FERAL SONGBOOK

Collective Improvisation as an Ecological Survival Technique

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ABSTRACT

This article argues for a deeper understanding of how collective and participatory improvisation rehearses modes of political and ecological resistance to the manifold forms of violence and dispossession felt today. Taking cues from previous research conducted on populations of feral parakeets in Europe, the project Feral Songbook compiles a series of scores for collective and participatory improvisations that take these parakeets' "territories of chant" as modes for polyphonic cooperation. For philosopher Vinciane Despret, "[bird] territories draw networks of sonic territorialities." Such territorialities propose alternative, affective cartographies that counter Modernity's bird's eye-view with the relationality of being within bird's earshot. Indebted to collective and participatory improvisations such as those proposed by composer Cornelius Cardew and the freeform collective Scratch Orchestra (1969–1974), this article describes how such practices may help restore our relationship with the nature culture continuum via rites of attention and mutual responsibility.

Keywords: Affect; Relationality; Listening; Participatory practice; Collective improvisation.

1. PREAMBLE: ON FERALITY

For the past four years I have devoted special attention to observing, listening, recording, playing back, and processing the sounds of two species of birds: Ring-necked parakeets Psittacula Krameri, and Monk parakeets Myopsitta monachus. Endemic to South Asia and South America, respectively, specimens from these two species were first brought to Europe to be commercialised as pets. Although commercialisation lasted roughly two hundred years, from the mid-nineteenth century until the beginning of the twenty-first century, their popularity as pets rose immensely in the 1980s and 90s, and whether willingly or unwillingly, they found ways out of captivity either by escaping or being purposefully released by their previous owners. Once breeding pairs were able to establish themselves in the (urban) wild, numbers grew, albeit slowly at first – a latency period that usually accompanies acclimatisation (Berthier *et al.,* 2017, p. 410). But in tandem with the rise of yearly average temperatures, courtesy of current global warming and climate change, exponential population increase has been observed over the past ten years, with around 10,000 parakeets in cities such as London (BTO, 2023) and Madrid (Torres, 2024), around 9,000 in Brussels as of 2016 (Aves Natagora, 2024), 8,000 in Paris (LPO, 2022), 6,000 in Barcelona (Borray-Escalante *et al.,* 2024), and 5,000 in Amsterdam (Sovon, 2022), to cite just a few cases. Acclimatised and naturalised, these birds are still considered exotic given their endemic regions, and have, in some cases, been classified as Invasive Alien Species (IAS). Both Monk parakeets and Ring-necked parakeets are considered IAS in Spain, but in France only Ring-necked parakeets are so listed. This has lead to interdictions at European level regarding their commercialisation, in an attempt to curb their further dissemination. The IUCN International Union for Conservation of Nature (2025) working definition of Invasive Alien Species states:

> An alien species is an animal, plant, or other organism that is introduced by humans, either intentionally or unintentionally, into places outside its natural range. Globalisation has increased the movement of people and goods around the world, leading to a rise in the number of species introduced to areas outside their natural ranges.

The IUCN (2025) also directly addresses the impact of climate change when it cites a study that "found that over one-third of all introductions in the past 200 years occurred after 1970, and the rate of new introductions is showing

no sign of slowing down." For the IUCN, this is a clear indication that "IAS are compounded by climate change, which facilitates the establishment and spread of many alien species and creates new opportunities for them to become invasive" (IUCN, 2025). But there is a third criteria that has been a recent point of contention between specialists regarding whether or not these species of parakeets actually meet it: they must have had economic impacts (on crops or livestock in particular), ecological impacts (direct predation or competition with local species for resources or habitat), or health impacts (IUCN, 2000). A study in France by Deguines *et al.* (2020) argues there is not enough data to support either that Ring-necked parakeets have had a clear and continued economic impact on crops outside their natural ranges, or even enter in direct predation or competition with local species. Their study was based on garden bird feeders, "using the nation-wide citizen science scheme BirdLab, in which volunteers record in real-time bird attendance on a pair of bird feeders during five minute sessions" (Deguines *et al.,* 2020). Since most European populations of exotic parakeets are found in cities, impacts on crops have not been regularly observed. And if the results from Deguines *et al.* study (2020), do not corroborate the hypothesis these exotic birds would compete and drive away other local bird species, there must be some other reason for their classification. According to philosopher Joëlle Zask (2020, p. 48), this may be related to the fact that:

> For most people, the installation of [so-called] wild animals in the city evokes less an incomprehensible disturbance of the functioning of nature (...), than a complete perversion of the ideal of the wild. […] These impressions are based on a dichotomous conception of the domestic and the wild.

This would manifest, in Zask's words, in "the inadequacy of our dominant conception of the city as a place of excellence for purely human life (…), to the exclusion of all other forms of life" (2020, p. 78). Cities have never been completely devoid of animal solidarities other than those mediated by human societies. There are those of species such as mice, rats, sparrows, and pigeons, whose own territories are completely indissociable of human settlements and modern urban development, even if they escape a strict notion of domesticity. But other nonhuman city dwellers, such as parakeets, would constitute a whole other, much more problematic category. Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka (2011) use the expression "liminal animals" to designate those that, neither

domestic nor wild, have adapted to spaces inhabited and transformed by humans: permanent residents that nevertheless desire to live at a distance from us. Parakeets would, then, occupy a specific and paradoxical position as a resident, liminal species, predicated on a special form of ferality: no longer domesticated, but not rewilded either. Here, appropriating Zask's terminology, "'ferality' is situated somewhere between a post-domestication and a reverse domestication" (2020, p. 92). It entails "an unpredictable evolution that has nothing to do with the return to a hypothetical original state, contrary to the reversal suggested in the notion of rewilding" (Zask, 2020, p. 92). Feral, then, is any plant or animal formerly domesticated which has become untamed again, after escaping captivity and domestication. Neither domesticated nor wild, feral are those that have adapted and proliferated in infrastructures of human disturbance and which, while inhabiting those same environments of contemporary human societies, wish to live apart from us.

2. INTRODUCTION: OF SONIC TERRITORIALITIES

Feral parakeets exist in a liminal space between co-dependency and autonomy. They benefit from an independent food chain, albeit courtesy of the botanical cosmopolitanism that characterises European cities' landscape management: cities tend to feature several different tree species that share these parakeets' natural ranges. Ferality has thus come to symbolise an ambivalent response to various forms of dispossession and domestication: anthropocentric, colonial, but also ecological, since parakeets have come to occupy ecological niches left empty by the great loss in numbers of other species, like sparrows and other passerine birds. Coupling climate change, ease of access to different sources of food throughout the whole year (even in winter), and a lack of predators (although there have been documented cases of predation by birds of prey, such as falcons, or owls, in Mori *et al.*, 2020), the growing populations of feral parakeets in European cities today marks a clear resurgence in the face of environmental disturbance. Today, feral parakeet colonies make it loud and clear what spaces they occupy and how they occupy them.

Fig. 12 - Ring-necked parakeet Psittacula krameri feeding on the berries of a Chinaberry Tree Melia azedarach, Paris, February 2024. Endemic to South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Australasia, this tree's common name in English derives from the fact its natural range includes, obviously, Southern China. This biogeographical region is coincident at points with that of Ring-necked parakeets' endemic range in South Asia.
© *Nuno da Luz*.

Monk parakeets are extremely gregarious birds: although they live in couples, they establish multi-couple nests that can hold around 30 to 40 birds in total. Nests that are actual common or community dormitories, multi-family arrangements, that hold whole flocks. They are extremely vocal birds, with an extensive vocabulary, and tend to vocalise near the nest. Their vocal communication is very important for the group's cohesion. Individuals try to be in constant and close proximity to one another. Their contact and greeting calls, for example, are known for not holding one single unequivocal meaning, but are mainly used in order to maintain active communication channels between the members of each colony.

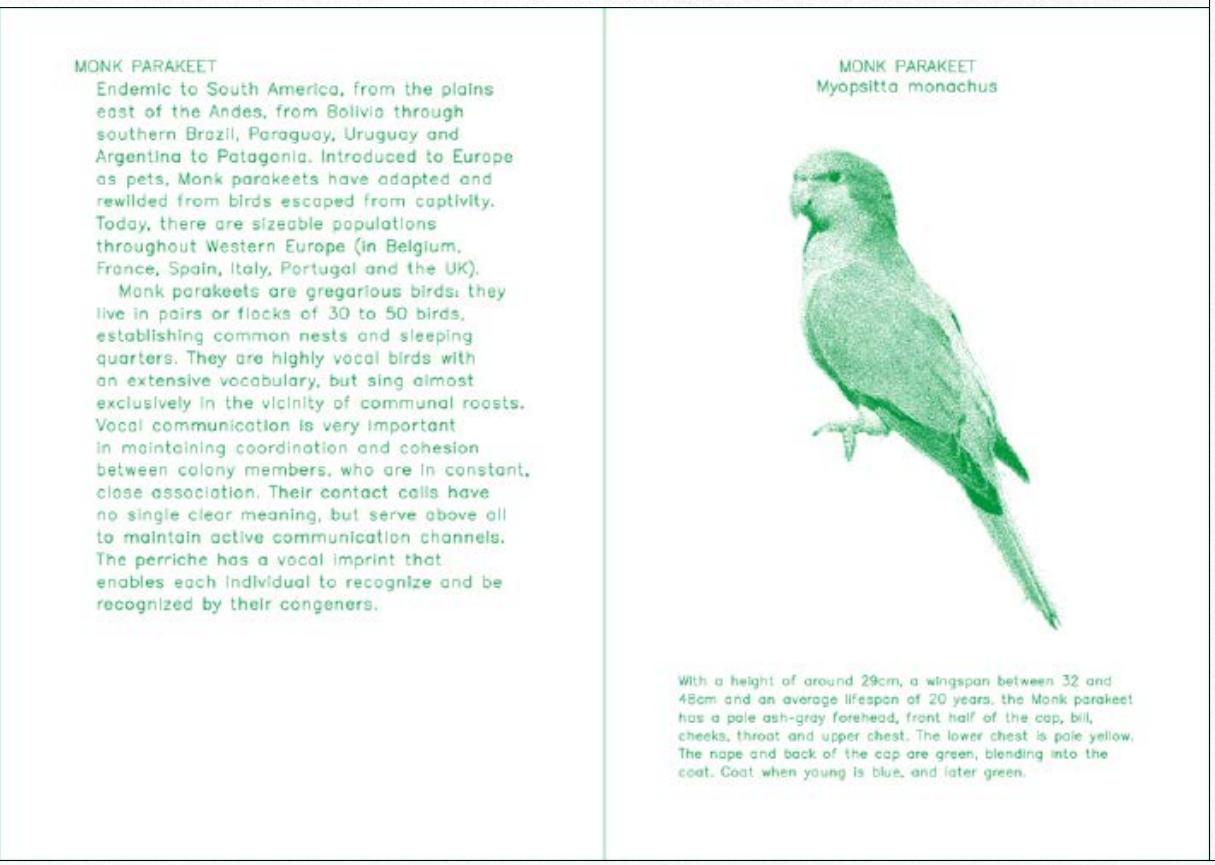

Fig. 2 - Pages from the fold-out libretto "Feral Songbook #2: Monk Parakeet Myopsitta Monachus (for any number of untrained voices)," produced for Prix COAL Art et écologie Se transformer, Paris, 20 November 2024. © *Nuno da Luz.*

Ring-necked parakeets, on the other hand, make their nests in pre-existing cavities in trees or artificially built structures (such as buildings, for example). And although their "fundamental year-round social unit is the mated pair" (Baker, 2000, p. 906), they can be generally found in groups while feeding:

> Commonly consort[ing] with small numbers of conspecifics in loose and fluid groupings during the day. In the non-breeding season, Ring-neck parakeets usually assembled in traditional roosting areas in the late afternoon. (Baker, 2000, p. 906)

Their feeding grounds are usually far away from the nests, and they are easily spotted during their flights between nests and feeding grounds as they emit a series of cries while flying:

> The most common call recorded was termed the flight call because it was produced mainly when one bird of a pair took flight and emitted this call while the other bird followed, itself often calling as well. (…) My observations suggested that this call is a within-pair signal employed in coordinating movements and indicating location if separated. (Baker, 2000, p. 906)

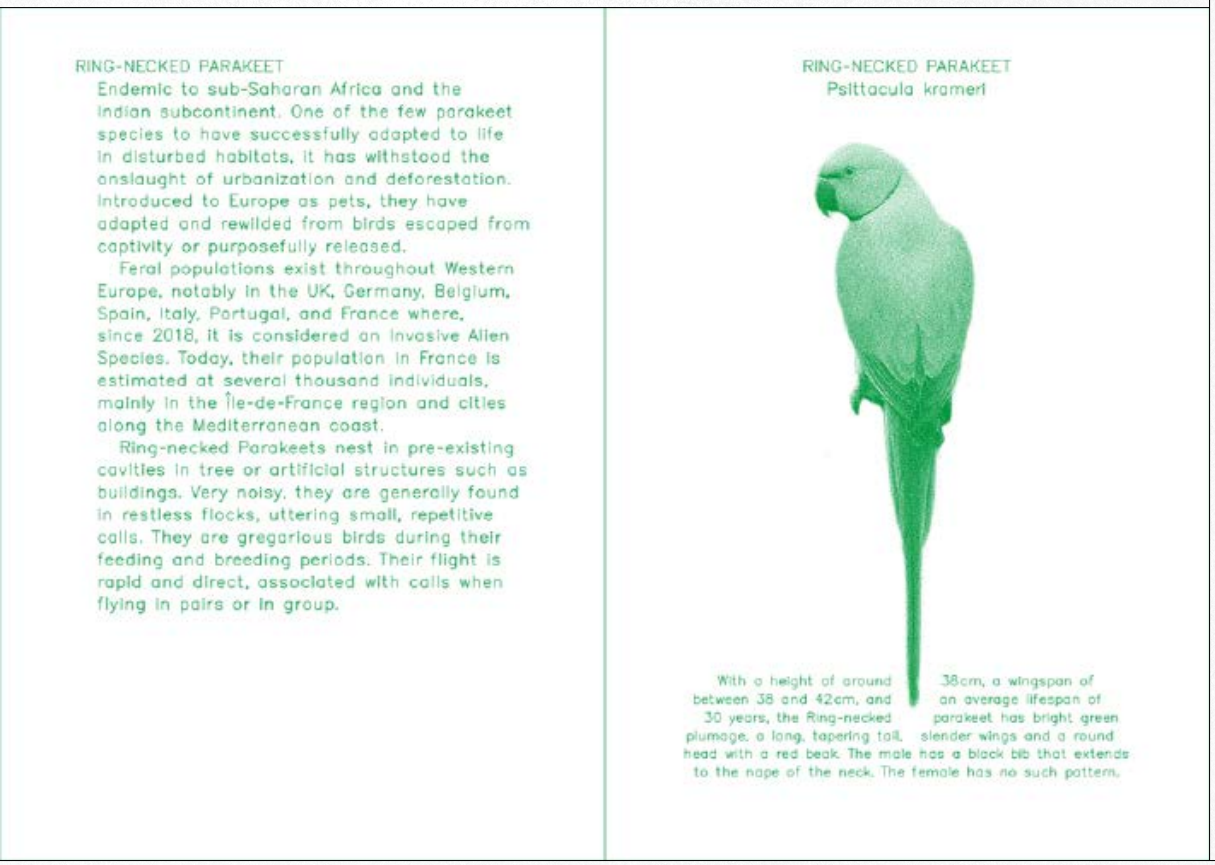

Fig. 3 - Pages from the fold-out libretto "Feral Songbook #1: Ring-necked Parakeet Psittacula Krameri (for any number of untrained voices)," produced for Prix COAL Art et écologie Se transformer, Paris, 20 November 2024. © *Nuno da Luz.*

Whether speaking of the contact calls of Monk parakeets or the flight calls of Ring-necked parakeets, vocalisations are intrinsic and essential to the functioning of these societies. Whereas birdsong has been ascribed historically to males as a form of asserting domination over a territory, parakeets of both sexes vocalise often, together, and roughly at the same time. Male dominance through birdsong has been historically characterised as intended to keep possible intruders/trespassers/competitors at bay, but philosopher Vinciane Despret recalls the studies and hypothesis of ornithologist James Fisher that actually posit the opposite: that "songbirds often establish territories in clusters and have relationships with their neighbors that are not strictly competitive." (Fisher, 1954). Or more importantly even, "territories are social activities that foster cooperation" (Despret, 2019, p. 142). Fisher's hypothesis goes against the grain of his contemporaries, like the ethologist Konrad Lorenz who, according to Despret, hypothesised that "the territory is determined by aggression, it is aggression that causes territorial behaviors" (2019, p. 140). Fisher postulates instead that "birds are fundamentally social animals," leading Despret (2019, p. 143) to further understand bird territories as the loci where certain stimulations are intensified. Reading through the findings of ornithologist Frank Fraser Darling, Despret reclaims the following proposition:

> The territory is a place composed, on one hand, of one or two focal points – the nest and the singing post – and on another hand, a periphery. The term periphery underlines a crucial dimension of any territory: they are always adjacent. (…) They are always concomitant with other territories,

there are always neighbors. (2019, p. 160)

What the author calls “territories of chant” (Despret, 2019, p. 158) are not predicated on dominance being asserted from an epicentre that radiates outwards concentrically, but on the elastic triangulation between the two foci – from where emissions radiate – and the vibrational boundary layer constituted by the vicinity, the adjacency with other singers’ territories: the interface where things actually take place. Birds’ “territories of chant” thus present a triple dimension that is expressive (territories are constituted by and through chanting, what Despret calls “territories as compositions and melodic arrangements” (2019, p. 168)), geopolitical (territories are predicated on the existence and recognition of their neighbours), and social (what Fraser Darling calls “reciprocal responsiveness” (1952, p. 183)).

My hypothesis here is that we may take cues from such nonhuman forms of polyphonic territorialisation as modes for cooperation. I seek to propose alternative, affective cartographies that counter modernity’s obsession with the so-called bird’s-eye-view – the ubiquitous view-from-above that ties cartography and colonialism since the advent of European expansionism – replacing this naturalised two-dimensional perspective with a spherical notion of being within a bird’s-earshot. This entails replacing the aerial perspective of a bird flying alone, high in the sky, looking down, with the intensification and elastic triangulation that makes up the adjacent boundary layers of their sonic territorialities – hopping up and down between the ground and the canopy of trees, perching on branches, flying from nest to feeding grounds and back again. Movements that are not only sonic but affective. Vocalisations are sent out in coordination with their relative motions: choreographies where sound, movement, and responses together describe forms of belonging. Forms of affiliation that blur space and sound, individual and collective, through the capabilities of affecting and being affected by other bodies in proximity.

Departing from the territorialisation/socialisation processes observed in feral parakeets, a series of formal or structural traits can be distinguished and inferred from their vocalisations and calls: rhythms, cadences, variations, modulations, and especially call-and-response patterns – what Baker calls “signal employed in coordinating movements and indicating location” (2000, p. 906) in relation to one another. In other words, vocalisation follows listening and vice-versa in a feedback loop that recalls the words of musician Don Cherry when speaking about free improvisation in conversation with Amiri Baraka: “‘Listen’ is a word I think about as much as ‘music’” (Baraka, 1967, p. 169).

Monk parakeets' contact calls are, for example:

> The most common vocalization given by the Monk parakeet. Adults of both sexes use the contact call in a wide variety of situations; for example, members of a group call to each other when flying long distances; while foraging; while feeding their young; and (often combined with the greeting call) when birds approach each other at a nest. (Martella & Bucher, 1990, p. 103)

They are further characterised by researchers as "tonal calls with at least three peaks in their frequency modulation" (Smeele & Tyndal *et al.,* 2024, p. 3) that can be further broken down into the following six main variants:

> Typical (call with at least four frequency modulated components), four triangle (stereotyped call with four triangular shaped frequency modulated components), ladder start (call with low frequency harmonic in the first component), ladder middle (call with low frequency harmonic in the middle of the call), ladder multiple (call with multiple low frequency harmonic components), and mix alarm (call with frequency modulated components mixed with amplitude modulated components). (Smeele & Tyndal *et al.,* 2024, p. 3)

These recurrent motifs resemble those of themes as the bases for improvisation in music: predetermined patterns that allow for a wide range of individual expression, and can vary according to context without losing their value. Smeele and Tyndal *et al.'s* study on the geographic differences in Monk parakeets' vocalisations, in their European invasive range, "demonstrates the existence of distinct dialects in European populations of monk parakeets, lending support to the cultural drift hypothesis" (2024, p. 1). The study "proposes that vocal variation is the result of passive cultural processes, with either copying errors or innovations combined with neutral or directional cultural evolution that allows for groups to diverge (Smeele & Tyndal *et al.,* 2024, p. 2). Dialects as idiomatic forms of expression that are elastic, prone to change and transformation through continued use.

In practice, Feral Songbook takes on and compiles some of these principles to devise a series of guidelines, prescriptions, instructions and invitations that do away with traditional forms of musical notation. Instead, such "feral" songs feature patterns and structures observed in the vocalisations of

feral parakeets as inspiration for scores to be performed by groups of humans, within bird's-earshot of each other. It is conceived as a practical manual to be used in group workshops where participants – that do not necessarily know each other beforehand nor need any previous musical training – are invited to engage in collective and participatory improvisations that follow the directions therein. Each song imagines different "sonic territorialities as networks" (Despret, 2019, p. 169). In order to partake in such reterritorialisations of the self and the collective, the songs/scores in Feral Songbook take cues from the parakeets' flight paths, feeding habits, and especially their patterns of noise-making – without the need to resort to imitation or mimicry. It is not about sounding like feral parakeets, but to "feral" our human soundings, "feral" ourselves in relation to one other, to other creatures, and to our surroundings – no longer domesticated nor rewilded either. To restore relationships of mutual awareness and respect within multispecies compositions through improvised vocalisation. Or in other words, to use such prescriptions, instructions and invitations as a stepping stone to tether bodies in arrangements of affect that evade predictable outcomes, even when rooted in specific protocols. For one, as a form of resistance against ecological dispossession and human exceptionalism. And hence, as a slim offer towards what may constitute a technique for survival of both humans and parakeets in a world that has been rendered increasingly unliveable.[29]

[29] "Ecological Survival Technique" is a term I borrow from poet and environmentalist Gary Snyder, first used in his article "Poetry and the Primitive: Notes on Poetry as an Ecological Survival Technique" (1969), and appears in his collection of poems and essays titled Earth House Hold – itself a play on words on the etymological root of ecology (from the greek oikos, meaning household). In no part of the article does Snyder define what an "ecological survival technique" is. Instead, Snyder threads together the importance of poetry as oral tradition and its intrinsic, core value as an ecological technology. Meaning, Snyder finds a continuum in lyrical tradition, that, in his view, stems from the lived-in experience of the world in. Poetry as such would always have constituted, historically, an ecopoetics, and hence a low-impact technology of apprehending and understanding, being affected by and affecting the world in which we occur.

3. IN PRAISE OF THE UNPREDICTABLE

Wild is what is not foreseen.
- Zask, 2020, p. 97.

By assembling a group of hitherto strangers as a temporary "flock," the scores in Feral Songbook invite participants to create community through collective effort. One that is nevertheless rooted in each individual lending their voice and presence to a composite whole, since humans also have individual voice prints that, like parakeets, allow individuals to recognise each other and be recognisable among the general cacophony:

> Humans have complex and flexible vocal repertoires, but we can still recognize each other by voice alone. This is because humans have a voice print: our vocal tract leaves a unique signature in the tone of our

> voice across everything that we say. […] To date, almost no evidence exists for animals having unique signatures that underly all calls made by an individual. In other words, almost no animals are known to have a voice print. (Avolio & Smeele, 2023)

According to researcher Simeon Smeele from the Max Planck Institute of Animal Behavior:

> [An] underlying voice print, (…) is an elegant solution for a bird that dynamically changes its calls but still needs to be known in a very noisy flock. […] There could be tens of birds vocalizing at the same time, (…). They need a way of keeping track of which individual is making what sound. (Avolio & Smeele, 2023)

Dispensing with preconceived formal notions of how a choir or chorus may be constituted and takes shape – through the use of harmony, scales, keys, or tuning – this set of scores or invitations are belied in a "reciprocal responsiveness," where each individual's responsibility towards the group is rooted not in unison but in dissonance; rooted in each participant's unwavering commitment to expressing themselves while part of a collective; listening and making noise with others. More than polyphony, polyvocality: composition as cooperation as sonic territoriality. Or in the words of Fraser Darling:

> There seems to be in animal life a reciprocal responsiveness which in itself leads to a development of variability of behavior – and there can be no evolution without variability. It would be unscientific to say that this generic need for the awareness of other selves is designed to lead towards cooperative behavior, but cooperation undoubtedly develops. That inherent, unconscious, reciprocal responsiveness is, in fact, cooperation in its simplest sense. (Darling, 1952, p. 183)

Feral Songbook is proposed as an experimental methodology that takes the productive, collective embracing of improvisation as an alternative starting point for cooperation and composition. One that is grounded in the variability precluded in a "reciprocal responsiveness," as defended by Fraser Darling, under the assumption that:

> [It] is not that there is one correct way of doing things, one score, one

> right set of notes to play, one order, but rather that we can collaboratively create through the interaction of constraints and possibilities rather than either order or disorder. (Montuori, 2003, p. 246)

Improvisation is literally that which is unforeseen, "at its core a practice of play with structures: with contextual, socio-technical information" (Sauer & Bonelli, 2020). This information provides a context for collective improvisation: "a form of musical dialogue, requiring constant attention, negotiation, listening" where "both the process and the result are an emergent property of the interaction" (both Montuori, 2003). Its long history wholly indebted to the incredibly vast range of traditional musical forms, outside of the canons of Classical Western music, that make regular use of improvisation and variability in their own canons. Poet Amiri Baraka (1967, p. 194) mentions exactly that when referring to musician Albert Ayler talking "about his music as a contemporary form of collective improvisation (…). Which is where our music was when we arrived on these shores, a collective expression," arching back to the space allotted to improvisation in West African musical tradition. No matter how radical Free Jazz was in re-conceiving the importance of collective improvisation from the 1960s onwards, Baraka mention its indebtedness to "the old collective improvisation that was supposed to come out of New Orleans (…), a form as old as Black religious gatherings in the forests of the West … and connects straight on into Black free-Africa." Something that poet Stanley Crouch (1976) also refers in the liner notes to violinist Leroy Jenkins and drummer Rashied Ali's album Swift Are the Winds of Life:

> In the music that has developed within the last two decades, improvisation serves another purpose, and that purpose is the same as it served in the days of the collectively improvising New Orleans ensemble: clearing the air.

To "clear the air" is an idiomatic expression meaning "to defuse or clarify an angry, tense, or confused situation by frank discussion" but also to literally change the air conditions of a given space by making it cooler, fresher, less humid, more comfortable. Crouch's mention of New Orleans ensembles as fulfilling the purpose of "clearing the air" is intimately related to their ritual function during funeral processions, where jazz ensembles accompany the congregation from service to burial, shifting between funeral dirges and uptempo songs: "The jazz funeral is deeply symbolic (…). Sound elicits joy and lament, generating the

atmosphere of mutual aid" (Sakakeeny, 2024). For Sakakeeny (2024), "mutual aid" is manifested and actualised in sound as "both a model for and an outcome of collectivity that strains against practices of fragmentation and enclosure," with "memorializing, fellowshipping, joymaking – rambling – affirm[ing] social life through sound." All these are ritualistic expressions connecting the social and spiritual fabric of a community, symbolised in the cathartic atonement of grief through ecstatic states of communion, that do not so much negate death as acknowledge it through a celebration of life. If for Sakakeeny (2024), "The music on the street dictates the mood and the atmosphere of what goes on in the street," then "[the] complex interweaving of melodies heard in the jazz funeral procession – sometimes antiphonal, sometimes heterophonic, sometimes polyphonic, never in strict unison or synchrony," (Sakakeeny, 2024) is telling of its "shared goal of synergetic cohesion" (Coleman, 2021, p. 279). According to both authors, "the dominant texture of the New Orleans style is heterophony, what Kwami Coleman defines as 'multiple autonomous improvising musical voices'" (Sakakeeny, 2024).

Interesting to note, then, that Monk parakeet societies display a high level of what researchers call "fission-fusion" foraging dynamics, meaning individuals in pairs or smaller groups tend to forage in smaller units (fission), regrouping later around their nests (fusion). For Monk parakeets, but as well as for Ring-necked parakeets, "contact calls [are] often made during group fusion events, or when individuals are isolated" (Smeele & Senar *et al.,* 2023).

Earlier work on Monk parakeet vocalisations has described eleven distinct call types but only the contact call has been extensively studied. These investigations suggest that their contact calls are individually distinct but with high within-individual variability, and that unlike other studied parrot species, there is no evidence for active convergence on group-level vocal signatures (Smeele & Senar *et al.,* 2024). A clear case of interweaving melodies, "sometimes antiphonal, sometimes heterophonic, sometimes polyphonic, never in strict unison or synchrony" straining for "synergetic cohesion" (Sakakeeny, 2024). Which is similarly allowed in the score for "Feral Songbook #2: Monk parakeet Myopsitta monachus (for any number of untrained voices)" by using a simple call-and-response pattern that, as it gathers momentum by being intoned by an increasingly larger number of participants, starts to equate the antiphony, heterophony, and poliphony of the "collectively improvising New Orleans ensemble" (Crouch, 1976) and the "individually distinct but with high within-individual variability" and no "active convergence on group-level vocal signatures" (Smeele & Senar, 2024, p. 3) of parakeet vocalisations.

Found in chapter 8 of Kurt Vonnegut's sci-fi novel The Sirens of Titan (1954), the score for "Feral Songbook #2: Monk parakeet Myopsitta monachus (for any number of untrained voices)" takes a simple description of the call-and-response pattern of the fictionalised sole inhabitants of the planet Mercury in Vonnegut's tale. Sentient creatures living in caves deep in Mercury, called harmoniums, would feed on sonic vibrations arising from the tension between its perpetually white-hot, sunlit hemisphere and its dark-cold, penumbral one. Harmoniums "cling to the singing walls of their caves" (Vonnegut, 1958, p. 320), "nourished by vibrations" (p. 320) their bodies so thin that these "life-giving vibrations can make all their cells tingle without intermediaries" (p. 322). Harmoniums "have only two possible messages. The first is an automatic reply to the second, and the second is an automatic reply to the first. The first is 'Here I am.' The second is 'So glad you are'" (p. 323). The simple A↔B pattern standing in for the similarly self-reproducing feedback loop found in Monk parakeets' contact calls, where different individuals will feed the ongoing chatter, especially around the nest during group fusion events, as detailed above.

Fig. 4 - Score from the fold-out libretto to "Feral Songbook #2: Monk Parakeet Myopsitta Monachus (for any number of untrained voices)," produced for Prix COAL Se transformer, Paris, November 2024. © *Nuno da Luz*.

If the score for “Feral Songbook #2: Monk parakeet Myopsitta monachus” makes use of a call-and-response literary reference, the score for “Feral Songbook #1: Ring-necked parakeet Psittacula krameri” adapts an oft-performed score in the history of free improvisation, first devised by composer Cornelius Cardew. One that, nevertheless, understands above all that collective improvisation is rooted in ritual practice. Just like traditional practices that predate the “collectively improvising New Orleans ensemble,” where spaces of communion and congregation would either be ceremoniously “cleared” by smudging and other rites, Cardew approached collective improvisation as a way to open and expand space for collective and participatory improvisation as a form of rehearsing political agency. That open-ended, freeforms of aesthetic expression can become an expression of a political subjectivity: independent yet interdependent. Especially within the freeform, loose membership and variable geometries of the Scratch Orchestra – “a large number of enthusiasts pooling their resources (not primarily material resources) and assembling for action (music-making, performance, edification)” (Cardew, 1969, p. 617) – this composer, together with a large number of associates, devised scores as invitations for improvisation that were defined under the heading of improvisation rites: “An improvisation rite is not a musical composition; it does not attempt to influence the music that will be played; at most it may establish a community of feeling, or a communal starting point, through ritual” (Cardew, 1969, p. 619).

Cardew tried to expand what music and musicianship may mean as collective-decision making; beyond western classical music, beyond forms of idiomatic improvisation rooted in Black American music such as blues or jazz, or even beyond the strictures of western avant-garde composition after the Second World War. His work as a composer using graphical notation, instructions and many other experiments in conveying ideas for different forms of collective improvisation, have been crucial in creating and compiling a “Feral Songbook.”

Fig. 5 - Score for "The Great Learning: Paragraph 7" (1969) by Cornelius Cardew. © *Cornelius Cardew Committee*.

FERAL SONGBOOK
Collective Improvisation as an Ecological Survival Technique

"Feral Songbook #1: Ring-necked Parakeet Psittacula Krameri (for any number of untrained voices)" adapts "The Great Learning: Paragraph 7" (1969), a piece I had the chance to perform in various different occasions throughout the past fifteen years. Having first gone through it as a performer, I understand this piece as a tool for empowerment, since it enables any person that may have come to experience it by participating in one of its activations, to further pass it along to others. Its formal simplicity and openness to interpretation make it extremely effective when communicating with groups of people who may have never had either contact with musical training or previous experience as performers. Here, the linear progression through successive lines of text first suggested by Cardew is thought of as different points on a flight path, asking to replace the original text (taken from Confucius's The Great Learning classic treatise) with lines that may more easily resonate with the fission-fusion dynamics that are observed in feral parakeets. Acclimatised and naturalised but nevertheless exotic and alien, they are victims of unsolicited displacements, effectively amounting to bird communities in Diaspora. Fittingly, Confucius's words have then been replaced by those of diasporic Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, taken from his poem "The Earth is Closing in On Us" (1984):

> Where should we go after the last frontier?
> Where should the birds fly, after the last sky?
> Where should the plants sleep after the last breath of air?

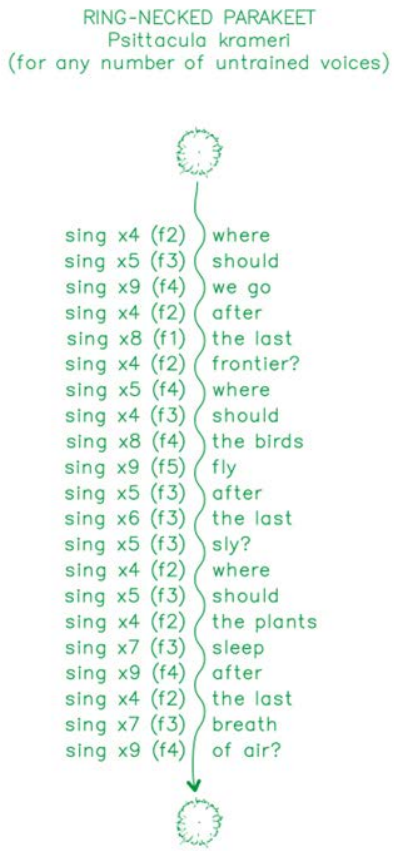

Fig. 6 - Score from the fold-out libretto to "Feral Songbook #1: Ring-necked Parakeet Psittacula Krameri (for any number of untrained voices)," produced for Prix COAL Se transformer, Paris, November 2024. © Nuno da Luz.

Darwish's words on the nature of uprootedness, displacement, and dispossession are reflective of the traumatic experience of exile and Diaspora. Case in point: the continued negation of the Palestinian people's right to self-determination, and the compounded mass violence they have suffered since the 1948 Nakhba, "the catastrophe in which 80% of the population was displaced" (Syed, 2024). Since then, poetry has been a space for the "rejection of de-Palestinisation," (Abu Duhou, 1993) as "they continued stubbornly to cling to their reason and identity. They refused to forget." (Abu Duhou, 1993). Darwish's own Memory for Forgetfullness (1987) book title alludes to that same resolve, resilience, and resistance. "Despite the lack of institutional stability afforded to Palestinians through Israeli occupation – and the continued destruction of schools and universities in Gaza – Palestinians maintain a national literacy rate of 97.7%," as of 2023 (Syed, 2024), which given the sheer volume of violence and oppression by the settler-colonial state that is occupying Palestinian territories since 1948, attests in manifold ways language and poetry as homeland to a people that have been stripped of their territories, but not their capacity to engender it through song, chant, and vocalisation. "If we can't imagine a free liberated world in language, how can we build one?" says Palestinian-American poet George Abraham to Armani Syed (2024). The flight path imagined in "Feral Songbook #1" then collapses together the quick, successive repetitions that characterise Ring-necked parakeets flight calls with the unfaltering reiteration by Darwish

that, even against all the impossibles, even when faced with every "ultimate" limit, life's irreducible character breaks through in survival. So-called Invasive Alien Parakeets have not been reduced to silence any more than Palestinian people have, no matter how many attempts to quell them.

The principle of relentless repetition employed first by Cardew in "The Great Learning: Paragraph 7," is appropriated and actualised in "Feral Songbook #1," as yet another case of "sometimes antiphonal, sometimes heterophonic, sometimes polyphonic, never in strict unison or synchrony" interweaving melodies straining for "synergetic cohesion" (both Sakakeeny, 2024). The temporary flock assembled through intertwining straight-line motion paths and ululating song lines, resists its underlying forced displacement by reiterating its affiliation and affective bonds. If in 1969, collective and participatory improvisation, such as the one advanced by Cardew's "The Great Learning: Paragraph 7," seemed dedicated to the emancipation of class struggle through social and expressive radicality – with such promise remaining yet unfulfilled by virtue of its innate avoidance of unanimity or normalisation – it still holds many other promises besides those of class struggle. By taking on at its core the creation of more egalitarian and less discriminatory communities, collective, and participatory improvisation rehearses how to build free liberated worlds, in language and in practice. A commonality/community that is not predicated on what is identical and uniform, but arises from, in and of difference: a necessary hiatus or gap that organises the possibility for something other to emerge, something that changes the vibrational spheres of each participant through friction and dissonance, or through sympathetic resonance. The mutuality inherent to sympathy – whereby a body responds to external vibrations to which it has a harmonic likeness – as the fundamental keystone that joins bodies in affect and grants them the possibility of being transformed by such encounters. Ian Biddle has characterised it as "affective transmission" whereby sound is "used to create a particular ambience or atmosphere, via the induction, modulation and circulation of moods, feelings and intensities, which were felt but, at the same time, belonged to nobody in particular" (Biddle, 2013, p. 5). Once it is emitted, it no longer belongs to a particular individual, but it threads together the agency of both emitter and receiver, in a specific affective cartography that reverberates atmospherically, and can be further picked up by whoever is in earshot of such an affective atmosphere.

4. CONCLUSION: OF SONGBOOKS

Fig. 7 - Fold-out libretto for “Feral Songbook #1: Ring-necked Parakeet Psittacula Krameri (for any number of untrained voices)”, Musée de la chasse et de la nature, Paris, November 2024. © *Nuno da Luz*

Fig. 8 - Performance of “Feral Songbook #1: Ring-necked Parakeet Psittacula Krameri (for any number of untrained voices),” produced for Prix COAL Se transformer, Paris, 20 November 2024. © *Andrea Mantovani*.

Fig. 9 - Fold-out libretto for “Feral Songbook #2: Monk Parakeet Myopsitta Monachus (for any number of untrained voices)”, Musée de la chasse et de la nature, Paris, November 2024. © *Nuno da Luz*.

Fig. 10 - Performance of “Feral Songbook #2: Monk Parakeet Myopsitta Monachus (for any number of untrained voices),” produced for Prix COAL Se transformer, Paris, 20 November 2024. © *Andrea Mantovani*.

The different scores in Feral Songbook have been conceived as individual sets of instructions, prompts and invitations to build on and reimagine human sonic worlds turned feral. Scores to be performed as collective and participatory improvisations where each participant follows the same protocol, according to their own response-abilites and capabilities, regardless of keeping pace, pulse, beat, and measure together. Just like in traditional ensembles, the score is made available on paper, with copies being shared with every participant, so that each may read, study, analyse, and adapt their own fold-out according to their needs and desires. Each score is laid out as an A3 (420×297mm when open) whose long-side centrefold is cut open, thus allowing it to be folded down to A6 (148×105mm) for ease of access and circulation. Fitting easily into a jacket or back pocket, scores can be kept at hand and accessed at will or filed away, according to each participant's preferred mode of activation. After being presented and discussed collectively, participants are invited to memorise scores to a certain point, but the fold-out can always be consulted during the performances themselves. Besides the score itself with accompanying notes on the protocol and notation used, each fold-out libretto contains a summarised description of the different parakeets biomorphology and ethology, as well as illustrations of their silhouettes and physiognomy.

As performed at the Musée de la chasse et de la nature, in Paris, 20 November 2024, the two scores mentioned above were activated by a group of twenty people, including myself, responding to an open call released by the Museum, myself and the association COAL Art et écologie, that detailed the following:

> Through a sonic pedagogy manual designed by the artist, this vocal workshop based on collective improvisation exercises and somatic practices, explores the "territories of chant" of green parakeets as a mode par excellence of polyphonic collaboration and cooperation. Like a flock of birds, participants' voices will map out a common space. The Feral Songbook aims to restore our relationship with the urban environment through attentive, eco-sensitive methodologies. This is a collective practice for which there is no need for prior musical training or education. All you need to do is listen, and use your voice as a form of spatial and social reference.

Prior to the performance, two workshop sessions were held to introduce the chosen scores to the group, acquaint them with the suggested protocol and procedure, discuss together processes, methods, and concepts, share

information and personal experiences, as well as rehearse possible solutions and outcomes. Both sessions started with a round-table introduction and discussion between all participants in order to acquaint with one another, a collective reading of the scores with further discussion on the texts and informations therein, a folding session of the libretti, somatic "tuning" and listening exercises to allow participants to "change" their perceptual modes for the performance, and rehearsals around the scores in order to embody them as much as possible.

Ranging from art students in their early twenties to practising artists in their thirties, forties, and fifties, to a small contingent of sixty-year-olds who worked on ecological transition policies and sustainability management, the group assembled for these two performances was, in its majority, white, female, economically stable, and regular visitors to the Museum with a keen interest in participating of its public programming, workshops, and other outreach activities. But there were also cases where economic precarity (in the case of students and artists) and non-European ascendancy made clear that the methods employed and objectives set out by the Feral Songbook speak differently to different participants, while engaging each participant to recreate them as their own – based on their own lived experience, especially as amateur, urban bird watchers/listeners. Regardless of education, occupation, or background, participants already arrived with previous personal experience on the topic of feral parakeets, as they are part and parcel of our shared urban environments. Whether through acknowledging their presence via sound or vision or both, participants arrived with both curiosity, excitement, and a willingness to challenge themselves, be it socially as well as ecologically – by becoming acquainted and aware of the parakeets' ethology, their naturalised habitats and their relationship with the ecosystem at large – through a duality of sound-making and listening, in collective and participatory improvisation.

> It is not simply a question of paying attention to the role of sound phenomena in societal dynamics, but of understanding that the entire universe is in motion and vibrates, that other species also quiver and communicate, that this relationship concerns the multiplicity of earthlings and their modes of existence. ... Listening to the world has taught us that we cannot understand ourselves, if we do not take into consideration our own becoming alongside the other beings that populate it. (Barbanti, 2023, p. 27)

Considered as an ever-ongoing, in-progress-compilation, the Feral Songbook will hold as many different scores as there may be at any given moment, always mindful of the "individually distinct but with high within-individual variability" that parakeet calls possess. As contact, group, flight, alarm/threat, and isolation calls take on various local and divergent accents (or dialects, according to Smeele and Tyndal *et al.,* 2024), their modalities will always insist on the shared notion that both birdcalls and improvisation scores do not tend towards an "active convergence on group-level vocal signatures" – to use, yet again, the term employed by Smeele and Tyndal et al. when recognising the heterophony of parakeet vocalisations. Given the parakeets' disregard for synchrony and unison – or its irrelevance for their communication purposes –, the feral songs collated here as book and manual drawn on principles such as those of a possible parakeet "heterophony" (Sakakeeny apud Coleman, 2024) and those of a "collectively improvising polyphony" (Crouch, 1976), that would field the same purpose they served for human communities enjoined in music-making: to clear the air. Finding room to breathe together in an increasingly strained world, through listening and vocalising with each other.

Through the scores, workshops, and performances, what is being tested is not the particular musical acumen of the written piece, but how we can engender collective modes of being that rely on self-sufficient, low-impact technologies that can be shared by a certain group of co-actants. Finding strength in Gary Snyder's defence of "poetry as an ecological survival technique" – one that for millennia has inextricably linked the human and the nonhuman in affective cartographies (Snyder claims it goes all the way back to the Palaeolithic and the first human societies) – here the lyrical is portrayed through ever-changing possibilities of its vocalisation as a tool of unpredictability, and hence escape from the normativity of conventional modes of address and communication. Improvisation as a tool for engendering more, many "communities of feeling." Communities that may organise the possibility for something other to emerge; something that changes the vibrational spheres of one another and lets us imagine free liberated worlds within our shared one.

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