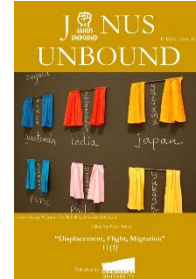


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Songs of Prescience: Canadian Musical Activism in Climate Break- down

Scott Stoneman

Since the 1980s, there has been a fiftyfold increase in the number of places experiencing extreme heat.

—Darin Barney and Ayesha Vemuri (2022)

If one were to search the phrase “heat waves” during the summer of 2022, one would likely be directed first not to information about the extreme heat events the world is facing. Instead, Google would likely anticipate that users were looking for a link to the Glass Animals’ song “Heat Waves” from their 2020 album *Dreamland*. Despite their continual increase, year after year, the unprecedented and intensifying heat waves fueled by climate change are not nearly as ubiquitous as Glass Animals’ “Heat Waves.” The song has been played, as of the time of this writing, more than 433 million times on YouTube and over 2.1 billion times on Spotify. But that is only part of the story of this song. It is a record-setting “sleeper hit,” having taken an unprecedented 59 weeks to reach number-one on the Billboard Hot 100. Billboard’s analysis explains that the long duration of the track’s ascent could be attributed to “a fanfic trend in late 2020,” or more significantly, “a sense of seasonal appropriateness in mid-2021” (Unterberger 2022). The euphemistic phrase “seasonal appropriateness” is critical here. While Andrew Unterberger notes, in a curiously tone-deaf way, that the track “isn’t a pop scorcher so much as a slowly enveloping temperature shift,” it is essential to remember that “Heat Waves” first rose to the top of the charts in Australia in 2020, closer to its release date, after an apocalyptic megafire event dubbed the “Black Summer” torched 143,000 square kilometres (an area roughly the size of the State of New York) and drove several endangered species to extinction.

The experience of heat waves is now desperately common, with the threshold for survivability getting closer and closer to a regular threat in many parts of the world. It is already “the deadliest weather phenomenon in a typical year in the United States, killing an average of 158 people annually in the 30 years from 1992 to 2021” (Dhanesha 2022). That number is sure to shoot up as temperatures climb and the US shows no demonstrable interest in weaning itself off the death-dealing but highly profitable fossil fuels that propel its economy. It is oddly resonant for the country currently called Canada that a song

about heat waves references the “middle of June,” specifically since June 2021 saw a lethal “heat dome” descend on British Columbia. According to the provincial coroners service, the heat wave killed 526 people, with 231 dying on 29 June alone. That equates to nearly 10 people an hour (Schmunk 2021). The heat dome also caused the loss of an incalculable number of sea creatures, in a mass die-off that is likely to contribute to rising sea temperatures. How can we reconcile the fact that, considering all of the current media available for receiving climate-related information, searching “heat waves” takes us to more links for Glass Animals’ breakout track than to more pertinent or serious sources on threats to collective survival on Earth? Is our connection to the experience of climate change now hopelessly overdetermined by popular culture? Or is there reason to hope that the permeation of popular music by both climate grief and ecological optimism is potentially progressive?

Music is uplifting. A song can be energizing, musing, and palliative at the same time. One of the challenges that comes with writing critically about music is that “the omnipresence and widespread recognizability of music, as a set of performative acts and objects of inscription that invite particular modes of listening, can work to elevate its conceptual status above scrutiny” (Sakakeeny 2015, 113). Many of us lack the language to grasp and relate to the intensities of dread, insecurity, and grief that accompany knowledge of global warming. Music can be a tool for developing a political nomenclature (from the Latin *nomen* [name] and *clatura* [calling, summoning]) to expand the climate struggle. Music may under conditions of appropriate public support, diverse participation, and place-specific songwriting offer an indispensable sounding board and source of “shared agency,” as Min Hyoung Song (2022 1) puts it: a felt sense of the “ability to act in ways that have intended effects.” For this to happen, we need a broad palette of compositions that offer more than a rootless soundtrack to climate despair.

If we scrutinize the music of climate breakdown, we find that it resists the petrocultural inculcation of fatigue around the prospect of decarbonization. It communicates—through the inexorable surge associated with resonance and rhythm—the perhaps increasingly “fragile idea” that what we collectively do still “matters,” as singer-songwriter Tamara Lindeman croons on “Tried to Tell You,” a standout song from The Weather Station’s iconic 2021 climate record *Ignorance*. Scientific models, manuscripts, infographics, and the overwhelming accumulation of video web live-stream of climate catastrophes, have proven inadequate to meet the cultural demands of environmental communication at a time of maximal urgency. Fossil fuel companies and petrostates “salivate over opportunities” for extracting, commodifying, and combusting this “black blood,” as Tanya Tagaq (2016) sings on “Retribution.”

Academic, scientific, and other professionalized forms of environmental communication have been challenged by messaging which asserts that fossil fuels are an unavoidable necessity. The difficulty of sustaining momentum in the multiscalar quest to phase out fossil fuels and achieve energy transition to avert climate catastrophe is evidenced by the number of people actively concerned with the imminence of climatic breakdown in overdeveloped countries

like Canada. In 2019 Abacus Data found that, while over 80% of Canadians felt that climate change was a serious problem, only a quarter of the people surveyed thought about it regularly, and only half worried about the impact it will have (Coletto 2019). Clearly there is a disconnect here. It is not that the public at large, or in this case the Canadian public, does not *care* about climate change; the problem is that we do not know *how* to care or what to *do* with or about our concern.

The literature on the psychological impact of climate catastrophe reinforces the point that many of us are beside ourselves, struggling under both economic and ecological duress. For Deborah Seabrook (2020) and many others, music is a therapeutic means of coping with such difficult feelings. Seabrook focuses on individual coping strategies for climate anxiety. I am interested in an emerging musical language for collective impatience and antagonism. References to the “Anthropocene” tend to reduce the question of music’s impact to individual psychology: for example, Seabrook draws from the work of Joshua Ottum, whose “Between Two Worlds: American New Age Music and Environmental Imaginaries” (2018) affirms the transformative potential of “the New Age genre” of music by inducing feelings of “relaxation, inner-peace, and ecological harmony,” (193) and finding unity between the “philosophies of commerce and spirituality” (212).

What kinds of compositions might be better equipped, in our current moment, to create “vibrational spaces” for imagining pathways out of energy impasse and the climate emergency (Boon 2022, 212)? Some contemporary songs explore the devastation and political upheaval of global warming. Music fits with ecological imagining. Artists, compose music that conveys the need to care for nature. Songwriters and composers present to their own grief, fury, and political sense of disorientation can create sonic states of being that move listeners to action.

My goal is not to theorize all ecological sensitivity in music. Like Boon, I am moved by “scenes and cultures with ... intense commitments to sound” that work to create spaces of transformative feeling through waveforms” (2022 17). If we adopt this expansive framework, according to Boon, we move rather quickly into a world where music asks “ontological questions” of us. The pursuit of “target states” through music is not a foreign concept in many cultures: for example, the idea of tapping into the “vibration of the land” in many Indigenous musical pathways is a vital practice in a settler-colonial context (2022 66).

I hope to open a conversation on which styles of music might be best suited to connect with diverse publics on climate emergency. When Anohni composed the song “4 Degrees” with Hudson Mohawke for United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP)21, she did so to provoke anger and action in response to dangerously commonplace climate defeatism. But what was the scope of the song’s impact? What was the effect of its anger? Can certain songs and genres of music better address particular constituencies? Climate music must gauge the breadth of its influence. Determine a means of finding “sweet spots” between forms of sonic expression too broad or too rarefied. A principal

way that artists achieve this is by speaking from a highly specific place lyrically, musically, and ecopolitically. Producing music from a rooted place can help artists evolve a musical vocabulary for climate breakdown.

Music is palpably binding in a scene, in participants at the local level. When it reaches a global scale, it tends to become bloated, commodified, and evacuated of meaning. Music produced to make a worldwide audience more “environmentally-friendly” has been notably frivolous in its scope and sense of purpose. Songs like Lil Dicky’s “Earth” (2019) or Paul McCartney and Natasha Bedingfield’s well-meaning but crass “Love Song to the Earth” (2015) are about nowhere and nothing, a form of NGO-driven cause marketing that may generate clicks and raise some money, but which “seem nostalgically quaint compared with the rapidity of ... deleterious biophysical change” (Wodak 2018, 68). These songs fail to offer a compelling political language of feeling, shall we say.

The music I am curious about exists in counterpoint to the hollow spiritualism of high-profile environmentalist anthems like “Love Song to the Earth,” where a cavalcade of celebrity singers represent a vision of the Earth as a “diamond in the universe / Heaven’s poetry to us” and declare that “tomorrow’s in our hands” so we must “make it better somehow.” What would a musical language that expresses the unsettling feelings associated with climate change—anger, anxiety, mourning, vexation, helplessness—sound like? The climate music with the greatest resonance grows out of the attunement of artists to their imperiled places. Music more directly connected to the destruction of a particular place may not necessarily trigger a transformation, but it has potential.

The communication of climate grief, anxiety, and the need for radical change is at odds with the normative constraints of many genres of music, especially pop. As Pedelty puts it, a “pop show, a rite of spectacular excess, is inappropriate for communicating sustainability” (2015 204). There is little question that pop music is an awkward fit for “ecopolitical aesthetics,” given that it is a veritable “soundtrack for overconsumption” (Pedelty 204). Even so, music is “an activity by means of which bodies are synchronized into a social body” (2009 44). Music that feels prescient or prophetic is typically participatory, while music dedicated to inspiring awe through the artist’s mastery onstage tends to encourage a level of passive reverence. The collective experience of music appears to be fading. Jonathan Sterne charts historical shifts in music in *The Audible Past*, explaining that “as a form of expression becomes more legitimate and ... prestigious, its audience quiets down;” eventually, the effect is that “the individuated listener comes before the collective sonic experience” (2003 161). In Western hyper-capitalist cultures, participatory music “tend[s] to be conceptualized as ‘less-than’ the more ‘important’ (i.e., professional and performative) spaces” (Walcott 2016, 9). Jeff Titon affirms the idea that participatory music “repositions culture workers collaboratively” and “help[s] to revitalize musical traditions and ... ensure their continuation” (2020 155).

The Weather Station’s “Live at KEXP” performance has been viewed on YouTube just over 44,000 times since March 2022. This is a far cry from the

stratospheric popularity of Glass Animals' "Heat Waves." However, the performance does give Lindeman a platform for explaining her reasons for writing the songs on *Ignorance* the way that she did. Her goal was to create earworms that might engage people on the climate emergency through sly danceability instead of dry diatribe, to insinuate a bridgeable but unmentionable ecological anxiety into the listener's consciousness. The groove that runs through all of *Ignorance*, evoking the glittery production of New Wave tracks, was a sort of calculation:

I've noticed that there's something so wonderful about pop music. You can be in a Value Village or walking through the mall and you hear, like, an Abba song or something it just sort of burrows into your mind. And the lyrics are there with you, right? But you don't pay attention to them because it's so catchy. So I was like, wouldn't it be so interesting if I found ways to write songs that just sort of communicate and transcend genre in that way, where they're just so approachable, but then what would happen if I use that kind of song-writing and that catharsis and that movement to convey some of these more unsettled feelings? So I sort of loved imagining these songs being out there ... secretly conveying some of this pain and difficulty in a very comfortable package. ("The Weather Station—Full Performance [Live on KEXP]" n.d.)

Lindeman's songs work as a "powerful mnemonic for attention," to use Song's phrase from *Climate Lyricism*, in part because they collapse the distance between the listener's comfort and an "always deferrable future" of escalating climate impacts in the energy-addicted Global North (5). Lindeman's "Atlantic" is unique in its acknowledgement of complicity with deferral, narrating the desire to "get all this dying off my mind." The temptation is to exercise self-care by "know[ing] better than to read the headlines" and to experiment with the political and theoretical question of whether it "matter[s] if I see it?" (Lindeman). Can the resonance of a song like "Atlantic" expose the all-too-common tendency to maintain a comfortable sense of distance from the inflection point?

On his award-winning opus *Wolastoqiyik Lintuwakonawa*, Jeremy Dutcher, a Wolastoqiyik member of the Tobique First Nation, makes a point of using his powerful tenor vocal range to project a heroic mood of cultural resurgence. Dutcher's album rekindles the Wolastoqey language and devises a prescient musical grammar for healing from ecocide by modelling a return to Indigenous land management and empowerment. In July 2022, I attended a free show that Dutcher organized as part of a tour focused on generating support for a land-based Wolastoqey school in Fredericton, New Brunswick. Dutcher started the show by honouring the land we were situated on, Mi'kma'ki, the unceded and unsurrendered land of the Mi'kmaq people. Localizing this welcome felt weightier than the land acknowledgements that have become commonplace in Canadian activist and educational gatherings since the 2015 Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. Such acknowledgements often function, according to Theresa Stewart-Aambo and K. Wayne Yang, "to make

the speaker and their institution appear blameless, to appear to be in solidarity with Indigenous nations, when in fact, the words may not reflect any meaningful relationships with Native communities and obscure institutional complicity with land occupation, resource extraction, and Indigenous dispossession” (2021 31).

In between songs, Dutcher spoke at length about how languages hold entire cosmologies and how his sense of responsibility to preserve the Wolastoqey language is rooted in saving that life-saving cosmology. Dutcher’s compositions have a jubilant quality. They conjure up visions of rewilding, liberating, ending extractivism. Audience members were encouraged to overcome their presumed discomfort and sing together in Wolastoqey. The act of singing together felt unusual, even contrived, in music cultures that still privilege ideals of performative mastery. However, Dutcher pointed out our reticence about singing together and used his virtuosity to challenge it. This led to a discussion of preserving the Earth and a collective singing of the civil rights anthem “We Shall Overcome.” One of the most significant moments in the show, for the purposes of thinking about the music of climate breakdown, was when Dutcher explained that in Wolastoqey culture, a “song carrier” goes where they are called and creates music as “medicine ... for the spirit.”

Music under hyper-capitalism has become, according to music teacher and percussionist Daniel J. Shevock, “an unsustainable monoculture ([with] fewer genres, fewer musicians). Musician is redefined,” he says, “as *professional musician* (leaving the community musician as obsolete)” (2017 30). During “Climate Week NYC,” The Climate Group was planning to stage the inaugural “Big Climate Thing” festival between 16-18 September 2022. A climate music festival of unprecedented size, it would have included lectures and panel discussions on the climate emergency. Headliners like Haim, The Flaming Lips, and The Roots were the main draw.

One of the artists slated to perform at “The Big Climate Thing” was The Weather Station, not surprising given the commercial and critical success of *Ignorance*. In the lead-up to the festival, Tamara Lindeman expressed optimism that, because

music plays a primarily emotional role in people’s lives ... it has huge potential in pushing us to recognize our tangled emotions around this topic ... a stadium full of people coming together for a climate event centered on music ... is an enormous opportunity to feel a solidarity that has been so missing ... and push those in attendance to examine their *climate feelings* and *push through them* enough to act. (Martoccio 2022)

This was certainly a best-case scenario for the event. If music can offer a language of feeling and an invigorating sense of the importance of political will in an era of escalating climate catastrophe, then we need to recognize the ways that artists are working to create new methods of sonic expression suited to this moment. At a time when we need to act collectively with urgency to address climate collapse, music provides a form of environmental communication. The

type of music that grows out of place-based engagement with ecocide uniquely communicates the sensoria of climate breakdown. A musical language for dealing with deeply unsettled states of being can help climate justice.

Biography

Scott Stoneman (he/him) teaches in the Department of Communication Studies at Mount Saint Vincent University in Kijipuktuk (Halifax). He is the host of the Pretty Heady Stuff podcast, which has included guests such as Raj Patel, Andreas Malm, El Jones, Judith Butler, K. Wayne Yang, Anna Tsing and many others. He's also the co-author of the forthcoming book *Widening Scripts: Cultivating Feminist Care in Academic Labor*.

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