

## SOUNDS OF JUSTICE PODCAST

### Episode 5

## More-than-Human Rights: The Music of Nature and the Nature of Music

CÉSAR RODRÍGUEZ GARAVITO and REBECCA DIRKSEN

in conversation with IGNACIO SAIZ

**Ignacio Saiz:** Hello and welcome to Sounds of Justice, a podcast about music and human rights brought to you by the Global Campus of Human Rights. I'm your host, Ignacio Saiz and in this episode, we'll be opening our ears to the sounds of the more-than-human world, from forests to fungi, and exploring how this kind of listening might reshape our understandings of rights and of our relationship to the planet we inhabit.

[AUDIO: Song of the Humpback Whale, recorded by Roger Payne]

As you may have guessed from the opening whale song, this episode is part of a growing conversation that challenges the idea that only human beings can be bearers of rights.

We'll look at how Indigenous and Afro descendant cosmologies, bioacoustics research and creative legal activism are all contributing to a new field - More-than-Human Rights - and we'll be exploring how listening to the more-than-human world can become a tool for co-creation and accountability between humans and the ecosystems that we're part of.

My first guest today is a pioneering human rights and earth justice advocate César Rodríguez Garavito, Chair of the Center for Human Rights and Global Justice at New York University (NYU) where, among many other things, he directs the More-than-Human Rights or MOTH project. César, thank you so much for joining us.

**César Rodríguez Garavito:** Thank you, Ignacio, great to be here with you.

**Ignacio Saiz:** So César, let's begin with the concept of more-than-human rights. Why that framing? How does it challenge conventional understandings of human rights?

**César Rodríguez Garavito:** The reason why I proposed the term 'more-than-human rights' is to bring to the law and the field of human rights the realization of both Indigenous sciences and many approaches to even Western science that have been offered the last 20-30 years, which have brought home the point that we as human beings are fully embedded in the web of life of the Earth. Meaning that humans and the human world are embedded in the more-than-human world, which is a term that I'm taking from the work of eco-philosopher David Abram, who first used it in the 1990s, precisely to convey the message that we are dependent on and entangled with - which is another term that I love,

which is offered by my colleague and friend, Merlin Sheldrake in his beautiful book, *Entangled Life* (on fungi). He's also a member of the MOTH collective, just like David is, and they both are fantastic communicators and thinkers that are inviting us to acknowledge, fully acknowledge, in fields ranging from mycology to philosophy, and then my modest contribution is to bring that more-than-human turn to the field of law and human rights research and advocacy. So it is an overdue update, so to speak, of the intellectual framework and the practical toolkit that we work with as rights thinkers and doers.

**Ignacio Saiz:** Fantastic. Well, let's delve a little further into the sonic dimensions of more-than-human rights. So, in the human rights community, in the human rights world, we often talk about voice as a concept that is central to human dignity, to agency, to personhood. But it seems that voice and sound are equally, if not more, fundamental to the notion of the rights of nature or the rights of the more-than-human world. For example, the concept of the living forest, '*kawsak sacha*', that I know, has been very central to the work that you're doing with indigenous communities in Ecuador. How do the sounds of the living forest, how does listening to the sounds of the living forest, help us perceive the forest and the beings that live in it as rights holders?

**César Rodríguez Garavito:** One of the invitations of the more-than-human rights language is precisely to listen in. And listening to other beings like whales or fungi or trees or rivers I think is a timely challenge for human rights researchers and activists. Because in the end, what I think we are engaged in, is in a veritable global listening exercise - that includes and features prominently new developments in Western science, like bioacoustics, which is a whole field that uses technology to listen intently to the vocalizations of whales under the oceans, to the sounds of nutrients that are being passed around in a forest, to, of course, songs of birds, but in a much more granular way that is made possible by advances in technology.

And one of the projects that I've been involved in as part of the MOTH collective is a close partnership with Project CETI (C-E-T-I), the Cetacean Translation Initiative, which is the collective of scientists, roboticists and complexity science experts that is farthest along in documenting the complexity of whale language, sperm whale language, and potentially understanding the content, the messages that are being transmitted in those communications among sperm whale. With them we've just published a law review article and a series of op eds in popular media on the rights implications of now knowing that sperm whales have in their languages the equivalent of vowels, diphthongs and tones like in Mandarin, so the building blocks of highly complex languages, right?

So those beings that, from Descartes on, Western philosophy thought were mute, turns out they're saying a lot. Just like many Indigenous nations have said all along, that they communicate with those ocean beings, just like the Sarayaku colleagues that are also in Ecuador, that you mentioned Ignacio, that lead this fantastic initiative called *kawsak sacha* or the living forest. They too, have said for the longest time that the forest is alive, that there are beings in the forest that have sustained them as a human community and that need to be respected. That's where I first heard the idea of rights of nature, in the Sarayaku territory about 15 years ago. And at the time, I didn't know what to do with that idea, as a human rights person, well, what can I do with someone who says to me: 'well, just listen intently', as I was told by the shaman of the community, Don Sabino Gualinga back then: like just listen in to what the forest is saying. I didn't have the tools intellectually or practically to usefully understand and then act on that realization.

One of the many encouraging developments around the MOTH collective and many other collectives that I feel are moving in similar directions, not just in the field of human rights, but in the fields of Western science, of the arts - some of the most active members of our collective are musicians, poets,

designers – is that we are engaged in a planetary listening exercise that is overdue and feels very hopeful to me.

**Ignacio Saiz:** Well, let's put on pause the human voices here, and let's listen to some sounds of the forest, of the living forest, made possible by Sarayaku musician, filmmaker and rights defender, Eriberto Gualinga.

[AUDIO: Eriberto Gualinga, Selva Viva Kawsak Sacha]

Another reason why I find this invitation to listen to the more-than-human world very generative is that we as human beings are mostly visual animals. We tend to process information by privileging what we see as opposed to what we hear. Other non-human animals, like whales, are highly auditory. Their eyesight is very poor but they can communicate and hear and listen to songs that are transmitted across the oceans. And that also means that by listening more intently, we also get closer to other forms of understanding the world. There's a term for that that has been popularized by Ed Yong in the book *An Immense World*, which is 'unveiled', right? So, a perceptual world. And that, I think it gets close to core values of human rights practice which, like empathy, like solidarity. If we are to stand in solidarity with other groups of humans and more-than-human beings, then understanding their context, their perceptual world, how they feel, how they perceive each other and how they perceive us, I think is something that cuts across many of the efforts that, for the longest time, human rights collectives have made, but now extend to also those groups of beings, of living beings, from plants to non-human animals to fungi, that have been excluded from that circle of moral concern and consideration so far.

**Ignacio Saiz:** It reminds me how those first recordings of whale song kind of helped bridge the emotional gap in environmental rights discourse because it elicited empathy. You know, one of the human responses to sound is empathy. It sounds like your work is taking that to a whole other level. I can't resist asking you about how you navigate the ethics of interpreting what the more-than-human world is saying, especially when you're using the technology that you described.

**César Rodríguez Garavito:** Indeed, it's a fantastically complicated question, because of course, every technology, new or old is a double-edged sword and has potential for bringing us closer to the more-than-human world. But we have used past technologies, everything from sonars to drones, to even older technologies like boats and cars, to not to get closer to the more-than-human world, but to become even more dominant and more manipulative of the rest of the web of life. This is why, together with the project on the legal implications of potential legal opportunities for the protection of whale and whales and other animals that we're pursuing with Project CETI, we as MOTH are also writing a report on the risks and challenges of bioacoustics for the protection of animals. And because we want to be helpful, we also propose a set of principles and guardrails that all scientific collectives pursuing this type of research should bear in mind, so that we take advantage of the opportunities while minimizing the risks of this sort of technological advance.

**Ignacio Saiz:** César, let me ask you about the Los Cedros case. You and the MOTH collective recently filed a petition in Ecuador to have the Los Cedros cloud forest recognized as the co-author of a musical composition. Can you explain what the case is aiming to achieve?

**César Rodríguez Garavito:** This is an initiative undertaken by four members of the MOTH collective, dear friends and colleagues, including musician Cosmo Sheldrake, mycologist Giuliana Furci, writer Robert Macfarlane and myself, together with the Los Cedros forest of Ecuador, which was declared as a subject of rights by the Constitutional Court of Ecuador in a 2021 ruling. We visited the forest at

the invitation of Rob for his book, which recently came out and became kind of an instant bestseller. The title is, 'Is A River Alive?'. By the way, if there's one thing that listeners take away from everything that I've said is, please read that book. It's such an achingly beautiful book, but also is, I think, a fundamental contribution to everything that we're discussing here. What this group did around one week into a long hike up the Los Cedros reserve was to riff off of a few words that Rob jotted on his little notebook. And then, because he's a very skillful poet and lyricist, he quickly put together a series of verses that then Cosmo put music, music to literally that night in the forest. Giuliana and I pitched in with some words, some ideas, and eventually Giuliana recorded some verses in Spanish that she beautifully added to the song. And my contribution in that conversation, I wasn't, as you can imagine, I was not very helpful when it came to the lyrics and to the music, but I was helpful in suggesting that we extract the legal consequences of what was happening.

I suggested that because it was clear that the forest was co-creating the song with us, that we would have never come together as a group, we would have never become fast friends without the catalytic effect of the forest in the ways that forest and quote, unquote, 'nature' does with human beings, like that we translate this into a legal petition. Long story short, the legal petition was filed before a copyright authority in Ecuador. And if the copyright agency ends up turning down our request to register the song as having been created by the four of us and the Los Cedros forest, then we'll challenge that petition before the courts. And we aim to take this all the way up to the Constitutional Court to ask the court to extract what I see, putting on my lawyers hat, as the logical and legal consequences of their own ruling. Because one of the things that we're keen to do out of the MOTH Collective is to make sure, or to do our best to contribute to the effort to have rights of nature have real impact on the ground. As we all know, sometimes pieces of legislation or fantastic rulings are not translated into changes on the ground. So what we want to do for the rights of nature movement, together with many people and organizations that have been at this for much longer than we have, is to contribute to the implementation of those rulings and those pieces of legislation.

**Ignacio Saiz:** So let's listen to the Song of the Cedars, a joint composition by the Los Cedros Cloud Forest, Cosmo Sheldrake, Guiliana Furci and Robert Macfarlane.

[MUSIC: Los Cedros cloud forest et al, Song of the Cedars]

We probably have quite a few musicians listening to this podcast. A question that arises is what ethical implications do musical creators, do human creators have towards their non-human collaborators in a case like this?

**César Rodríguez Garavito:** We also deeply care about that question. In fact, Cosmo Sheldrake, my friend and colleague who composed the music for the Song of the Cedars, he is a pioneering voice in a movement that's taking...is gaining momentum in the musical world to recognize, to reciprocate the contributions of nature to musical compositions. So, in addition to our initiative in Los Cedros and the MOTH imprint with Cosmo, there are other initiatives like Sounds Right, that aim to incentivize musicians to pay back to nature for some percentage of their creations and their income to conserve and protect ecosystems. What these initiatives are trying to do, from my point of view, is to translate into law, into practice, into policy, into politics, the value of reciprocity, the relation of reciprocity, which is so central to how ecosystems operate. No, there is no species in any ecosystem that is fully autonomous from the rest of the web of life. So there are reciprocal relations. There are symbiotic relations happening all the time, and incorporating that logic and the idea of reciprocity also has a beautiful even etymology, because it initially meant 'a back and forth' And what we're trying to do, and what many musicians are doing in their own work, is to find ways to come up with creative ways of

taking sounds of nature, but also giving back to nature as they continue to create with the more-than-human world.

**Ignacio Saiz:** Just as a parting reflection, then César: how can listening and sound be a vehicle for that reciprocity that you described? Can listening and sound be a method of human rights practice?

**César Rodríguez Garavito:** Listening is such a generative activity, and also requires a certain emotional and intellectual disposition, because it requires openness, it requires attention, which is something that is in scarce supplies, of course, supply these days, as we're all pulled in so many different directions by so many stimuli, from the media to social media and so on. So for me, listening is not just a practice but is also an emotional and even an ethical perspective and attitude.

I teach at a law school. I train future practitioners of earth rights and human rights, and they're usually very competent, and they get a lot of training in public speaking. Teaching them and training them in public listening is something that is not necessarily part of the usual toolkit of law schools, of human rights NGOs. I think that we should continue to make an effort to put public listening on par with public speaking as essential skills that future practitioners of human rights should be cultivating.

**Ignacio Saiz:** Fantastic. César Rodríguez, law professor, human rights and earth justice advocate and co-composer of the Los Cedros, the Song of the Cedars. Thank you so much for inspiring us to listen to the more-than-human world and to think about rights in a whole new way. Thank you, César.

**César Rodríguez Garavito:** Thank you, Ignacio.

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[MUSIC: Azor, Gran Bwa ]

**Ignacio Saiz:** Welcome back to Sounds of Justice, the podcast on music and human rights, produced by the Global Campus of Human Rights and hosted by me, Ignacio Saiz.

In this episode, we've been exploring how music and sound inform our relationship to the more-than-human world. We now turn our attention to Haiti, where environmental justice is also being powerfully reimagined through sacred ecology, and where music and ritual rooted in Haitian belief systems have been a key form of ecological expression, resistance and regeneration.

Haiti played a leading role in the construction of the international human rights framework and in the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Yet the realities of contemporary Haiti have understandably prompted skepticism among many Haitians about the effectiveness of that framework, which has proven relatively powerless in the face of decades of extractivism and foreign interventionism that have contributed to environmental plunder, the collapse of the state and the depletion of its resources. Yet, as we will hear, Haitian traditional knowledge and cultural practices, including music, are once again showing a way to how we might rethink human rights in relation to the ecology and our responsibilities towards the more-than-human world.

Our guide for this part of the journey is Rebecca Dirksen, Professor of Ethnomusicology at Indiana University, whose work centers on music, environmental justice and sacred ecologies in Haiti. In her writings on Gran Bwa, the spirit of the forest, she examines how music and ritual are being mobilized

as part of community-led and spiritually grounded responses to Haiti's environmental and human rights crises. Welcome, Rebecca.

**Rebecca Dirksen:** Thank you. It's an honor to join you.

**Ignacio Saiz:** So, Rebecca, we began this segment with a song of Gran Bwa invoking the spirit of the forest. Can you explain to us the significance of Gran Bwa in Haitian culture?

**Rebecca Dirksen:** Gran Bwa is a multivalent and among the most powerful symbols in Haitian metaphysics, history and cultural heritage. Gran Bwa signifies both the mystical great forest and a corresponding Lwa, or spiritual entity. Gran Bwa, the forest, is symbolically linked to Bwa Kayiman, the site where the Haitian Revolution of 1791 to 1804 is said to have been launched in the north of the country. Gran Bwa, the Lwa, is a forest dwelling entity who owns the leaves and knows their medicinal secrets. In other words, Gran Bwa both recognizes the precise location where those who have been enslaved declared their humanity and is a source of healing power and a protector of the earth.

There are a number of notable recorded tracks in Haitian music repertoire that invoke Gran Bwa, including the one that you've played at the top of this interview. But as a general introduction, I would draw us toward a traditional verse that was sung to me by the late journalist and vodou adept Anthony Pascal as we walked to the Parc de Martissant in Carrefour, Haiti, in January 2018 on Fête des Lwa, or Epiphany, in fact. Pascal, best known as Konpè Filo, sang for me, [*recites lyrics in Creole*]. That is: 'I'm going to the great forest, I'm going to look for leaves. When I return, they'll tell me that I've brought poison or magic.' Those outside the vodou tradition may well characterize the use of leaves as wanga or magic in fearful or distrustful terms, as indicated in this song's lyrics. But Konpè Filo, whose life's work revolved around destigmatizing vodou and Haitian culture more generally, pressed me to focus more on the engagement of this song's narrator with the natural pharmaceuticals of the forest to manage health. And during especially fraught periods such as the revolutionary fight for independence and abolition, and now, when this fight is urgently being taken up again, this frame could be broadened to consider Gran Bwa as a fount of wisdom, energy and force, to address the tangle of seemingly impossible circumstances that are making life very difficult to sustain in Haiti.

**Ignacio Saiz:** In your work, you've described music as central to what you call sacred ecological metaphysics in Haiti, in other words, a way of understanding the land as alive, as spiritual and deserving of care. So can you tell us a bit more how music, especially music within Vodou ritual, helps cultivate that sense of sacred ecology?

**Rebecca Dirksen:** Yes and I'd, in fact, extend that from the land to the land, the sea and the sky. I'd first point out that Haiti is a nation of great faith following many global religious traditions, from Catholicism and Protestantism to Judaism to Islam to Vodou. These faith traditions coexist, sometimes in complement and sometimes in friction. To some extent, each of these traditions bears important teachings about the environment. Vodou goes far beyond religion to encompass systems for education, medicine, agronomy, economics, arts and aesthetics, community governance and justice.

It is an Afro-Haitian worldview premised on ideals of equilibrium between the visible and invisible, and between the human and the natural or more-than-human worlds. And far beyond the other sacred belief systems, Vodou is grounded in profound teachings toward environmental consciousness. Above all, Vodou is a sacred ecology that instills in practitioners an ethics of care, which extends beyond the individual and community to all living entities.

Many songs within the vocal repertoire of Vodou convey various fears, warnings and lessons about the Earth and humanity's relationship with it. They provide a sort of sonic library of traditional ecological knowledge. There are songs about seeds, leaves, trees, crops, drought, rain, rivers, the sea and the sun, for example. And many plead for guidance and intercessions from the Lwa and from Bon Dieu or God when things are out of balance or not right. There's this beloved song about healing leaves and roots, which carry the added weight of memory. [*Recites in Creole*]. 'Three leaves, three roots, oh. To throw down is to forget. To gather up is to remember.' Beneath the literal sense of these lyrics, the deeper meaning points out the choice to embrace or refuse one's heritage, ancestors and way of life. In short, these song repertoires are carried from one generation to the next, and cultivate environmental awareness. Vodou encourages tapping into spiritual consciousness known as *connaisance*, to seek root causes and appropriate responses to spiritual imbalances, which may manifest as political, social, financial, medical or environmental troubles.

**Ignacio Saiz:** Rebecca, you spoke earlier about Konpè Filo, who I understand is a towering figure in terms of advancing the sacred ecology approaches that you were just describing. He is well known for the tree planting campaigns that you've also written about, aimed at reconnecting ecological restoration to spiritual practice. Why were these campaigns so significant and more broadly, what do you think Konpè Filo's life and legacy can teach us about the intersections of music, spirituality and ecological justice?

**Rebecca Dirksen:** Well, I think Konpè Filo's life contributions and legacy are critical on so many levels. Here I've written about his decades long tree planting campaign, but he was so much more than this. He was a committed pro-democracy activist who used the airwaves to combat the Duvalier dictatorship during the 1970s and 80s, and he was exiled for years for his efforts. As a journalist, he was dedicated to bringing the news to the population in the language they spoke, that is Haitian Creole, rather than the official language French, which, in fact, only about 5% or so of the population actually speak. This became an essential contribution and way of reevaluating the Haitian population as intelligent and being worthy of understanding the things happening around them.

He also was dedicated toward an elevation of Haitian Vodou and Haitian culture more generally, with a particular emphasis on the Haitian countryside and life beyond the capital city. And he would then incorporate a lot of these explorations onto his long-running daily television program called *Kalfou* or *Crossroads* on Radio Télé Ginen. And this then became a force for elevating Haitian cultures that he incorporated around his efforts toward environmental concern as well. So for a good three decades or more, he had put together a project where he would plant seedlings at his house, and he would raise them until they stood about six feet or so, would look around the country to give them to the right people, people who would adopt these trees and then plant them. He literally referred to himself as a 'parrain' for these trees, and he would go around the country to check in on their growth. And so this then became this informal but quite active project over decades where he was literally responsible for reforestation of quite a large portion of the country.

He had a particular love of the mapou tree, which is a gigantic species. It stands about 250 feet at its highest, has these massive buttressing roots that collect water and then supply the plants around them with the nourishment that they require during the dry seasons. Another reason that Konpè Filo was drawn to the mapou is that they had this tremendous significance for the Haitian Revolution. As enslaved people would flee from plantations, as plantation owners were in hot pursuit, they would flee up the mountains and find these nooks and crannies in these massive buttressing roots and effectively disappear from sight. The mapou then took on this sacred significance. And so I think he had a very particular affection for this particular tree, the mapou for all of those principles.

And those are some of the things that he loved to share with me as we were discussing our love of trees together, that was an affinity that we came to understand. And so in talking through that over a number of conversations over the years, that emerged into the idea of creating a music video together around this theme of trees and the importance of countering the centuries of deforestation that have ravaged Haiti as a nation. That then resulted in collaborating with a good friend, BIC, also known as Roosevelt Saillant, who is very well known for his socially engaged lyrics and also Kendy Verilus, who is a fantastic documentary filmmaker.

And together, we ended up coming up with this track called 'M pral plante yon pyebwa', or I will plant a tree. The gist of the refrain of this song is, 'I will plant a tree, and if I cut down one, I'll plant three.' But the stanza that is most symbolic is the stanza that says 'Pou peyi a pa kouche, fòk nou kanpe tankou yon pye mapou' - 'For the country not to lie flat on its back in resignation, we must stand tall like a mapou tree'.

[BIC feat. Konpè Filo, M Pral Plante Yon Pyebwa]

**Ignacio Saiz:** Rebecca, you've also documented other community-based efforts across Haiti that also weave together musical performance and environmental action in the way that you've just so powerfully described in your collaboration with Konpè Filo. Can you share a few examples of how movements and artists are using music and ritual to resist ecological destruction?

**Rebecca Dirksen:** I want to pick up on one thing that I said previously about the way that Konpè Filo organized his activism, and that is you can't see any of these sectors as being somehow separate. When we're talking about rights, human rights, environmental rights, the rights of various species, you can't separate out colonial forces from environmental degradation.

There is a centuries old genre-crossing expressive form known as *mizik angaje*, and relatedly, *mizik sosyal*, socially and politically engaged music. *Mizik angaje* tends to be tied up in revolutionary values. Using direct or coded and layered messages, angaje lyrics offer staunch critiques and call out injustices, political wrongs, politicians, institutions and powerful figures doing wrong. In pressing for fundamental rights to life, all of these expressions are in various ways related to resisting ecological destruction and devastation to life.

More explicitly, though, there are robust repertoires that address environmental concerns. Trash, for example. In fact, one of the first Haitian songs I fell in love with some two decades ago was Boukman Eksperyans', Imamou Lele. Lead singer Mimerose Beaubrun invokes Imamou, the sea Lwa Ague's priest, and laments, 'Gadé yon péyi k'ap gaspiye'. She sings, 'Look at a country that's being spoiled. Look at a hot sun that's being wasted. Look at the intelligence that's being squandered. That's energy that's being wasted. Look at the youth who are being lost. Look at Haiti that's being trashed here.'

[MUSIC: Boukman Eksperyans, Imamou Lele]

**Ignacio Saiz:** Thank you, Rebecca, for illuminating the complex and varied links between the issues that we've been discussing: music, spirituality, the ecology, rights. It's been a pleasure talking with you.

**Rebecca Dirksen:** Absolutely, it's been a pleasure.



**Ignacio Saiz:** We opened this episode of Sounds of Justice with The Song of the Humpback Whale, recorded by Roger Payne. We then heard Kawsak Sacha, Selva Viva or Living Forest by the Sarayaku musician and filmmaker, Eriberto Gualinga; and Song of the Cedars, co-created by the Los Cedros Cloud Forest and Cosmo Sheldrake for the More-than-Human Life program.

In the second part on music and environmental justice in Haiti, we heard Gran Bwa by Azor; BIC & Kompè Filo singing M pral plante yon pyebwa; and Imamou Lele by Boukman Eksperyans. Our signature tune is from the song Yehlisan'umoya Ma-Afrika by the South African singer, Busi Mhlongo.

You can find other episodes of Sounds of Justice wherever you get your podcasts and on the website of the Global Campus of Human Rights. I'm Ignacio Saiz. Thank you for listening!

#### **RELEVANT LINKS:**

[More Than Human Life \(MOTH\) Program](#)

[Selva Viva, Kawsak Sacha](#) (Eriberto Gualinga and the Kichwa People of Sarayaku)

[Project CETI](#)

[Rebecca Dirksen](#)

[M Pral Plante Yon Pyebwa](#) video (BIC, feat. Kompè Filo)