

Blackbird Songs: More-than-Human Aural Histories in the Anthropocene

Concepción Cortés Zulueta
Universidad de Málaga, España

Abstract Due to the anthropocenic momentum of the pandemic, birdsong turned into an alternative avenue of research. First, the relative human silence allowed birds to be more present and audible, even if they were singing at a lower volume, and this aroused a nostalgia for what we were losing to anthropogenic noise. Then, a reflection followed about how history and birdsong intertwined, even about birdsong as history, as a non-human or more-than-human history that sings and offers multispecies stories of a certain place and time. This chapter adopts a situated approach that combines academic research with moments of attentive listening and personal experiences involving birds and their sounds and specifically, blackbirds, and an individual male blackbird in particular. Stressing the materiality of the text and the instant (of listening, of writing) it attempts to offer, in parallel, blackbird episodes as lived and listened to from a human perspective together with a reflection on the songs of this blackbird as a collection of sounds (from other birds, from humans) selected from the surrounding soundscape in as many episodes, with the aim of presenting those songs as more-than-human stories and histories of that situated place.

Keywords Birdsong. Blackbird. Aurality. Mimicry. Narratives.

In the gardens of a complex of tourist apartments located in a medium-size village on the south coast of Spain, there is a local blackbird (*Turdus merula*) that can be heard singing for long hours, day and night, from mid-winter to late summer, perched above the garage of a car workshop. This blackbird, besides singing his own themes (a percentage of which he shares with other blackbirds nearby, like a local, cultural, repertoire), also mimics and archives several other birds and some anthropogenic noises. Mixed with the rest of the song of this blackbird, there is an imitation of the call of a rooster.

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Because, although the blackbird sings close to the tourist seafront, a hundred meters inland the area is still rural, with crops, goats, chickens and plastic greenhouses. A busy road separates the rural area from the more urbanised seaside, and the blackbird reminds us about it by imitating car brakes screeching on the adjacent roundabout, as well as by singing the roar of an engine and other metallic frictions that have accompanied humans since the Industrial Revolution. In his song, the blackbird combines this mechanistic past-present with a more digital and supposedly ludic present-future that he echoes in the form of recurring beeps and electronic alarms, or the ringtone of a smartphone. He also borrows the voices of several species of other birds. Both the menaced, declining ones and the introduced parakeets that signal the degraded environment. Either predators or prey.

Hence, the songs and imitations of this blackbird are an aural archive and narrative of the history of his surroundings, created by a non-human animal, in a non-human manner. Because the blackbird listens to the soundscape, selects and then composes and sings back, archiving, narrating and singing the histories of the place where he¹ lives.

[early morning, first light, walking out]
a blackbird has landed on the pavement
and he watches me behind his round eyes, curious.²

In my life, and lived places, blackbirds (common blackbirds, *Turdus merula*, *mirlos* in Spanish, or *merli* in Italian) have always been around. If maybe not exactly the default bird – that honour would perhaps be more fitting for the common but unfortunately declining house sparrow – when growing up in a southwestern European temperate region like the centre of the Iberian plateau, blackbirds were those other bigger and darker birds, hanging out mostly on their own around gardens, parks and suburban areas. Birds that were instantly recognisable, with their long tails and their half solemn, half electric mannerisms. Like when one of them freezes for long seconds after noticing you, her or his head up, evaluating the situation with bright, dark eyes more or less noticeably rimmed with orange, then to decide to abruptly resume his or her activities, lowering the head and running full speed, charging across the grass. Or when you hear noises coming from the undergrowth or a pile of fallen leaves, and afterwards a glimpse of frenzied feathers, beak and feet allows you to find out that a blackbird is responsible for the ruckus, throwing clods of soil and vegetal matter into the air, everywhere, while looking for food. In a way much like how you would picture a cartoon character, busy while searching for the keys in the sock drawer.

Blackbirds also feel like a lesson from a basic ornithology course presenting the urban birds of Eurasia, North Africa, and parts of South Asia – as well as of Australia and New Zealand, where they were introduced (Aparicio 2016, 12). First, the aforementioned house sparrows, and the visual differences between the darker and marked males and the greyish-brown females. Then, the blackbirds, with dark males and dark females, again

¹ In the case of blackbirds, males are the ones singing. However, in the last years more attention has been paid to female song, since in the majority of species females do sing, contrary to what was believed in the past due to a bias that imposed as a world standard what was prevalent in temperate regions: Odom et al. 2014.

² Verses between sections are by the Author.

distinct because of sexual dimorphism, but with subtler differences for the untrained eye. Female blackbirds are not really black, but dark brown, with a slightly mottled breast, so the English name of the species does not describe them adequately. Male blackbirds, treated as better representatives for the whole species, are the black ones, with glossy black feathers and bright orange or yellow bills.

Still, it remains feasible to visually distinguish the dark brown female blackbirds from the black male blackbirds. Especially if you share the same area with them, due to all the opportunities they provide to practice. In these circumstances it is almost impossible to avoid *blackbirds*, not to see them or to hear them, not to cross paths with them on a daily basis: momentarily standing in your way, perching on a cable or a lamppost, or flying away while yawping an alarm call. Yet, at times it is surprising how little some people notice blackbirds, provided they know what a blackbird is. This appears to be a symptom of the general disconnection because of which many people do not pay attention to birds at all. Birds are part of the daily background, they are undeniably there, but even if they are perceived unconsciously, they are not registered. Unless something remarkable or out of the ordinary happens, and then they are acknowledged. However, if you are a human living among blackbirds, they surely are still here, as pausing and looking out of the window, attentive and careful listening, or a short walk will demonstrate.

Due to the anthropocenic momentum of the pandemic, people started paying more attention to birds from their windows, particularly to their sounds and singing (Mynott 2020; Pritchard 2020). Birdsong turned into an alternative avenue of research, or a route, already trodden, in which to dive in and delve more deeply. As illustrated by concepts like the “Phonocene”, coined by Vinciane Despret after a statement by Donna Haraway calling for “the ear to hear terrestrial sounds, the sounds of everything linked to the earth, and it includes the atmosphere” (Vincent 2019).³ Despret herself introduced her book *Habiter en Oiseau* with a segment (first chord, counterpoint) devoted to a blackbird:

At first, it was a blackbird. My bedroom window had been left open for the first time in months, like a sign of victory over the winter. His song woke me up at dawn. He sang with all his heart, with all his strength, with all his blackbird’s talent. Another one responded from a little bit further away, without doubt from a chimney in the vicinity. I couldn’t go back to sleep. (13-14)

In what follows, she explains that what kept her awake and attentive, intrigued and amazed, were the incessant variations and counterpoints of the blackbird, the succession of sung phrases shaping his account, full of sentences that felt so close to the spoken word, a “roman audiophonique” in which beauty, silence, and song were in tension, at stake, resting on the shoulders of that blackbird: “My window, from that day on, remained open every night” (13).

That sentiment resonates with me. Particularly when in a subsequent event, a reading-cum-performance in collaboration with artists Mélanie

3 Translation by the Author. The term “Phonocene”/Phonocène was not in the interview.

Courtinat and Antoine Bertin hosted by Barcelona's CCCB and titled *Phonocene* that took place during the pandemic (October 2020), Despret insinuated that, at some point, an attachment would be felt. The singing blackbird would become *votre merle*, 'your blackbird', mi *mirlo* (CCCB 2020). My windows remain open, as well, day and night, while the local blackbirds roam, call, and sing. Just right now, at dusk on an early May evening, in the gardens surrounding the apartment buildings of this coastal mainly - but not totally - holiday complex, a blackbird shrilled. This time, a very peculiar quavering squeal only heard when these birds are dealing with their fledgling chicks, already energetically strolling out of the nest. Minutes later, a bundle of adults, situated in different parts of the gardens, started their back and forth 'the dark is coming' *tchinks*, happening all year round, tails popping up and down with each call. Tonight, punctuated by occasional *ss-rees*, the gliding shrieks endorsing the Doppler effect of the swifts, and the overarching whistles of the spotless starlings.⁴ Then, a kestrel made his presence known, this time through a couple of high gurgles instead of the usual, ascending cascade of squawks, as a European robin *txan txan txans*⁵ from inside the bushes, and another blackbird issues a rattling alarm call in passing, while flying away, and while the remaining light keeps fading.

This twilight soundscape, and its accompanying scene, in a certain sense is like any other unravelling in the same place, at any moment of every day. It just happened that I was writing that bit at that point in time, space and page - now that I am revisiting the passage, mid-morning the next day, a blackbird sung an isolated phrase, in the distance, then becoming muzzled by the deafening start of a ride-on mower with its blaring, avid diesel-burning engine.⁶ Once you focus, you can find one of these scenes occurring at each and every moment of any day, defining them and their context, and at the same time being shaped by it. And yet they are also distinct, peculiar, irreplaceable.

Like when, last year, while writing, I tried an experiment that failed in many ways, and perhaps succeeded in others. The idea was to write about blackbird sounds and wanderings as they were happening, on a mid-July day, almost at noon, coming and going to the window, so I could give a sense of their liveliness, of how present they can be for any human living among blackbirds. But even during an extreme heat wave at the end of the breeding season, it was hard to keep up because of so many blackbird songs, sounds and episodes taking place in a short period of time: my blackbird concluding a snippet of one of the local themes with a mimicry, a nightingale coda; this male blackbird and a female - probably the one that, several months ago, I had watched shredding the fibres that dangled from the trunk of a palm tree - refreshing and splashing in the irrigation puddles under the rose hedges; my blackbird then perched for long minutes on a 'No dogs allowed' sign, widely and intermittently opening his orange beak - maybe because of the heat? -; two or three young birds, displaying and charging across the

⁴ For the different calls of blackbirds, see Dabelsteen 1982, 314; Aparicio 2016, 7.

⁵ The European robin, in Euskera *txantxangorri* due to this species' calls and red colour, has become the symbol of this language. <https://www.deia.eus/actualidad/sociedad/2016/01/15/pequeno-petirrojo-o-txantxangorri-nuevo-5068315.html>

⁶ The mower finally stopped and the blackbirds, starlings, sparrows, collared doves, *verdecillos*, and a passing monk parakeet were heard again. I could go on and on chronicling these conversations, this string of sounds, orbiting around avian voices.

grass and below the hedges, observed by my blackbird from a palm tree. Later, while at the computer, the singing of my blackbird got interrupted by a commotion, and when I went to the window, a kestrel was flying above the gardens with someone between his claws: oh no, life (and death) happens. It was a brownish bird, perhaps a sparrow, that the kestrel began to eat on the upper ledge of one of the balconies, tossing feathers around. After a pause, my blackbird resumed his singing, sentence after sentence, heard but not seen, with the occasional counterpoints from other birds.

Or, in another context, the morning prior to the nightfall scene described before, a blackbird alighted in the *tilde* above the accented letter I, part of the large sign 'FACULTAD DE FILOSOFÍA Y LETRAS' (Faculty of Philosophy and Arts) of free-standing metal letters, located at the entrance of campus, while I was beginning to climb the stairs. He spent a couple of minutes up there, perched in that word, murmuring a bit of song at first, changing his posture and nervously checking on me from time to time, as I snapped a couple of pictures. On this occasion a different site, an urban campus instead of a residential area. Although with plenty of blackbirds as well, flying between the lecture rooms and across the nearby botanical garden. One among them, singing from the trees or rooftops, stringing together portions that, for a moment, appeared to encompass another coda mimicking an absent nightingale, and also to carry the influence of several digital noises which, between lessons, became mingled with the hubbub of the students' discussions.

Blackbirds are there, then. And here, today, mid-afternoon, immersed in their sung dialogues, in another location on the Iberian Peninsula after my unexpected, impromptu trip inland. There it is: my local blackbird here just imitated the whistle of the knife grinder's pan flute. To know and to be aware of blackbirds - or of any other everyday bird - is just as simple, and as complicated, as paying attention, listening. However, that is the issue. They are always there, but they tend to be overlooked. Perceived merely as an aural background, not even overheard, only missed when they become silent, like in the pesticide-induced bird-apocalypse feared by Rachel Carson (1962) in *Silent Spring*. Just noticed when we lower our voices, and reduce anthropogenic noise. During pandemic lockdowns many people turned their attention back towards bird songs and calls, because they had the time, space and silence necessary to listen. Even to the point of thinking that birds were singing louder, since they could hear them more. Although, if anything, they were singing lower, due to the lack of competing human noise (Derryberry et al. 2020; Greene 2020). Later on, the lockdowns ended, the pandemic dwindled, ordinary routines resumed, and birds and their sounds were, again, largely forgotten, and left behind by the majority, receding to the aural background.

Albeit now it has become more challenging to pause and to listen, since the human world has accelerated its pace, increasing its disruptions and the impossibility of being there and capturing the instant. Especially, in the case of "critters" as lively as birds (Haraway 2008, 330 fn. 33). Any moment is difficult to register, to completely acknowledge as it is happening. So sometimes I wonder why that insistence on birds, on their instants and their sounds, by me, by others, or during the pandemic. And I ponder whether, to a certain extent, it is due to birds' decided grounding in all the nuances of the locations and ecosystems they inhabit; in the cycles of the seasons, underlined by their mutable songs and sounds, and in their aural

and multisensorial dimensions. Being, all of them, realms that we tend to elude, as if we were above them, no longer bound and subjected by them, distanced through our visual approach and elevated objectivity. A pretentious self-isolation that it is not just damming, but unattainable. I believe those are some of the reasons behind my attempts of – or may I say my compulsion towards – pausing, listening and rendering episodic reconstructions of avian and blackbirds worlds. Layers upon layers of impressions of birds singing the instant, who keep doing so while you write, when you read and revise what you had written with your window open – just right this past moment, a blackbird flew away with a characteristic alarm call and, soon after, the other local birds resumed their sung dialogues.

[late at night, walking back home, several *madrugadas*]
the bird sings from the top of the cypress tree,
sings a phrase, silence, sings again
nobody around, no more sounds in the streets,
just the bird, me, and the night.

When singing, a male blackbird will typically chant an uninterrupted phrase, lasting a few seconds. A silent pause will follow, during which he will listen to the response by other blackbirds. Then, he will answer with another sung sentence, at times repeating part of what he has just heard if it is a shared, local theme. He will pause and wait for an answer, sing again, pause again, and keep doing it for a while. There are certain common features regarding the structure of blackbird songs. They usually have two parts. First, the melodious whistle, followed by the sizzling and swift twitter (Rasmussen, Dabelsteen 2002, 65-6). Nonetheless, there are lots of nuances and variations. Some are related to the intensity and vehemence of each blackbird's performance, at a given moment. At different times of day, a certain blackbird can be either singing with all he has, full volume, burning his two syrinxes. Or, instead, only in passing, barely humming in an absent-minded manner. Even doing it for himself, perhaps just as a rehearsal, so low that it is almost impossible for anyone to hear it – which makes it all the more special to be able to listen to it, to wonder if you are hearing anything, or solely imagining it.

On the other hand, the repertoire – the chosen combinations of one or more whistles with one or more twitters in a sung phrase, and the ensemble of all those phrases – differs for each individual blackbird. Some of the themes and segments are distinct, and identify one blackbird, while some are shared with other neighbouring blackbirds (72-4). All derive from the bird's learning process, that merges the aural bits he has either composed or listened to and selected from the songs of other blackbirds or from the surrounding soundscape. Sounds he chooses, learns, remembers, and practices; combines and performs; repeats, and transmits as culture, in song form (Hall-Craggs 1962). In the case of certain blackbirds, some of these sounds are recognisable, to human ears, as mimics; fragments that the blackbird in question has taken from what he hears around him (Hall-Craggs 1962, 293-4; Hindmarsh 1984, 318). Often, these are the songs and calls of other birds living in that environment. But the blackbird might incorporate into his sentences the imitations of other sounds, some of them of direct or indirect human origin, and combine them with other fragments. And, since blackbirds are open-ended learners – meaning they can modify

the structure and profile of their sung sentences throughout their whole life – they keep adding to their songs, accumulating novel sounds and variations (Hultsch, Todt 2004; Hesler, Mundry, Dabelsteen 2012).

If previously, within my own human constraints and influences, I attempted to convey an episodic, fragmented version of the aural and lively worlds of the blackbirds who constantly and continuously sing and call around me while I write, listen, and think, it can be argued that blackbird songs contain and relentlessly communicate their own blackbird perspective and account, even history, on the soundscape and context in which they live (Cortés Zulueta 2021b). After all, they choose some aural fragments among what is available for them to hear, and they combine, repeat and modify those bits within the framework of their songs, and according to their preferences and needs. Thus, providing their own rendition of their surroundings through what they collect and then repeat, and emphasise via their reiterated singing.

Since some blackbirds include humans and human sounds in their songs, we can presume that, in their own way, they are listening to us – this, they can hardly avoid –, and that they are archiving us together with other bits of the surrounding soundscape. Then to sing and to narrate us, among many other things and without necessarily giving us priority. Because of this, I believe we can assume that these birds have their own account of the place they inhabit, where some humans happen to live. So, in one way or another, they end up incorporating humans and human related sounds into their songs. We can only speculate about why they pick those sounds, or any sound, from among the ones present in their milieus. Whether this is due to aural appearances and qualities – favouring certain pitches, paces, timbres, or sonic inflections –, or whether there are memories, thoughts, emotions, associated to the source of a sound – be it a neighbouring bird, a particular individual of its species, or anything human-related – or to the moments when they were heard, and chosen. Moments, sources, individuals, memories that might be revived, afterwards, with each song, with each repetition.

Even if we are not able to assure anything about what blackbirds, or one blackbird thinks or feels regarding humans and human affairs, there is the choice to listen to how humans are conveyed, in a certain time and place, by a bird, by a non-human being, as part of his songs. A bird who has listened, selected, learned, remembered, practiced, repeated, combined, composed and, above all, sang those sounds. While we listen to those songs, to the anthropogenic fragments they comprise and to the episodic perspective that has been returned to us, we can reflect on how we sound, on how we are listened to and perceived by others. And through it we can reassess both how we perceive ourselves and how we perceive the soundscape and environment around us, that we enormously constrain.

For instance, there is the local blackbird, *mi mirlo*, whose comings and goings I described before, and who I knew, listened to often and recorded occasionally since that first time I was fooled by his imitation of a great tit (Cortés Zulueta 2019, 35-6; 2021b). During a sunset at the beginning of the 2021 breeding season and with pandemic restrictions still translating into lower levels of anthropogenic noise, we recorded him for a few minutes.⁷ It

⁷ It was possible to record him because I had noticed that he would perch on a cable at a particular time, sing from there briefly and be done for the day, since the season was only starting.

was a striking burst of singing, several whistles, twitters and what seemed isolated sounds strung together, without the customary pauses, which is something I associate with rehearsals or with blackbirds figuring out that year's songs, usually during late winter or early spring.⁸ Shortly after, he hushed and flew away.

When I listened carefully to that recording, and to the other ones that followed that same season, I realised that this blackbird sang more mimicries than I expected. Inside his twitters – the second half of his songs –, I found imitations of the songs and calls of many birds, besides those of a great tit that had caught my attention initially: the tweets of house sparrows, the melodious chirps of greenfinches and goldfinches, the honed warble of European robins, a peep from a white wagtail, the chirrup of a passing barn swallow, the ascending cry of a kestrel, even the coda flourish of a nightingale, closing a couple of the blackbird's sung phrases. All of them, aural bits coming from birds that I recognised from the area.

The hybrid, dislocated nature of the place – an urban satellite of a coastal village made up of holiday apartment buildings, and their evergreen gardens growing along the seaside promenade, superseded by plastic greenhouses and tropical crops set on much more arid extensions of Mediterranean scrubs as soon as you walk a few tens of metres inland – is echoed, portrayed by the mimicries chosen, learned and sung by this blackbird.⁹ There is the squawk of a seagull and what seem to be samples of the high-pitched singing of a crested lark, found in the open, earthy fields nearby. The blackbird also performs a rendition of the growl of one of the roaming stray cats, a regular occurrence around here, or the shrieks of the ubiquitous monk parakeets, an introduced species, originally from South America, whose calls indirectly point towards humans, and to human-caused imbalances of ecosystems.

In that first sunset recording, among many other mimicries, there is the interrupted crowing of a rooster, a contrasting rural feature from the crop area inland, once again linked to human activities. In fact, a short walk takes you through fields, white plastic greenhouses, *cortijos* and the paths trodden daily by a herd of goats, a shepherd and his dogs. But, in line with the mixed character of the place, not all the human imitations by this blackbird are so idyllic. Other ones could be associated with later steps in the evolution of the soundscapes produced and defined by humans, as categorised by Murray Schafer ([1977] 1994). Consider the creaking of metallic friction, as coming from the rusty hinges of a gate that the blackbird uttered at times, back and forth.¹⁰ I tried to look for the specific source of that sound for some time, even waiting for the moment when garbage trucks lifted and emptied waste containers – perhaps, I thought, it was the friction of their articulated arms, or of the containers themselves – without success. Afterwards, it got me thinking that it might not be a particular noise, but a sonic bit inspired by the metallic scratching that accompanies the operation of machines that has been punctuating many human soundscapes since

As registered in the recording, these bursts are frequently preceded by distinctive tweets (Cortés Zulueta 2021c).

⁸ On how blackbird songs mature along a season, see Hall-Craggs 1962. One time, I think I heard a blackbird repeating again and again a mimicry from a roof, then changing to another sound, as if practising outside the frame of a song.

⁹ For an attempt to convey the blackbird's account as a tale, see Cortés Zulueta 2021a.

¹⁰ Cortés Zulueta 2021c, 2'45".

the Industrial Revolution (71-3). Here, as iterated through a cover version by a bird that reflects a massive change in terms of the soundscape, as imposed by humans on other animals centuries ago, with considerable persistence even today.

A peculiar instance of this would be the screeching of car brakes that the blackbird sings. He surely has heard this as a consequence of the nearby roundabout and the traffic hustle from the main road that connects the urban centres along the coastline. Again, yet another example of the impact of anthropogenic noise in the area. But that would not be the only case caused by cars, or maybe more accurately, by engines. Since the blackbird also sings and mimics some kind of motor: at times roaring a *vrrroom*-like onomatopoeia just once; others, twice or thrice (2'16") (Cortés Zulueta 2021c). A couple of this blackbird's favourite perching and singing spots - the apex of a gable roof eave, and a tall lamppost - were above the tent of a small car workshop where, on occasion, the engines of cars and motorcycles are tested through sequences of various accelerations. The noteworthy detail about this is that the blackbird did pick up and replicate the acceleration cadence, the rhythm that you would expect by someone starting an engine - *vrrroom, vroom vroom* -, a first emphatic push followed by two additional ones. If you think about it, humans may learn to do this for several reasons, and perhaps it is easier to notice when you hear it through the voice of a blackbird, who has summarised how humans sound like at times just as well as how a robin, or a kestrel does (2'55").

The preceding mimicries, with their metallic frictions and humming engines, could be framed within what Murray Schafer (1994, 69-87) identifies as the first phase of the post-industrial soundscape, emerged after the Industrial Revolution and characterised by a general aural impoverishment. The next step, which accelerates this loss, is what he names the Electric Revolution, with its disrupting, distracting and attention-grabbing schizophonic pings, rings and buzzes, during which the original source of the sounds had been separated from where they were reproduced and heard, like on the radio (88-99). Not in vain, the blackbird repeats and returns to us a blaring alarm - probably a car's, but it may be a house's, or a siren (2'11"). This is a consequence of how annoyingly and frequently cars, houses, garages, businesses, or even a faulty ATM - wording a police warning - proclaim and denounce supposed risks to someone's property (which rarely materialise, at least here), via the connections, disconnections or malfunctions of various electrical systems. On the one hand, it is a contrast with avian alarm calls, issued in the proximity of humans or when an endangering kestrel flies over. On the other hand, many major situations contributing to urgent threats, such as the ecological and climate crisis, go much more unnoticed and, perhaps unfortunately, are not accompanied by that kind of audible warnings.

At last, the blackbird's repertoire of anthropogenic aural fragments is rounded off by the ringtone of a mobile phone, distinct because of its liquid, crystalline quality, with pristine, reverberating notes cascading up and down, the final and closing touch a discordant one, lower and sharper, as if urging you to take the call. For a while, I kept searching for the original source, the specific sound that the blackbird would have heard, and imitated. After ruling out ringtone after ringtone, I began to think that such a source might not exist. The bird could have learned and mimicked it, and modified it later on, as blackbirds do sometimes. Or perhaps, just as he picked up the cadence of an engine being accelerated, he got inspired by a

particular trend of ringtones, and was able to capture the essence of those that tinkle and echo, up and down and back of a certain scale in a circular fashion, that we recognise as mobile ringtone-like. Similarly, other segments of this blackbird's song are marked by regular *beep beep beep beeps*, or by squishes, *weeeees*, *fiu fius*, *wiggy wiggies*, peeps and buzzes reminiscent of the mixture of digital, electronic sounds, alerts and notifications with ludic overtones but far more negative connotations that nowadays hijack and disrupt our attention and populate our daily soundscape, invading and shaping the soundscapes of others, as this blackbird kept reminding us.

Therefore, this blackbird registered the acceleration of the digital and electronic soundscape, and overall pace, which defines our era and was anticipated by Murray Schafer (1994, 96). Through other fragments and, in a way, superposing different layers of human aural history, the blackbird also sings metallic bumps and frictions, engine roars and brake screeches, all derived from the combustion of fossil fuels and the machinistic turn brought by the Industrial Revolution. In his sung phrases, he includes sonic elements that betray the hybrid and disjointed nature of the place, that add rural touches to the noise of traffic of this coastal city, like the crow of a rooster (2'43"), which has accompanied humans for millennia. And then all those other mimicked bird calls and songs, great tits, house sparrows, greenfinches, goldfinches, European robins, white wagtails, barn swallows, nightingales, crested larks, kestrels, with a seagull pointing to the proximity of the Mediterranean, and a cat again proclaiming human presence. Or monk parakeets, as introduced by humans – a symptom of the grave distortions and imbalances we are causing to ecosystems.

All of the above makes it possible for humans to listen to themselves as conveyed by a bird, by other voice, by other being, which gives us an account of our aural history as manifested in that specific place; on how we are listened to and perceived by others, a perspective that can enrich and enlighten our thinking. Although the blackbird, the blackbirds, chant much more than human sounds and mimicries. Since we are but just one of the sources of the fragments that they incorporate into their songs. In the end, when blackbirds respond to each other in their sung dialogues, through their shared and evolving local themes shaped by the composing and listening of males and females, they are giving form to their own traditions, to their own culture, to their own more-than-human aural history.

[sun heat blue sky dry scrub]
a blackbird
on a fence, by an olive tree, near a cabin
(none of them exist no more)
is he singing?
(so close, but his chirps are less than a whisper)
or I am dreaming it?

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