ecological integrity of the entire biosphere. The act of listening may not change the world tomorrow. But it's a first solid step toward compassion and empathy. The Ecology and 1m<sup>2</sup> study, and ecological soundwalks, are invitations for place-based pedagogy. More so, these active practices can be restorative for our screen-addled and often frenetic-paced minds, and encourage our bodies to march toward social and climate justice.

Tolkien (2013) alluded to our lost connection with birds in *The Hobbit*. When the thrush tries to communicate with Bilbo's company that Smaug the dragon is dead, and his treasure unguarded, it realizes they cannot understand his speech. Thus, he summons a 153-year-old raven, one of the last of the feathered beings who can speak the common tongue. This elder raven tells Thorin, the dwarven leader of the company, that "The treasure is likely to be your death, though the dragon is no more!" (p. 267). Thorin, to the detriment of many, ignores the raven's wisdom. Will humans do the same?

## Epilogue: The Story of Takaya

Aldo Leopold (1996) wrote that "only the mountain has lived long enough to listen objectively to the howl of a wolf" (p. 129). About 250 wolves live on Vancouver Island (Koch, 2019), adapted to coastal living. They typically roam the northern half of the island, where humans are more scattered amongst temperate rainforest. However, in 2012, a lone male wolf decided to venture to the southernmost tip of Vancouver Island. The problem? This took him through a thriving metropolis: greater Victoria houses 400,000 people (BC Population Estimates, 2020).

This wolf had to navigate almost 40 kilometres of cars, houses, and humans (Alexander, 2020; Frymire & Williams, 2019). Multiple sightings occurred at Elk Lake in May, 2012. He then crossed the busy Patricia Bay Highway, and swam up to three kilometres of strong current to reach Discovery Island. Soon after, signs were erected: "Warning Stray Dog." Discovery Island belongs to an uninhabited (that is, by humans) archipelago, part of the unceded, ancestral territories of the Songhees First Nation. But it turned out that the paw prints and scat on Discovery Island were, in fact, from the wolf that came to be known as Takaya.

Stqéyəʔ means 'wolf' in Songhees' Coast Salish dialect, from which Takaya arose. The Songhees welcomed this wolf's arrival near the time their longtime Chief Robert Sam passed away. This was, according to Songhees Nation Chief Ron Sam, "a message that our chief was still with us" (Kelly, 2020, para. 7). Conservation officers considered shooting the wolf (lethal control, as the official lingo goes), without any consultation with First Nations. Ultimately, they decided to trap and relocate Takaya. They failed, twice. The Songhees made vocal statements about their preference for nature to be left alone, and so Takaya lived on Discovery Island for eight years.

Why did this young male leave the pack? Juveniles sometimes disperse to their own territories to form new family units.

Discovery Island has no resident deer, and the freshwater dries up in the summer. Nevertheless, Takaya adapted by hunting geese, using the shadow of night to catch seals, and digging deep for water.

Residents of Oak Bay listened in awe for his howl, most frequently in late winter. Mating season. A wolf's howl is engrained in human consciousness. Dogs carry the ancestral memory of this call when an ambulance siren goes by, or a human mimics a howl. Much like bird language, wolves howl to communicate danger, territory protection, the location of other species, and to find each other. They also howl out of affection for one another (Mazzini et al., 2013).

Takaya's long, mournful howl is one that cuts to the soul. Even this author, whose only opportunity to listen occurred through a screen, shed tears of empathy when I heard Takaya crying for companionship, seemingly impossible in this landscape usurped by humanity.

Then, a miracle happened. A female wolf was spotted in greater Victoria (Bent, 2019), where Takaya himself had ventured seven years prior. In January, 2020, during mating season, Takaya was spotted in Oak Bay. He had swam from Discovery Island back to Vancouver Island, perhaps in search of the one thing that had eluded him all these years: a mate. Conservation officers caught and relocated him into deeper wilderness, near Port Renfrew.

On March 24, 2020, just after the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, a hunter shot and killed Takaya.

This wolf's last two interactions with humans involved drastic measures. The first, with humans in relationship with him, relocated Takaya to a safer area (i.e., where there were less humans). The second human, by all accounts having no relation to this wolf, came across Takaya by chance on a logging road. While Takaya stood watching him curiously, the hunter shot him with a Remington rifle from 15 meters away (Pynn, 2020). To the hunter, this wolf was not a living, animate, soulful being—or if he was, the hunter saw it as his right to take these away.

The hunter's actions were legal. The spirit of the wolf, reduced to a pest or trophy status, enabled a gunshot to cut his howl out of the world. In our industrial-exploitative society, humans grant themselves the right to silence the voices of other-than-humans, entire species, even ecosystems.

Aldo Leopold used to shoot wolves as vermin. I finish with his account of killing a wolf, where he realized he had killed not just a wolf, but a way of being in the world that his mind could not fully comprehend.

We reached the old wolf in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes. I realized then, and have known ever since, that there was something new to me in those eyes—something known only to her and to the mountain. I was young then, and full of trigger-itch; I thought that because fewer wolves meant more deer, that no wolves would mean hunters' paradise. But after seeing the green fire die, I sensed that neither the wolf nor the mountain agreed with such a view. (Leopold, 1949, p. 130).

The academy privileges intellect above emotion. Perhaps, in this vulnerable moment of kinship, Leopold was learning to listen with his heart.

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