

# Resonance

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When I left the house this morning and step on the paved street leading to my bicycle, I heard a strange sound coming from above. It was a very high whistle, which even though loud enough to be clearly heard, was soft and cheering to the ear. I rose my head up to see the origin of the sound and saw five black shapes in the clear morning sky. The round shapes were quickly jumping and spreading their wings, so I could not recognize the species of the bird. They were very small, with long thin beaks, and much more lively than the usual city bird I see around The Hague. They whistled again for a couple of minutes before leaving the street. The noise of an approaching car pulled me away from my contemplation and reminded me of my original purpose: get my bike and go on with my day. Nevertheless, the sound of these birds stayed with me, as well as a strange feeling of lightness and joy. Every time I think back about their song, I feel wrapped in a soft cloth. My chest rises as I inhale and a wave of sweetness runs through my body; my senses awake. I am immensely unsettled by this experience. What does this sound call in me which is powerful enough to bring me so much peace?

At twenty-eight years old, I have lived all my life in a western urban environment.<sup>1</sup> Sure, there are some trees, animals, water, and occasional insects but not in high enough amount to overcome the surrounding concrete, metal, glass, and tar. In these urban environments, it is easy to live as humans. Most of us can fulfill our main tasks of finding food, water, warmth, and sleep relatively quickly, in

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<sup>1</sup> Man-made environments will be here designated under the terms of urban and rural. To avoid the problematic term of “nature”, I will define all the other entities that compose our ecosystem as wildlife.

theory making space for less essential activities during the day.<sup>2</sup> When possible, these less essential activities are often of social nature, self-development, leisure or anything else that brings happiness to the mind and convince your brain that you are going in the right direction. In this perfect world, it seems like nothing is missing. Nothing? Let's listen to the bird's song again. This experience gave me something completely different than the pleasures felt when completing the previously mentioned activities. The feeling felt both new and very old, like a forgotten memory suddenly resurging from the past. Yet, I know that I have never heard this sound before. I have experienced similar feelings though, and each time, it was in relation to a non-human entity.

## **Western Soil**

The relations western modern humans have with the non-human world is tremendously one-sided: we take what we need and want from our surrounding without giving anything in return. This way of behaving bears several concepts of our existence which I find problematic. First, if we allow ourselves to feast on the wildlife, it presupposes a certain form of superiority of the human on the other entities. Wildlife is seen as available, existing to serve humans' interests. Second, it also implies that wildlife is completely dissociated from us, autonomous and unchangeable. Our actions do not have any impact on the wildlife, therefore we do not have to feel responsible for it. If today we understand better the place of humans in the ecosystem and their inherent consequences, the idea that humans are superiors to any other life-form is still very much embedded in western culture. I believe this vision to be in large part due to the influence of Christianity on Western Europe, and its narration of the world being created for humans by God.

So God created human beings in his own image. In the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

Then God blessed them and said, "Be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth and govern it. Reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, and all the animals that scurry along the ground." – Genesis 1:26-28

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2 Essential is used here in the sense of providing to the body what it needs to strictly function.

Today, religions (including Christianity) play a less important role in western societies. Our capitalistic society managed to replace or fulfill people's needs, previously brought by religion, with material comfort and shopping areas -or maybe are we too busy to think about it. Nevertheless, the earlier described vision of humans on earth resisted the passing of time. Now do we not only tell humans to rule over wildlife, but we are so successful in doing so that soon nothing will remain to rule on.

It is only fifty years ago that some western humans started to think about ecology and our relation to the ecosystem.<sup>3</sup> The thought that we are not separated but part of all life forms inhabiting earth slowly rose, together with the global effect of our economy and lifestyle on earth fragile ecosystem. Because it is obvious today that global warming will also have consequences on human life -even if still debated by some people- we are starting to think differently about our role and place towards other natural elements. Interestingly it is maybe due and thanks to globalization, that Western societies are given a chance to change their understanding of the earth ecosystem. During the industrial revolution, we got access to more resources which allowed us to develop our technologies. These high technologies, on which we are now extremely dependant, are very demanding in primary resources and energy. The "taking human" kept taking, always more, always further away, thus increasing global warming and earth ecosystem imbalance. Now, it is also because we developed these high technological tools that we are given a possibility to see and understand the far end of our actions. The development of photography, television, and the internet made it possible to see the consequences of deforestation, intense mining, sea pollution, and climate change. We can exchange on continents-apart cultures, traditions, and knowledge. We can compare, question, and change our ideas, towards maybe a more harmonious humanity.

It is within this uncomfortable contradiction that I encountered Native American culture.

## **The Cherokee Way**

About five years ago, I was at a friend's house for a good-bye dinner. She was leaving the Netherlands to go back to her hometown and was giving away most of

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3 I refer here to the emergence of deep ecology in the 1960s, and more specifically to Arne Naess paper "The shallow and the deep, long range ecology movement. A summary" published in 1973.

her belongings. The place was filled with the mixed sound of people talking over techno music and dishes getting filled or emptied. I was mostly here for her, so I didn't know most of the people there. As I was standing and looking around her things, my eyes stopped on her bookshelves. They were filled with heterogeneous works apparently classified by theme. I grabbed an illustrated hardcover book about exotic birds, and stroll a couple of pages. I was going to place it back when my attention got caught on the next publication title: "Walking on the Wind, Cherokee teachings for Harmony and Balance." Intrigued, I asked my friend about it and if I could take it home. She couldn't give me much information, since she inherited the book from a far family member and had never read it; she gladly handed it out. The book stayed unopened for three more years in my bookshelf, until I felt the moment had come.

Michael T. Garrett introduces the reader to different Cherokee traditional beliefs and knowledge in the form of illustrated tales. What stroke me first was the absence of morals in these stories. They recount the origin of animals, plants, astral elements, and human interactions, explaining why the turtle has a pattern on its shell, or why humans get sick and can heal themselves with plants. Underlying in these stories, I found a completely different way of looking at the universe, and more particularly on the planets' life-forms and their relations to each other. Spiritual and natural laws drive a person's life into being a helper in all relations inter-beings. Some of these laws are:

1. never take more than we need;
2. give thanks for what we have or what we receive;
3. use all of what we have;
4. "Giveaway" what we don't need.<sup>4</sup>

Of course. Here, written in plain sight, is all that western culture forgot -or never had; diametrically on the opposite of everything I have ever been taught. These laws sit in a greater understanding of life as a circle. It is "a sacred symbol reminding us of the importance of our unique place in the universe and our relation to all things."<sup>5</sup> The Circle is based on the awareness of the cyclical nature of the earth ecosystem.

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<sup>4</sup> Michael T. Garrett, *Walking on the Wind*, (Bears and Company Inc., 1998), 46.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

From the change of the seasons to the way every organism grows and decays, this vision highlights living co-dependency. Michael T. Garrett explains the importance for humans to respect our place in the circle: “whatever enters the cycle, of which we are only a part, finds its way back to the beginning point in the end.”<sup>6</sup> Reading about the cyclical way life goes, reminded me of some middle school science classes. I recalled the drawings of the soil being eaten by the worm, itself eaten by the mouse, then eaten by the bird, and finally eaten by us. The food chain was not a circle though. It was a pyramid, and at its top, sat what we called super-predators. The super-predators, not only could not be harmed, but were also of no use for anything else. I don’t remember how I felt about it at that time, but now I find it an extremely lonely fate for humanity.

Today, I can look at this vision with a bit more distance. I feel relieved that it is not a universal truth, but a relative and partial way of understanding the world. I will not hide here that I find much wisdom in the Cherokee way of behaving like humans and that I want to share their vision in the hope for change. But I am also aware that such vision emerged from much closer contact with nature than the actual average. The density of population on the planet involves that many of us do not have any contact with other lifeforms. The wildlife keeps being pushed back by our modern human world. There can not be individual relationships to the natural environment and intimate experiences of the living when we are so divided. I want to live upon the Natural laws of the Cherokee and respect my place in the circle because it gives some sense to my existence, but when I look through my window, I hit a concrete wall.

## **Biophilia**

As I am writing this text, I realize that I will not be able to reach what I hoped for when I started. Every knowledge I gather on the subject only increases the diameter of the loop. I do not exactly come back to my starting point; I am further away from the center. All the dots are not connected but they give me a sense of direction. I will just keep adding epicycles.

The term of biophilia is what I found the closest equivalent of the Cherokee vision in our western culture. The word first appeared in the work of the American psychoanalyst Erich Fromm “The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness” in 1973. He

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6 Ibid., 45.

describes biophilia as “the passionate love of life and of all that is alive.” Later, the term extended to designate the human primary need to connect with other life-forms and their genetic basis.<sup>7</sup> Through our evolution, we have been in close contact with nature, getting most of our knowledge from it. The sensory interactions we do no longer have were essential for the survival of the species and got passed on generations in our DNA. Compare to the long history of human evolution (approximately six million years) it is a very small amount of time that we are “independent” from wildlife to survive. The biologist Edward O. Wilson suspects that this recent shift and our now urban environments could affect our past fundamental dependency on nature and participate in the current disinterest of humans in natural environments.<sup>8</sup> The problem here is that our urban environment is not independent of the natural environment. It provides the illusion of an autonomous world, but depends on technologies, themselves relying upon natural resources. We humans shouldn’t disinterest ourselves from nature because we still need it to survive, even though the sensorial connection is interrupted.

Another part of his theory mentions the development of humans as well as all other organisms come from one common ancestor 3.5 billion years ago. We will “share the genetic code and basic biochemical processes in the cell(...) reflected in the structure of the human mind.”<sup>9</sup> This perspective reminded me of a similar thought expressed by Michael T. Garrett: “every cell of your body contains the memory of everything you have ever experienced through time.”<sup>10</sup> Even though the contexts of these writings are very different, the fundament of the thought is the same. We are made from everything that surrounds us and the other way around. The urge to connect with other life forms is rooted in our cells and conflicts with our present way of living.

The bird song called on my craving for relation with the natural environment, awaking tapped knowledge from billions of years ago. As Robin Wall Kimmerer puts it in *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2013) “Breathe it in and you start to remember things you didn’t know you had forgotten.”

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7 Kara Rogers, "biophilia hypothesis," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 25 Jun. 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/science/biophilia-hypothesis>. Accessed 7 November 2021.

8 Edward O. Wilson, “Human Decency is Animal,” *New York Times Magazine*, 12 Oct. 1975, 38–50.

9 Jana Krčmářová, “E.O. Wilson's concept of biophilia and the environmental movement in the USA”, *Kladyán* 6 January 2009, 6.

10 Michael T. Garrett, *Walking on the Wind*, (Bears and Company Inc., 1998), 31.

## Finding New Connections

Now that this is said, I wonder about the practical way to fulfill this need for connections. In the urban environment, there is not much wilderness to link to. Birds might be the closest to an understanding of it, together maybe with nettle and flies. As an artist and maker, I am more often in contact with “dead” life-forms, more commonly identified as “materials”. I work primarily with natural materials, such as charcoal, graphite, and paper for drawings, and wood, clay, textiles, and other plant-based sources for sculptures. I work with natural material first according to my ecological concerns toward global warming, but also simply because handling them brings me pleasure. The work of clay is for me the most evident and shared example of physical resonance when shaped. The direct contact of the fresh and soft clay with the naked hand makes me think of Wilson’s hypothesis of contact with nature. Are there maybe enough shared molecules in clay that allow us to connect with our survival instinct? Is the pleasure felt partly due to it? Since every material that constitutes our urban environment is at its base from a natural source, there might be some possible link. While we figure out a way to introduce wild lives back in our environment, maybe we could invent a transitory coping mechanism. As a way to escape the paradoxical modern society, maybe connecting to what is alive in our surrounding materials can lead us to a wiser future. And so, in my concrete city, I can now see a door opening.