

WHY LISTEN WITH ANIMALS? STRAINING TOWARD AN ENVIRONMENTAL RESONANCE



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ABSTRACT

This article summons John Berger's essay *Why Look at Animals?*, reframing its analysis on human–animal relations under Modernity (with its emphasis on the gaze at a distance) through the entangled reflexivities of listening together with more-than-humans others. If for Berger, animals “in zoos ... constitute[d] the living monument to their own disappearance,” field recording helped enshrine their extinction while archiving their voices. Here, I intend to stress the significance of more-than-human vibrations and sounds as transformative zones of contact, especially in our increasingly impoverished urban biomes. And by arguing for an expansion of vibrational attention to such social-environmental contexts, re-assess listening as an eco-sensible methodology that understands both humans, more-than-humans and technology as part of integrated ecologies.

Keywords: Technology arts and ethics; Field recording; Acoustic ecology; Listening.

41°08'51"N 8°40'06.5"W JARDIM DO PASSEIO ALEGRE, PORTO, SEPTEMBER 20, 2023, 6.19 AM (NAUTICAL DAWN).

The location, date and time detailed above refer directly to the when and where of the recording made available with this article. Having taken place three days before the autumnal equinox, this recording encapsulates a late summer morning at the Jardim do Passeio Alegre, in Porto. More specifically, an attempt at encapsulating its surrounding acoustic ambience, which, according to Jean-Paul Thibaud (2011), “we do not experience [as] the world from the outside, [or as] in front of us, but through it, in accordance with it, [and] as part of it” (p. 8).

The garden is delimited south by a palm tree boulevard that lines both sides of its adjacent road, running parallel to the Douro riverbank and paved with cobblestones. It marks the approaching Douro River’s mouth and stops right at the concrete breakwaters and jetties that jut out into the Atlantic Ocean. Located right between two palm trees at the outset of the boulevard away from the open ocean, I have placed a stereo recording rig¹ facing west: the left channel angled at the boardwalk and the river; the right channel directed at the cars, cobblestones and the garden laying beyond them.

Roughly one minute after the recording starts, amidst the rumble of distant traffic and breaking waves, we hear the first cry of a spotless starling *Sturnus unicolor*, or *estorninho* in Portuguese. And almost immediately after that a jogger runs by, a car approaches and disappears into the distance, and a few other birds start to chirp. All is relatively quiet until five minutes in, when other spotless starlings join briefly as an airplane flies over the city.

Located on the western edge of town by the coast—bordered North by the Foz Velha hillside, South by the Douro and West by the Atlantic—the Jardim do Passeio Alegre was built in the end of the nineteenth century in an area that is at the crossroads of estuarine, maritime and terrestrial ecosystems. The myriad influences that can be felt there at any given day made themselves present that morning with a fog that dissipated as soon as recording started, and first light started to shine. The clear skies and light wind made up for the dampness and cold that could be felt that early in the morning, right before the change in temperature difference that followed sunrise.

The Jardim do Passeio Alegre was chosen as a recording site chiefly for harboring, within the crowns of its many palm trees, the nests of dozens of monk parakeets *Myiopsitta monachus*, or *caturritas* in Portuguese. An exotic bird species endemic to South America, these parakeets have become an almost ubiquitous presence in Southern Europe, with very expressive populations in the Iberian Peninsula (around 13,000 individuals in Madrid, and around 8,000 in Barcelona). If the population in Porto is quite small by comparison—estimated at around 40 to 60 birds only (Alonso et al., 2022)—it nonetheless constitutes

¹ A recording rig consisting of two microphones with omnidirectional capsules in ORTF configuration (17 cm distance between capsules placed at a 110° angle), enclosed within a windscreen suspended at 2 meters from the ground on a stationary mic stand. Incoming microphone signal running through two XLR cables onto a Sound Devices MixPre portable digital recorder, capturing audio at 192kHz sample rate, 32-bit float bitrate.

an expressive population of an established exotic bird species: its numbers attest a continuous inter-generational presence over the years. Predicated on their popularity as pets and also among bird breeders, the overwhelming majority of recorded individuals have survived, adapted and thrived in the (urban) wild due to involuntary escape from captivity, or the occasional intentional release (Alonso et al., 2022).

These once domesticated and now turned feral—or re-wilded—animals find refuge and food in plant species that themselves have been transplanted from other latitudes and longitudes, albeit not directly related. The specific palm trees we find at Jardim do Passeio Alegre, planted in two distinct parallel lines, are *Phoenix canariensis*—endemic to the Canary Islands in the Atlantic. More telling even is the fact that they not only harbour the nests of Monk parakeets but also those of spotless Starlings. A too often overlooked case (or simply not documented enough) of interspecific cohabitation, which prompts this paper and the arguments thereof.

With that first cry of a starling around 6.20am, a whole series of interlocking rhythms, patterns, cadences and sequences starts to coalesce in this recording. The rise and fall of waves, cars, and steps, as they approach and move away from the stationary microphones, gives way to a sense that there is no such thing as background sound. All sounds, and more specifically their emitters, all contribute their share to a real-time composition of our sonic environment, at all times, the whole time. Only at considerable distances—to whoever (or whatever) may be listening—do they come together and give the illusion of a coherent backdrop that foregrounds other sounds. As posited by sound artist and bioacoustics researcher David Dunn (1997), “[w]hile we often *see* something as distinct in its environment, we *hear* how it relates to other things” (p. 1). It is this inseparability of phenomena that so often composes an experience of listening to our immediate surroundings, to so-called ambient or environmental sound. Nevertheless, *who* or *what* constitutes a listener has to first be understood as intrinsically shaped by the ways such listening is conditioned and predicated on the radical alteration of the entire planet, and the Great Acceleration witnessed during the past 70 years (Steffen et al., 2015).

With this paper then, I wish to argue for a closer and more critical awareness of how listening can be, not only a tool or a practice, but an eco-sensible methodology that allows for a deeper understanding of humans and more-than-humans as technologically imbricated beings; and of such technologies as part of integrated ecologies. For this, I am summoning John Berger’s essay *Why Look at Animals?* in an attempt to reframe its analysis of human-animal relations under Modernity and replace its focus on the retinal—with its emphasis on the gaze and on observation at a distance—with the entanglements and reflexivities of listening together with those more-than-human others we have come to call animals. For this inquiry, I am calling forth on writings and concepts developed by fellow researchers and sound artists Mark Peter Wright and AM Kanngieser, whose own insights on the genealogy of field

recording, its historical shortcomings and future potentials, and the critical importance of critical listening (that is, a knowledgeable and conscious form of listening that engages not only with the sensorial but also with how it is contextualized) can help challenge hegemonic discourses and cultural blindspots that, until recently, have been naturalized and universalized, in the name of a purportedly neutral, objective position of “direct perception rather than a *contestable* construal, that is, as an act that involves interpretation and criticality” (Brooks, 2020, pp. 106–107).

2. LOOKING AT

41°08'51"N 8°40'06.5"W Jardim do Passeio Alegre, Porto, September 20, 2023, 6.30 am

Back in Jardim do Passeio Alegre, the first parakeet wakes up and timidly squawks amidst a series of starling cries. As more and more starlings start to partake in a chorus, other timid parakeets cry too. Still, all is relatively calm as the sun has not even risen yet and human activity is quite sparse—reduced to a few passing cars, early morning joggers and dogwalkers, save for the incremented rhythm of airplane turbines roaring and reverberating along the banks of the Douro, as they approach Porto’s airport.

The fact that all feral parakeets are, in one way or another, descendants from animals that were brought to Europe in captivity—either through pet trade or further reproduction by bird breeders—resonates eerily with John Berger’s essay *Why Look at Animals?* (1980), focused on human–animal relations under Modernity. Berger starts by pointing out several different historical threads of human–animal relationships: some predicated on mutuality and cooperation, as well as domestication, breeding, feeding, ancient ritual and religious life, foundational myths. Systematising the comparative relation between human and non-human animals up to the late 1970s, Berger focuses on the double knot of increasing expulsion and elimination of animals from urban settings (that stemmed from public health, public hygiene and sanitary laws enacted between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century) and the creation of zoos or the popularisation of keeping animals as pets, happening at the same time. He states, “public zoos came into existence at the beginning of the period which was to see the disappearance of animals from daily life” (Berger, 1980, p. 19).

Perhaps unsuspectedly, this essay is dedicated to French painter Gilles Aillaud (1925–2005), who was quite active throughout the mid-twentieth century, and is famous for his extensive series of paintings depicting animals in captivity, specifically in zoos. These paintings feature animals as prominently as their cages, catchments and containment paraphernalia.



Figure 1. Gilles Aillaud, *Perroquets* (1974) © Adagp, Paris. Photography: Fabrice Gousset, courtesy Loevenbruck, Paris.

For Berger (1980), “public zoos were an endorsement of modern colonial power [...]. Yet, like every other nineteenth century public institution, the zoo, however supportive of the ideology of imperialism, had to claim an independent and civic function” (p. 19). I would argue that the history of field recording—as derived from ethnographic research—has done just that, only aurally. Equally indebted to ethnographic representations of alterity, field recording historically reinforced the ongoing separation of nature and the human, or relegated and helped erase other human stories and experiences than those of the recordists themselves. In the words of Jonathan Sterne (2003), field recording was initially “driven by political programmes concerned with both obfuscating ongoing colonial violence and defining its impacts through the lenses of loss and extinction” (p. 315). Whole ecosystems, human and more-than-human ways of life disappeared, obliterated while also being forever fixed and crystallized in their liveliness, played back indefinitely as evidence of their authenticity as much as of their predictable demise. Much in the same way that “[t]he zoo to which people go to meet animals, to observe them, to see them is, in fact, a monument to the impossibility of such encounters” (Berger, 1980, p. 19). Through the double violence of captivity and spectacle, the gaze afforded to visitors is not reciprocated at all by the animals on the other side of the bars: to look at them is to look “*at something that has been rendered absolutely marginal*” (Berger, 1980, p.22 [author’s emphasis]). As such, “[i]n zoos, [animals] constitute the living monument to their own disappearance” (Berger, 1980, p. 24). And to this, I add that the recordings of their voices have helped enshrine their extinction. Phonography, in this case, acted as a double-edged sword that documented and accompanied both conservation and preservation efforts to “rescue” the last remaining wild individuals (or specimens) while displacing them; and leaving in its wake either the effacement or the enclosing of their original habitats.

Like many other technological devices, apparatuses and instances, “the development of the phonograph instigated the idea that a recording device could engender an objective replication of the world” (Kanngieser, 2023, p. 2)—an idea fully predicated on precepts of human exceptionalism whose tenets posit humans and nature as completely separate from one another. Founded on what AM Kanngieser (2023) calls “the historical separation of the domains of nature and society” (p. 3), it devolved not only into the separation between human animals and non-human animals, but crucially into colonial forms of difference and separation that have historically searched to dominate, subjugate and oppress other humans, their attachments and forms of relationality with their close environments.

The invention of “scientific” raciality and white supremacy at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century are inextricably intertwined with the nascent social or human sciences of anthropology and ethnography, that made first use of the phonograph in order to document but also historicise encounters with peoples other than Western. Kanngieser (2023) has deemed this “Salvage ethnography,” purposefully within quotes, as a mode of recuperating and rendering clear how cruel this historical term was, when it was used to refer to the practice of collecting and documenting human cultures, in the face of presumed decline or extinction, in the early twentieth century. “The documentation of Indigenous and First Nations songs and oral histories alongside animal songs and calls” (Kanngieser, 2023, p. 4) served mostly to invest in possessing, defining and delineating objects of research, historicizing actual living cultures. and “[t]he objectification of Indigenous life was a reflection of the scientific objectification of ‘the field’” (Kanngieser, 2023, p. 4). This crystallisation of the Other through sound recording was the practical result of a concomitant process of deterritorialization whereby “the field” was created: the networks of affects and relationalities that were intrinsic to each specific communities’ topography and topology were spatially and territorially flattened through an accord of cartography and phonography—tools for mapping and surveillance. According to Anette Hoffmann (2021), “this means that the very politics of colonization, which endangered the survival of groups of people and led to epistemicides, also made the production of acoustic recordings possible logistically” (p. 531). In sum, those same instruments of expertise and control of territory and its expressions, enabled a discourse through presentation, and validated the institutional and scientific bodies behind such expeditions while enacting a specific colonial erasure. Most strikingly, to adhere to the strict principles of scientific objectivity, or like Kanngieser (2023) puts it, “to hold on to the myth of transparency, the ethnographer and their device had to be expunged from the recording process, a practice that despite the evolution of the discipline continues to circulate today” (p. 4). A practice that I have continued both inadvertently and not as a “field” recordist, and that is not only predicated on a century of ethnographic practices but mostly indebted to the set of practices put forth by the Acoustic Ecology movement. Dunn (1997) argues the “audio documentation of ‘natural’ acoustic environments” as “purist audio documentation of pristine natural

environments” is infused with “something perverse”, and acknowledges that

[t]he premise that these recordings will somehow sensitize the listener to a greater appreciation of the natural world when in fact they are more often perpetuating a nineteenth century vision of nature and at best merely documenting a state of affairs that will soon disappear (p. 7).

It is unfortunate indeed that the vast sound archive amassed in the world today will most likely last longer than the chances of most biodiversity to continue to exist. It has been made abundantly clear that the planet is undergoing a mass sixth extinction, brought on by anthropogenic activity. Namely, the Great Acceleration within the last seventy years with: mass exploitation of resources, territories, and the residues thereof; greenhouse gases emissions, ocean acidification, soil contamination, deforestation, land-grabbing, exponential rates of industrialisation and urbanisation. All of which has had a clear impact on the world’s climate, not only in the foreseeable future but already today. A recent climate report published by BioScience stated that we are entering into uncharted climate territory, a situation no one has ever witnessed firsthand in the history of recorded humanity (Ripple et al., 2023). To employ another famous and overused term, but not less poignant, it is not only Springs that may be rendered silent, like Rachel Carson anticipated in her book *Silent Spring* while observing the effects of pesticides on wildlife in the early 1960s. We are actually talking of a world infinitely poorer and more silent with each passing year. The chain reaction and cascading effects are already quite palpable and they are exactly the reason I am lead to appropriate Berger’s initial question but refashion it beyond the confrontational value embedded in the act of looking straight at who or what is in front of us. If in zoos, cages and compounds are classically designed so that visitors have a frontal perspective on the confined animals—affording the audience with an unimpeded, direct line of sight to the animals on display, at a safe distance—I propose then a peripheral perspective afforded not by listening to but by listening with and within earshot. Perhaps such a change in perspective can afford other forms of attachment and affect with our close environments as they (and us) undergo massive stress and systemic disruption. Or as theorized by Brandon Labelle (2018), such a perspectival shift may actually constitute an acute form presence or of “dwelling within the present with others” (p. 161), since it posits listening as “an extremely active relational space within which voices may resound” (p. 160). Likening listening as a methodology to “listening as an ‘art of presence’” (p. 162), Labelle credits listening as having the capacity to actually engendering the listeners’ freedom of engagement with a “range of voices and things to be heard and shared”, and that includes “the co-soundings and echoes of earthly creatures and matters” as forms of “discovering and nurturing new formations of solidarity” (p. 160). It is such an agency – the capacity or potential to act – that I also recognize

and hold as central in the practice of listening as “this sound we hear is already the production of a shared world” (Labelle, 2018). A world we desperately need to produce anew and in tandem with those around us, on our side and by our side, instead of continuing to insist on the frontality and potential for confrontation that are at play in the act of looking straight ahead of us.

3. LISTENING WITH

41°08'51"N 8°40'06.5"W Jardim do Passeio Alegre, Porto, September 20, 2023, 6.40 am

By now the descending whistles of spotless starlings, coming from different palm trees, have started to mesh together in a continuous chorus that is punctuated by the regular sound of airplanes, the cries of seagulls circling above the river, a few more awaken parakeets, and the occasional blackbirds that can be heard singing from the maple trees in the middle of the Jardim do Passeio Alegre. All of it regularly muffled by cars rolling on cobblestones, albeit still few in comparison to what traffic will look like a few hours from now.

A Dawn Chorus is now fully in place, with all sorts of different creatures coming in to vocally and loudly greet the rising sun, making themselves heard and present to one another, and to whoever or whatever else may be within earshot, participating in or *listening with*. Berger's original title is reframed here by explicitly repurposing and quoting this term, used extensively and described in detail by researcher and artist Mark Peter Wright in his book *Listening After Nature* (2022). If the change in verb, from *looking to listening*—away from ocular or scopic regimes of visibility—already performs an enormous conceptual transformation, changing the preposition from *to* to *with* is as an essential operative mechanism to avert a directionality and intentionality that the “to” enforces on the act of listening. A directionality that owes plenty to the frontality of visibility, as in the customary expression “I am listening to...” Whereas *with* reinforces communality, sharing and partaking, better suited at the peripheral omnidirectionality of hearing. Peter Wright (2023) defines listening-with (that he purposefully hyphenates) as:

[A] critical sensibility that might assist the search for sites and sounds or processes and consequences that are not immediately apparent. It is a mode that seeks to foster critical alliance toward the sounds I hear, or do not hear, rather than approach them as something to listen to or for.

At a certain level, Peter Wright's description of listening as a “critical sensibility”—a mode of expanded attention to not only what vibrations reach us but also how, from where and when—broadens the understanding of the act of listening beyond the strictly aural; rendering impossible for sound to ever be disembodied, in the first place. But it is

the expression “critical alliance” that I wish to emphasize as a crucial aspect of listening as inherent relationality. Hearing and listening involve both sound-makers and -receivers in a two-way relationship, making sound to be heard to make sound to be heard to make sound to... I would argue further that such an alliance extends implicitly to the whole of the social-environmental context in which said sonic relation takes place. Or it extends the conditions under which that sonic relation can take place. Peter Wright (2023) continues:

Listening-with asserts that there is no singular subject but instead a plethora of ears, bodies, perspectives, recordings, and mediations at stake: stretched across site and species and scaled over thresholds of audibility and equity.

Pointing towards the ever-present multiplicity of elements, entities, and creatures that make up such nodes or clusters—such a simple and often used acoustic phenomenon like the Dawn Chorus that accompanies this essay—stresses how the qualities and capacities enumerated by Peter Wright were already at stake and at play before there was even a recorder and a recordist to set it to figurative tape (in this concrete case, a stereophonic digital .wav file). The recording or lack thereof would then point towards the same exact operative ability encapsulated in the word *with*: that a listening subject is never singular but plural. It denotes a relation, a communion. And this same quality traverses boundaries between species, animal kingdoms, elemental media and other specificities particular to determined bodies, times and places².

I would add to Peter Wright’s enumeration above that listening with strains toward the expansion of a vibrational attention to the whole of a given social-environmental context. It particularly demonstrates the possibility of sympathetic resonances between the “plethora of ears, bodies, perspectives, recordings, and mediations” (Peter Wright, 2023) that are at stake when speaking about listening. And here geographer and sound artist Amer Kanngieser’s notion of listening, as not solely about aural hearing, but in its broadest definition “as processes of sensing, attuning and noticing” (Kanngieser, 2020), is paramount. To listen with those around us—which, in turn, are also attentively listening to us—means:

[P]rioritizing practices of listening and relationality across diverse social-environmental contexts, paying close attention to the obligations and concerns ... we use to consider and approach these responsibilities, which guide us through contexts of ongoing dispossession. (Kanngieser & Todd, 2022)

What both Peter Wright and Kanngieser are defending—even if coming from very distinct points of departure—is that listening itself is not merely a neurophysiological operation, a sensorial apparatus and its web of perceptions, stimuli, responses. Oto-centric hearing—that is, hearing that

² A similar and sympathetic usage of the term can be found in composer Annea Lockwood’s call or invitation for World Listening Day, July 18, 2019, for which she urged participants to: “[listen] with the neighborhood at midnight, and again at dawn. Listening with an awareness that all around you are other life-forms simultaneously listening and sensing with you – plant roots, owls, cicadas, voles – mutually intertwined within the web of vibrations which animate and surround our planet” (World Listening Day, 2019).

is exclusively based on the incoming airborne vibrations that affect our timpani and cranium as humans—is only one of the many possibilities afforded by the care and attention that the practice of listening fosters as processes of “sensing, attuning and noticing.” In other words, listening with is a methodology that spans well beyond the hearing apparatus as it encompasses the whole of the vibrational body, within a network of transceiver agents (simultaneously sound-makers and -receivers) that affect and are affected by vibrations that involve them in mutual relationships; all agents are potential sympathetic resonators. It may even show ways in which hardness of hearing and deafness may be understood neither as an impediment nor an incapability of hearing, but constitute other forms of listening that activate sensorial capacities beyond the aural. Which prompts a rereading or rewriting of Maryanne Amacher’s conceptualization of our ways of hearing—how we sense, feel and locate sonic events (Amacher, 2008)—as no longer exclusively predicated on acoustic psychophysiological effects but as inherently ecological: a sensorial methodology that attends to human and more-than-human vibrations as transformative zones of contact. “Listening-with becomes an ethico-imaginative bond” (Peter Wright, 2022) shared by those who listen together, sparking connections, and assembling relations of mutual respect.

All these considerations feed onto and are distilled in the subtitle of this article: Straining toward an Environmental Resonance. Quoting directly the title of an essay by researcher and artist Mathieu Saladin, *Straining Toward an Impossible Ear* (2015)—itself quoting Deleuze—, it transforms the original’s *ear* into an embodiment of the *environment* through attunement as an ecological form of sympathy. Saladin’s original expression calls forth on the potential of experimental sonic practices—mostly linked with free or non-idiomatic improvisation in music—to relate and deal directly with their own failures and shortcomings. What Saladin calls:

[T]he creation of “an impossible ear”—i.e. a *paradoxical ear* allowing the perception of what, for various reasons, at first escapes perception: “[...] all the non-sound forces that the sound material ... will make perceptible, in such a way that we can even perceive the differences between these forces, the entire differential play of these forces”. (Deleuze, 2006, as cited in Saladin, 2015).

By arguing sound material details even what is non-sound—both its positive and negative, so to speak— Saladin, by way of Deleuze, gets at a rather particular and interesting point: that it is not only sound but even its absence that may be loaded with meaning. Non-sound shapes, as much as sound itself, the vibrational space and attention that is afforded in a relationship of mutuality. One that, like improvisation, feeds off each other by feeding each other in an evolutionary and open-ended conversation. In that sense, it is also composed by that which falls beyond the normative spectra afforded to aural listening but is also physically there, either as

signal or signalling its absence. I would argue that it is also such “an impossible ear” that is being described by Peter Wright as listening with. A listening that strains toward:

[T]he missing pieces, the holes in the jigsaw or lacunas in the audible. I do this again and again by asking the question: what are we not hearing? It draws attention toward the marginal, the forgotten, the inverse, and the underheard: there is always something beyond the audible when auditioning field recordings. (Peter Wright, 2022)

Here it is important to both recognize the conditions under which we are able to conduct our practices and how to navigate the limitations we confront within our personal approaches (Kanngieser and Todd, 2022). To strain toward such an environmental resonance would ask then to imagine and weave such ethico-imaginative bonds, that also pay attention to what may be beyond or masked by the audible when listening. And thus, lead us to re-consider and re-situate listening with our more-than-human neighbours.

4. ZONES OF CONTACT

41°08'51"N 8°40'06.5"W Jardim do Passeio Alegre, Porto, September 20, 2023, 6.51 am (Civil Dawn)

The sun is almost reaching the horizon as light floods from the East, casting a golden hue upstream whose shades slowly shift to purplish grey as the river flows from the East and reaches the ocean on the West. At this point, the myriad of spotless starling's whistles has meshed into a tapestry of descending high-pitch tones, complemented by the croaking and squawking of parakeets that fashions discrete blocks of mid- to high white noise. Bioacoustician and sound recordist Bernie Krause's acoustic niche hypothesis is made here loudly enunciated: “each creature appears to have its own sonic niche (channel, or space) in the frequency spectrum and/or time slot occupied by no other at that particular moment” (Krause, 1993, p. 5). But it is also made strikingly apparent, almost palpable. Both birdsongs appear from within the thick crowns of the palm trees without masking one another, although they share a very close frequency spectrum (roughly between 2kHz and 20kHz). In a physical analogy with their own occupation of the sonic spectrum, both bird species build their nests on the crown of palm trees: parakeets closer to where leaves used to spring from the trunk, whereas spotless starlings can be seen flying away from the youngest, top leaves. Neither the contiguity of either physical or audible space are impediments to the cohabitation of parakeets and starlings. Their shared dwellings are optimized to render them not only physically tenable (both parakeets and starlings create multi-partner, communal nests), but thriving for both communities. Such noisy, contiguous and overlapping territories,

3 *Sonotope* is defined as “a homogenous unit of a soundscape,” with *soundscape* being defined as “part of [the] *vibroscape* perceived as sound by an organism,” and the *vibroscape* being “the entire set of vibrations that is present in a specific portion of a geographical area” (Farina, 2020).

may tell us plenty about the significance of interspecific sound-making and listening as transformative zones of contact— interfaces of mutually transformative experiences based in intraspecific forms of communication that are mindful and attentive to interspecific exchanges. It may also be considered, according to researcher Almo Farina (2020) an *acoustic community*: “an aggregation of species that produces sound” (p. 152) but “distinct from a “traditional” ecological community because it is composed only of soniferous species and changes dynamically as they vocalize” (p. 153). If for Farina, “the sonotope³ of an acoustic community often includes non-biological sounds” but “the isolation of its biophonic signature for analysis is not always simple, especially when geophonic and technophonic sounds overlap biophonies with masking effects that impede the distinction of the ecological role of animal communication,” here such masking effects and overlaps are of extreme importance. Especially when discussing the increasingly impoverished and less diverse urban biomes of cities like Porto; or for that matter, most European cities.

According to the European Environment Agency’s report on the *State of Nature in the EU: Results from Reporting Under the Nature Directives 2013–18* biodiversity continues to decline and faces deteriorating trends in the greater part of Europe, mainly pressured by agriculture: “the intensification and specialisation of the agricultural sector has increasingly contributed to ongoing biodiversity loss” (EEA, 2020, p. 73); and urban development: “the conversion of natural and semi-natural land to housing, settlement or recreational areas” (p. 74), the “construction or modification within already existing urban or recreational areas” (p. 75). Bringing along with them the densification of already urbanized areas and the respective loss of green or human-unmediated spaces—i.e. spaces not dedicated to dwelling, leisure or economic activities.

This interspecific Dawn Chorus may help re-situate cities as nature too, both historically and biologically. Especially today, when there is a strong impact on any type of empty spaces—so-called wastelands—that could still host other solidarities than those developed through human mediation, meaning: the closest thing to wildness that could still be found in cities as pockets of biodiversity are dwindling. And with that, the dwindling possibility of hosting interspecific relationships that are not predicated on the presence of human agents as vectors for such relationships and interactions to take place. The ongoing densification of urban areas has been leading to a disappearance of either natural or architectural features used by different species for shelter and refuge, forcing them to adapt or face displacement. The same EEA report mentioned earlier refers “demolishing structures or deliberately closing them [when] ... such human-made habitats have become important for some species such as bats” (EEA, 2020, p. 75). Like bats, many species of birds are also cavernicolous: they prefer found and pre-existing holes as nests and shelter, like the case of the ring-necked parakeet (another exotic species that has significant populations all around Europe, and is considered an Invasive Alien Species in some EU countries). As human architecture tends toward efficiency, simplified forms, straight lines and

a lack of ornament or recesses (hole-like shapes)—that could grant secondary and alternative usages to more-than-human species—, the distance between humans and other species grows inversely proportional to their daily interactions. And so do their respective territories.

Most birds mark their territories by chanting. They compose their sense of place and belonging by triangulating, on one side, between one or two focal points (the nest and the location from where they sing), and on the other, a *periphery*. Which, according to philosopher Vinciane Despret, is where lies the possibility of interaction. With regard to bird territories, periphery underlies a crucial dimension: it always entails contiguity with another territory; it is predicated on allowing and recognizing there are other territories. For Despret (2019), “[territories] are always adjacent. We won’t find a territory ‘in the middle of nowhere.’ They are always in joint presence of other territories. They are always neighbours” (p. 160). Neighbouring, that is, to live in the vicinity of others, is essential to the definition of territory itself. And not only that but “signs of peaceful neighbouring would be constituted by the presence of a vocal canon, made up of songs and counter-songs coordinated between the males, or by the absence of signs of territorial conflicts” (Stamps, 1994, as cited in Despret, 2019, p. 166). So here, to return to Bernie Krause’s acoustic niche hypothesis is inescapable. By proposing that members of these overlapping territories constitute “acoustic collectivities that vocalise in tune” (Krause, 2012, p. 110), Krause has extensively described instances where different animals, from the same species or even from different species, will time their vocalizations with one another (p. 105). In other words, they are listening, not only *to* but *with* each other.

For Despret, Krause’s theory of acoustic niche segmentation, with its allocation or subdivision of different vocalizations may help explain how certain territorial disputes may be solved, but not only. Despret states that territorialization (the act of creating and managing a territory) is intrinsically compositional, albeit not in a strictly musical sense but in the sense of a social musicality: “territories are compositions and melodic arrangements” (Despret, 2019, p. 168). And if territories are to be taken as compositions, then there is a double dimension to their inhabitation that is indissolubly expressive (since it is by chanting that a territory is constituted) and geopolitical (since all inhabitation is, first and foremost, a cohabitation): “territories draw networks of sonic territorialities” (Despret, 2019, p. 169). Which brings us back to Jardim do Passeio Alegre and how the loudest voices on this specific recording belong to two different species of birds that run the whole gamut from starting to sing at different times to vocalizing occasionally; then, alternately; and finally, all together at the same time as if singing on top of each other. But in all, keeping and allowing for the other colony not only to express itself, but partaking and participating in an expressive collectivity that assembles more than only bird species, in the first place. An environmental assemblage of transceiver agents—a temporarily assembled collectivity of human and more-than-human sound-makers and receivers.

4 Referring to elements of different species cohabiting in the same geographic area, and thus frequently encountering one another.

According to Despret (2019), there are very few case studies of what she calls “expressive cosmopolitics” (p. 176). Researchers in biology or even most bioacousticians tend to focus on one species and the relations therein, more than on interspecific cohabitations and contaminations. There is also the common conception that if birds from different species sing in the same location, their frequency ranges close to one another, and even maybe similar feeding habits, then each group would try to better occupy the sonic field, distance away from each other, or try to mask the other’s signals, as to do otherwise would be to enter into competition. But Despret finds the studies of bioacousticians Rachele Malavasi and Almo Farina in Lazio, Italy, arguing for a completely different reality. According to Despret, Malavasi and Farina have found that different bird species in cohabitation do not avoid overlaps and they may sing during the same period that others birds also do. But these overlaps are “deliberately emitted in a way to mask the least possible the range in use by other animals” (Despret, 2019, p. 178). Farina’s (2014) own “species recognition hypothesis (SRH) supposes that species living in sympatry⁴ try to reduce the risk of utilizing similar sonic traits that could confound species in reproduction and create the risk of hybridizations” (p. 43).

Such acute attention not only to intraspecific interactions but to the whole of a specific and lived-in sonotope brings to mind Labelle’s concept of a “freedom of listening” rooted in an unwavering commitment to the present and to presence: listening as being present and being in the present. If the sounds we hear are “always the production of a shared world” (Labelle, 2018), then it’s all the more striking and accurate that Despret (2019) describes Farina’s hypothesis as leading to “neither a cacophony nor silent intervals, but a score made of relays and reprises” (p. 178). A genuine coordination that may attest not only to the strong sense of cohabitation of both parakeets and starlings, but also, more broadly to how species of birds tune (or harmonize, so to speak) within their groups, with other groups and with their close environments. If they arrive at tuning their overlaps and crossovers, is because “each has an experience of the others and they have learned the spectral structure of each group’s chants” (Despret, 2019, p. 178). Clearly, an instance of sound-makers actively engaging in listening with.

A territory, then, is fundamentally a form of attention (and not a form of property, as per Western economics); or a form of “creating modes of attention” (Despret, 2019, p. 180). Despret mentions how, in her view, what Malavasi and Farina have managed to do is “pay attention to the way in which birds pay attention to each other and to others” (Despret, 2019, p. 181), which resonates directly and sympathetically with the previously mentioned definition of listening as “sensing, attuning and noticing” (Kanngieser, 2020). Listening with such instances of expressive cosmopolitics (instead of solely listening *to* them) may then enable the capacity to keep in mind that all of these interactions are in danger of disappearing, and will disappear faster if we do not pay close attention, and try to attune to other rhythms and cadences other than our own.

And what this disappearance will entail is not only a specific type of aural silence (the absence of sound) but the obliteration of a multiplicity of ways of inhabiting and cohabiting this shared planet. By paying closer attention to such impromptu groupings that have so far avoided extinction, expulsion, scarcity and the insurmountable transformation of their ecosystems, we may come to understand other ways of situating ourselves within our close environments and how, instead of simply continuing to expropriate and appropriate to, more space, craft territories of chant together *with* our more-than-human neighbours.

5. CODA

Jardim do Passeio Alegre, Porto, September 20, 2023, 7.00 am

Even though the sun will only fully rise in about twenty minutes, it is already daytime and the sky is almost entirely blueish white. The traffic is starting to pick up or maybe is the fact that it is becoming more preponderant, since both starlings and parakeets have ceased their sun salutation. There are still a few singing birds but they are fewer and farther between. Most likely, also farther away physically from the microphones, having flown to other parts of the Jardim and other locations, daytime feeding grounds, etc. We are left with the distant sound of waves coming from where the Douro meets the Atlantic, other birds chirping in the middle of the park, and the droning sound of a boat engine as it navigates upstream.

Almost nothing sparks a recollection of what just transpired for the last half an hour. Almost, that is, except for the experience of those that listened together with during that specific moment in time. Extending, even if ephemerally, the conditions for an expressive cosmopolitics to be construed, understood and broadcast amidst a world in rapid transformation and environmental disrepair. That it so happens to take place between bird species, one considered to be endemic and the other exotic, speaks loudly about the consequences of globalisation, with its colonial and post-colonial forced displacement of living entities around the planet. But it speaks louder about the potential for interspecific forms of listening with—even in massively disturbed and engineered environments, like the ones of contemporary urban centers in Europe—as tools and methods to resist and counter what seems like a far too predictable silencing of the world.

Rewinding back to the starting point of this article, Berger (1980) concludes that

[l]ooking at each animal, the unaccompanied zoo visitor is alone. As for the crowds, they belong to a species which has at last been isolated. This historic loss, to which zoos are a monument, is now irredeemable for the culture of capitalism. (p. 26)

That the feral descendants of captured animals, as well as their wild neighbours, are bridging and shattering isolationisms, whether specist or otherwise, seems apt. And perhaps through sensing, attuning and noticing with we may come to tear down the monuments to those historic losses, and take a seat among our neighbours.

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