

Listening, Walking and Languaging in the City: An Incomplete Field Guide to the Voices of the Birds of Amman

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Abstract

This text resides alongside a soundwalk that took place in Al-Hussein Park, Amman, Jordan at the end of the first day of the *Art and the City* conference at Columbia Global Centre in Amman, June 2023, coordinated by Columbia University's Andrew Mellon Fellow Tijen Tunali. This text is not an explanatory component but an additional and complementary chorus of bird and human voices. As an art form, soundwalks take audiences out of the gallery, theatre and concert hall and connect participants to the sounds of a place, to listening at a specific site. A temporary intervention, soundwalks are a form of public art that enable audiences to engage socially and politically with place. This soundwalk was oriented to our troubled relationship with the more-than-human world, specifically the calls and songs of wild urban birds. In addition, at the end of the soundwalk a participatory component encouraged attendees to contribute to a voicing structured using experimental written scores.

This text is an informal narrative in a story-telling and inclusive writerly style, grounded in fieldwork, creativity and research. It is polyphonic: the voices of the birds occur throughout the text as do several of the participants from the soundwalk. The structure of the text drifts and spirals like a bird gliding upwards on a warm thermal. It circles around the soundwalk that is at the heart of the writing. There are pauses and diversions throughout.

I arrive in Amman, late. It's dark, mild. I am picked up from the airport and driven to the hotel by a friendly driver. The moon shows through the clouds as we drive northeast toward the ancient city. The moon is waning, about four days after full, big and bright, silvery, high in the sky, hanging over this place where human settlement can be traced back thousands of years. In daylight, the color of the city is a muted primrose yellow, the color of the desert, the color of limestone. The expanse of the city is across seven hills, known as jabals, each of which roughly defines a neighborhood. Today Amman's geography is often referred to as eight circles which extend westwards.

A couple of days before the soundwalk in Al-Hussein Park I stumble through another place as part of my fieldwork process. What I thought was a large city park turns out to be a mostly derelict site. On the map I discovered it is King Abdullah I Park. Grasses grow amongst the abandoned buildings. Clambouring up and down sets of steps, broken walls, and overgrown paths, there is a good view of the north west side of the city. I am outside the third circle

here, along Pr Shaker Street and Al-Sharif Naser Ben Jamil Street, both busy roads with eight lanes that are difficult to navigate as a pedestrian. In contrast Al-Fayhaa Street is a quiet suburban street that bounds the park to the east. It is warm and quiet up here, above the traffic. The light sandy color of the buildings stretches into the distance, the city is dreamy as it hugs the hills. Birds that I see or hear and recognize are Chaffinches, Blackbirds, House Sparrows, Laughing Doves, Swifts, Eurasian Hoopoes.

te-te-te-te-te-te-te-te-te-ta-ta-ta-ta

tra tra tree tra

Chaffinch

The call to prayer sounds. It sonically shapes the structure of the day and night across the city, every day. The call is like a mix of spoken word and song; it is a chant, poetic, rhythmic, and immersive. I listen to the materiality of the sounds, its transporting nature; recitation, recollection, repetition. From some parts of the city it is possible to hear two calls overlap creating a layering of voice that is doubled,

doubling, an echo, not quite synchronous, not quite a duet. In some other locations the amplification of the prayer creates a distortion of the voice shaping it into a rippling, dissolving reverberation.

tzzt tzzt it-it
Common Blackbird

zoi-ee zoi-ee
Palestine Sunbird

Flowers bloom in rich colours - majenta, violet, bright yellow, orange. The streets are scented with blossom. Oleander is common as are jasmine and bougainvillea that stretch over buildings and walls. Black locust trees, figs, grevillea trees, jacaranda, palms grow along the neighbourhood streets and the roots of some mature trees push the pavements up into contorted shapes. Cats are everywhere, watching,

noticing, dozing, stretching. Swifts fly in large numbers at dawn and dusk, calling with their thin high voices.

eeeeeeeeee eeeeeeeeeeeeeee eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee
Swift

What we hear and what we do not hear
What we hear of the birds and what we do not hear of the birds

At the end of the first day of the conference, we gather along Muhammad As-Saeed Al-Batayni Street, the eighth circle, before heading into Al Hussein Park. It is late afternoon in the warmth of early summer, June. We walk south.



Photo Credit Joanna Matuszak

*King Hussein Park. Who was he?
An invisible king, when did his voice break?
today chirping sounds linger in lieu of his fanfares
dry heat has its own sound
cracklecracklecrackle
grass breaks earth crunches
Friederike Landau-Donnelly*

*Stepping out the amphitheatre of the Columbia Global Centers
in Amman in order to join a soundwalk in King Hussein Park,
organised and performed by Catherine Clover, presented a
challenge for me. Indeed, it took me considerable time and
effort, to slow down and clear my mind from my thoughts after
a full day of conference presentations, discussions and debates
Konstantinos Pittas*

*chip-a-chip chip-a-chip
White Spectacled Bulbul*

*We had spent all day in the small, isolated auditorium of
Columbia Global Center: Amman, listening to and discussing
each participant's conference presentation. The start of the
walk, then, initiated us into an entirely different sensory
atmosphere: from air conditioning to the summer evening heat,
from the smell of coffee and limestone walls to that of asphalt,
exhaust, and trees, and from the quiet shuffles of paper under
spoken words amplified by microphones to the sounds of cars,
horns, and people spending leisure time in the King Hussein
Gardens.
Kyle B. Craig*

*Communal, Performative, Cheerful: The joint tour through Al-
Hussein Park first of all sharpened my senses. While the hours in
the conference hall at the Art and the City conference made me
focus mainly on the cognitive, Catherine's performance brought
me - metaphorically speaking - back into my body.
Mareike Schwartz*

*mmm mmm mmm
Common Pigeon*

As we walk, we move through space, through this place. We
start as individuals, negotiating the movements of the group
and our place in the group, our place in the park. As we walk

we listen. Our breathing starts to align with our footsteps,
our footsteps connect to our heartbeats. We form, break
apart, form again. As we walk we bond, we become a group
walking and listening together, as we walk we absorb the
place, and the place absorbs us, through sound, through
listening. As we listen and look we are noticed, we are seen,
we are heard.

As a group we fold and unfold. We are listening to this park
at a particular moment in time, on a particular day. We are
part of the park and we contribute to the sentience of the
park. We walk slowly, we listen.

To the left are the sounds of sport on the playing field, it's
football: whistles shriek, male adult voices shout, grunt, call,
instruct, advise, direct. Kids run, kick, squeal with joy, scuff
their feet on the dry ground.

*We made our way through the gardens, hoping to catch the
sounds of the birds residing in the area, but initially, it was not
easy to hear anything aside from the sounds of a sports game
happening at the same time as our walk.
Kyle B Craig*

A helicopter overhead.

*Although I could not see any birds around, I could feel their
presence and understand their initial hesitation to condone with
the noisy chatting of a group of 40 people that was interrupting
the calmness of the park.
Konstantinos Pittas*

Dine-in or take away. The radio plays from a café. The kids
and adults from the football game come here for hot snacks
and drinks, hungry, thirsty, chattering. Falafel, hummus,
arias, musakhan, kaak, knafeh.

*As we passed a small bar, the stand with the menu written in
Arabic - the language that I did not speak or read made the
visual experience and the unfamiliarity of the place very "loud
and clear" to me.
Joanna Matuszak*

hmm hmm hmm hmm

Common Pigeon

A pop song is playing on the radio. A male voice sings in Arabic accompanied by a stringed instrument and a flute-like sound, perhaps the oud and the reed pipe. Tempo is upbeat, dynamic, energetic. I have been told the use of traditional musical instruments is a popular form of contemporary song in Jordan.

trra-trra ee-ah

trra-trra ee-ah

Common Blackbird

It wasn't the first time I paid attention to bird sounds, but it was definitely the first time I did so while walking, and with the precise purpose of "archiving" as much sound as I could and

paying attention to the differences between different species of birds, and the experience was really enriching.

Vittorio Parisi

A large flurry of small birds chitter in a group of trees near the swings. It is impossible to see them amongst the thick foliage, but the mix of their voices is loud and audible. They could be House Sparrows, Crested Larks and White Spectacled Bulbuls, birds that are common here. They are unlikely to be Arabian Babblers in this urban setting although these gregarious and social native birds are common across the country.

Car horns punctuate the soundscape. Our footsteps are louder on some surfaces than others.





*Did we really listen after a first day of conferencing?
the myth of listening unconditionally
what's the color of your auditory distraction?*
Friederike Landau-Donnelly

I am also a person who easily gets distracted, and whose brain is completely messed-up by internet culture, while walking and silently trying to focus on the birds I couldn't help but think about the satirical, internet-spread conspiracy theory "Birds aren't real", made up by the artist Peter McIndoe in 2017, and that assumes that birds are actually drones that the government (precisely the US government) created to spy on citizens. A fake theory that was created as a joke but quickly became a "true" theory, followed by thousands of people.

Vittorio Parisi

What we hear and what we do not hear

What we hear of the birds and what we do not hear of the birds

Bird life is rich in this country. Jordan is at the meeting point of three continents and is on one of the main migratory bird flyways across the globe, from south to north, and north to south, each year, every year, year in and year out. Yet some birds no longer migrate because winters are warmer in the north due to climate change. Migration is exhausting for the birds and is also dangerous, and more than half the young birds that migrate for the first time do not survive the journey. Some birds like White Storks are very visible when they fly through Jordan's skies yet many are now choosing not to migrate. They stay in the north, in Switzerland, Poland, Germany, throughout the winter in their huge unwieldy nests perched on tall streetlights or brick chimneys in cities where food is plentiful.

Some of the migratory birds that continue to fly on their twice yearly journeys over Jordan are Little Green Bee-Eater, Desert Lark, Blackstart, Hooded Wheatear, White-crowned Black Wheatear, Arabian Warbler, Sooty Falcon, Lammergeier, White-Eyed Gulls, Collared Flycatcher, Thrush Nightingale, Graceful Prinia, Pallid Harrier, Honey Buzzard, Black Stork, Black Kite, Syrian Woodpecker, Greater Spotted Cuckoo.

Native birds in Jordan include the Long-billed Pipit, Sand Partridge, Desert Owl, Tristram's Starling, Fan-Tailed Raven, Striolated Bunting, Hooded Wheatear, White-Crowned Wheatear, Thick-Billed Lark, Basalt Wheatear, Red-Rumped Wheatear, Desert Lark, Clamorous Reed Warbler, Trumpeter Finch, Dead Sea Sparrow, Sinai

Rosefinch, Palestine Sunbird, Syrian Serin, Blue-Cheeked Be-Eater, Sandgrouse, Arabian Green Bee-Eater, Arabian Babbler, Arabian Warbler.

Common birds in Amman include Barn Swallow, Black Kite, Blackcap, Common Blackbird, Common Buzzard, Common Myna, Common Pigeon, Common Swift, Eurasian Jackdaw, Greenfinch, Grey Heron, Hooded Crow, House Sparrow, Jay, Pied Wagtail, Skylark, Cetti's Warbler, Sedge Warbler, Willow Warbler, Great Tit, Peregrine Falcon, , Grey Heron, Little Egret, Chiffchaff.

cr-craarr cr-craarr cr-craarr
Hooded Crow



Photo Credit Joanna Matuszak

What we hear and what we do not hear

What we hear of the birds and what we do not hear of the birds

We continue. Walking, listening. Further along from the football field and the café are the swings. The swings have a high pitched squeal as the kids play on them, swinging back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. The birds in the trees nearby, the House Sparrows, Crested Larks, White Spectacled Bulbuls, (the speculative Arabian Babblers) seem to vocally respond to the repeating rhythmic sound of metal on metal, a resonant frequency that matches and somehow attunes to parts of the birds' songs. Timbre and pitch coordinate. The friction of the metal frame and the chains, the hooks and their brackets, the regularity of the metallic rub creates a rhythm, a momentum for song; singing together, chorusing, duetting. Metallic sound and bird's voice seem to be mutually tuned, in this place. Back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. Squeak and squeal and scrape, a shrill of delight, repeated repeated repeated in an arcing succession, up into the afternoon sky of soft blue and back down to earth, dreamy late afternoon warmth. There are one two three four five and six notes sounding from the swing, notes linked by a sliding glissando, lower pitch when the swing passes it's still point, what would be the hanging vertical of the chains at rest, higher pitch at both extremities or heights, the heights that the kids reach as they swing up up into the sky. The higher they reach, the higher the pitch of the swing's metallic sound.

We turn and continue. Few of us are local and only some of us speak Arabic.

Under the low leafy Chinaberry trees, a group of ten local women gather. They are singing together, beating time and talking. We look. They see us, acknowledge us, and ululay towards us; loud, dynamic rounded vowels echo, they gesture, smiling. I learn later that zaghrouta is the Arabic name for the English word ululation. Often performed at occasions like weddings, women sing and perform together informally as well. The zaghrouta is high-pitched and loud, an expression of strong emotion particularly happiness. They see our group as we look and listen, they enjoy our presence as an audience. We pass, and they continue their

singing. One woman performs, a single voice, a storytelling rhythm and metre. I have heard of the rural zajal songs of Jordan, which are traditional improvised oral poetry that is a mixture of speech and song. The performer is accompanied by the other women loudly clapping time, the rhythm is strong and immersive. We hear their voices gradually fade as we continue around the park.

There is a light breeze. Further along two men share a bench and each smoke a hookah. The waterpipes are on the ground in front of them, tall objects with chamber, bowl, pipe, and hose, made of glass, ceramic, metal. The men smoke and exchange a few words but are mostly quiet; reading, sitting, watching, smoking.

We move through the sonic fabric of the park, through the song structures of the park, the park that is sonically enculturated by the birds, the singing of the birds. The birds sing as individuals, and they also sing in chorus. Their song cultures merge, blend and are distinct in this place, governed by the wider soundscape of the park and the dominance of anthropocentric sound, human sound. Their song cultures shape and are shaped by the park. We listen. We walk. We start to hear the sonic patterning, the pauses, the silences. The pure notes, the whistles, the murmurs, the hisses, the hoots, the chirps, the chatterings, the warbles, the calls, the exchanges. Our walk is shaped by sound, by how much we hear, and by how much we don't hear. How much we listen, how much we don't listen. The presence of sounds, the absence of sounds. The lives of the birds unfold in this park, we hear their sonic world, their vocal world. We witness the cultural lives of the birds through song, through their singing, through their silence. How much we hear, how much we don't hear.

So, at some point I asked myself: "Imagine if the birds weren't actually real and I was listening to robots?". And such intrusive thought accompanied me all the way to the moment Catherine let the whole group stop and reenact those sounds: "what if I am actually imitating the sounds of a bunch of robots?", a question I almost immediately turned into another one: "in the end, would it make any difference? As far as I'm concerned, I could be a robot myself without knowing it..." Only at that point I was able to cast out those silly thoughts and refocus on what we were doing:



Photo Credit Joanna Matuszak

cra cra cra

cra *cra* *cra*

yeowp yeowp yeowp cru cru cru

bzzz bzzz beep boop...wait a minute!

Vittorio Parisi

We try to be attentive, to hear, to listen, to notice, to immerse. We get distracted, we lose attention, we chat, we talk, we converse, we quieten, then we are attentive again. We listen.

What we hear and what we do not hear
What we hear of the birds and what we do not hear of the birds

Having started to attune ourselves to the park, we find ourselves in a brick structure that is open to the sky. It provides us with a place to stop, to reflect, to voice.

The time we spent in the stone structure (I am not sure what the building was for. Was it new or a reconstructed older structure?) was for me the most focused time. We stood in a circle. Even if we were not given sheets of paper with birds' sounds to imitate, I think we could keep the silence and focus on the aural sense of the moment. The birds' chirping could be heard but it was, maybe, by one or two birds. I suppose the number does not matter or should not matter. The birds were heard.

Joanna Matuszak

Eventually, we found a small stone patio away from the quotidian noise, where we decided to stop and listen. For a few minutes, we heard nothing. I also remember some "false alarms" in which I heard a sound I thought to be a bird's call, but I could no longer hear it when I tried to listen again more closely. Then, after some moments of practicing calm and patience, and with the help of Catherine's skillful bird calls, the sonic world of the

birds surrounded us. The process did not feel unidirectional, as if the sounds were always present, and we simply learned to hear them. Instead, it was as though the birds also chose to enter into a sonic relationship with us.

Kyle B. Craig

if you were asked to impersonate a bird, would you feel free or embarrassed? Do birds ever think to pretend they're humans? What's gained, what's lost? How much more can you hear?

Friederike Landau-Donnelly

Part of me wishes we did not make any sound ourselves but stood silent. On the other hand, our attempt to imitate birds' chirping made me aware of the impossibility of understanding another language – another channel of communication. Being aware of the obvious to contemporary art audience license to

interpret art in any way one wants, I wonder if our attempt to imitate birds' chirping was futile or hopeful. Maybe I was or could be a signal that one should try to communicate even without any hope for being understood or heard?

Joanna Matuszak

The voicing is not about training or expertise, nor about mimicry, nor about deceiving the birds, not even about *becoming bird*. It is about having the birds in mind (and ear) as we attempt a voicing together in the context of the lives of the wild birds. It is perhaps about becoming a little less human because we are focused on their lives, their world, their voices, as far as we can, in their space, as temporary visitors.

I hand out the scores.



Photo Credit Joanna Matuszak

Common Blackbird عئاشلا رورحشلا alshahrur alshaayie

Common Blackbirds are native to Europe and the Middle East. Their songs are beautiful and complex, not easy for the human voice. Their notes are clearly distinct, pure whistling golden sounds. Because of their songs the birds were popular companions taken across the globe during the European colonial period, introduced to many traditional lands where they have survived and thrived, sometimes threatening local bird species. Blackbirds have a repertoire that uses distinct verses and they incorporate many variations on a theme. The repetition of certain phrases or riffs are used again and again. These short phrases are achievable for our voices. The score is based on several of these repeated phrases. The timbre and pitch of the Blackbirds' voices are very hard for us to achieve but what we can manage is the rhythm and metre of the song, the prosody, the patterning of sounds, albeit far slower than the birds' delivery

trra trra ee-ah
trra trra ee-ah

ah-ah ee
tzzt tzzt it-it
tre tre

Common Pigeon قامامح hamama

Common Pigeons live on every continent except Antarctica. Like Blackbirds, they have been popular birds taken to accompany Europeans during the heights of colonisation. They are robust and resilient and have readily adapted to each new location. They have mixed reputations with humans and are much loved and readily spurned in equal amounts. Pigeon fancying is popular in Amman and groups of the birds can be seen flying over the city at dusk. Pigeons are easier for humans to vocalise. Our voices seem to more readily align with their voices. The Blackbirds' score is a simplified short section of song, but the score for the Pigeons is a more faithful rendering of their songs. The Dove family is relatively easy for human voices to emulate as their voices seem well-attuned to our humming, murmuring,

non-linguistic sounds that often occur in conversations. The three Doves or Pigeons that are common in Jordan are the Common Pigeon, the Laughing Dove and the Eurasian Collared Dove.

hmm hmm hmm
cu-cu-cu-cu cooo
cr-cr-cr-cr-cooo
crrrrr-oooo

bucket-a-coo
coroocoo
rackitty-coo

Hooded Crow ورك عنقم muqnie kuru

Hooded Crow is common across Europe and the Middle East. Like the Doves and Pigeons, the Hooded Crows use relatively easy sounds for human voices. Highly social and generally loud and raucous, their voices tend to command attention especially when large groups congregate and converse.. Much lighter in colour than many Crows and Ravens, these birds are grey and black, often paler in the Middle East. Crows and Ravens live on every continent except Antarctica and they readily share our large cities with us.

crrarr crrarr
crrarr crrarr crrarr
cr-craarr cr-crraar crrarr crrarr
crrarr

White Spectacled Bulbul لببل ابياب bulbul 'abyad

White Spectacled Bulbul is a songbird. Like the Palestine Sunbird it is native to the Middle East but its habitat also stretches into Turkey. It is common in these areas including urban and suburban environments. Often in small chattering groups, this Bulbul has a slightly louder voice with more distinctly separate notes, a little easier for the human voice to attempt. Their songs are a mix of fast varied sounds of similar pitch and timbre, with little melody.

trrrrrrr
 chee chee chee chee chee a chip a chip
 chip-a-chip chip-a-chip chip-a-chip

trrrrr che-che
 trrrrrr che-che

ch-ch-ch-ch-ch-ch-ch
 ch-ch-ch

Palestine Sunbird نيطسلف شم ش رئا ط tayir shams filastin

Palestine Sunbirds are local to the Middle East. They are native songbirds, common in the area, and were declared the national bird of Palestine in 2015. They are the only birds that carry the name of Palestine. Their dark rich rainbow colours are striking. Palestine Sunbirds drink nectar from flowers with long curved bills, and are readily

found in urban and suburban gardens. All songbirds learn their sounds when young and have dialects and accents that reflect their location, just like we do. In this way their songs are shaped by the landscape in which they live. The songs of the Palestine Sunbirds in this park are a lovely tinkling repeated sound with some complex phrases that use a sliding glissando between the notes.

zoi-ee trup
 zoi-ee trup

chit chit chit
 ch-ch-ch eet-eet-eet
 chi chi chi chi chi
 chi chi chi
 zee-oi zee-oi



Photo Credit Joanna Matuszak

What we hear and what we do not hear

What we hear of the birds and what we do not hear of the birds

We do some warm-up exercises to rehearse, to hear our voices in this place before attempting the scores. In-breath, out-breath, *mmmmmm*.

ohhhhhh
eeeeeeee
mmmmmm
aaaahhhh

In-breath. Out-breath.

Aaaaahhhh

We tentatively begin. Our voices are a suggestion, a hint, a small contribution. Language and landscape. Song and landscape. Sound and geography. In-breath, out-breath. The shape of a soundwave as it travels through the park, how the geography of the park shapes the soundwave and where it travels. What we hear and what we do not hear. What we hear of the birds and what we do not hear of the birds.

zoi-ee trup
mmmmmm
chip a chip
crrarr crrarr
cu-cu-cu-cu cooo



Photo Credit Joanna Matuszak

When attempting to challenge the dualism of humans and nature in introductory cultural anthropology courses, I often explain to students how birds alter their calls to adapt to the sounds of urbanization, something my dear mother-in-law (herself an avid birder) originally shared with me. If birds and other nonhuman creatures must make drastic changes to survive in our presence, what does that say about our responsibility towards them? How must we challenge human-centric views of the world by becoming more attuned to our mutually constitutive and multisensory ways of being alongside the nonhuman? For me, the sound walk through King Hussein Gardens was an evocative reminder of such pertinent questions.

Kyle B Craig

The rising and falling glissando of Palestine Sunbirds, the chattering of White Spectacled Bulbuls, the crrrraaarrrr of Crows, the humming of Pigeons, the golden melodies of Blackbirds. As we sing our voices make different sounds using different frequencies. As we try to attune to the birds' voices, we attempt a sonic connection, a connection that we may have had in the distant past but one that we have lost, one that we have forgotten, one that is no longer familiar.

As the group attempted to communicate with them, I started picking up a chorus of bird calls, a shy orchestra of low and medium pitch sounds that felt as a belated welcoming gesture to the newcomers. The walk allowed me to escape, even briefly, from the urban landscape along with its human-made noise pollution, to adapt to less anthropocentric environments, and to finetune with the temporalities of nature.

Konstantinos Pittas

As with any artwork, if we are to return and experience it from memory, that original experience, whatever it was, is colored by where we are now, what is happening around us, close by or far away. So, now it is the conflict between Israel and Hamas, civilians in Palestine living through hell . . .

Joanna Matuszak

What we hear and what we do not hear

What we hear of the birds and what we do not hear of the birds

Palestine Sunbird نيطس ل ف س م ش ر ئ ا ط tayir shams filastin

zee-oi zee-oi

oi-eet oi-eet

zoi-ee

t-t-t-t-t-t

t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t

tee-oi tee-oi tee-oi

ti-ti-ti-ti-ti-ti

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