

What Were Those Bird Songs That I Heard on Those August Mornings?

Pedagogical Narratives about Transformed Territories

Roberto Méndez

Like many other inhabitants of this region, Roberto Méndez is a migrant. He arrives to our region with a palpable curiosity and kindness, with a biologist's eye, and a heart of solidarity, noticing the "wounded Earth"—including the destruction of agricultural fields due to urban growth—searching for signs of hope, of "coexistence between human and non human animals"—including the humans that live on the border who see the birds, who create a present and a future in which they are included.

In this essay, he tells us about the project that he focused on during his participation in the third cohort of La

Semilla Food Center's Chihuahuan Desert Cultural Fellowship. Special thanks to writer Lorena Sosa, participant in the first cohort of the same fellowship, for her editorial support.



My project deals with the birds that inhabit the border of Ciudad Juárez-El Paso and the people who learn to take care of them and to cohabit with them. I understand that the spaces we inhabit are territories marked and modeled by different lifestyles, so to talk about birds, or any other species, we also have to talk about the people with whom they share histories and space.

I was always curious to learn more about the plants and animals that surround us. I studied biology and, after that, education. This has led me to work on activities related to knowledge about the natural environment and to study the ways we think about other species through writing, images, and speech. I was born in Mexico City, and I came to live in Ciudad Juárez in 2019. Its infinite blue skies, its reddish sunsets, and the aroma of creosote awoke my curiosity to learn more about the animal and plant life of this region. I went to live on the east side of the city, very close to the last cotton fields and the Rio Grande, a favorable place for exploring the links between the river, the agricultural activities, and the city's growth.



Tirano | Kingbird



Cernícalo americano | American kestrel

Birds are one of these life forms that are always present in any corner on the planet. Nevertheless, I think a certain ability and sensibility are required to notice them. My history with them started in the summer of 2021. During several August mornings, I began to hear different voices and bird calls that were not familiar to me. One rainy morning, I heard a shrill call, strong and persistent: *dee-dee-dee*. The next day, I heard a call accompanied by sounds that seemed to come from different birds: *ssee-ssee*; *waow-waow*. What were those songs and calls that I heard those August mornings? Those morning sounds seemed exotic in a city full of the noise of cars and industry. My curiosity led me to establish a routine of exploration through my daily walks and bike rides and also learning other methods of researching surroundings through my everyday activities.¹ Bit by bit, I started to notice that the cotton and sorghum fields, poplars, mulberry, grasses, ditches, and canals serve as rest areas and food sources for the birds in the region. Nevertheless, just like other forms of life, birds face the transformation of their surroundings and live on a border hurt by pollution and violated by urban growth that wipes out yesterday's agricultural landscape, which gave them refuge, food, and water.

The songs and calls that I heard on those August days began to materialize in other ways. My auditory encounters sharpened my senses and led me to pay attention to the vocalizations of others. With the coming weeks, I began to familiarize myself with other calls, and my curiosity motivated me to research their names and their presence in the city. This way, that shrill and repetitive sound that I heard acquired a name and identity, *ringed plover: a striking bird, announces its presence by emitting sounds while flying over farmland and other open fields.*²

¹ Here I would like to thank my colleagues from the Urban Ecologies Research Group from the University of Cambridge, mainly Catherine Oliver and Hugo Rainert, who offered me a space to present and discuss this project during its very embryonic stage in 2022.

² <https://www.audubon.org/es/guia-de-aves/ave/chorlo-tildio>

With time, I witnessed these birds and also others. One afternoon, I met a family of quail that was hiding in fields of winter wheat, and, another day, I could see how some burrowing owls were taking advantage of hollows in the clay to establish their burrows or nests at ground level. At the end of winter and beginning of spring, the fence outside my house began to serve as a rest stop for small birds with brown and yellow bodies that specialists know as flycatchers. Elsewhere, ducks and seagulls began to be more common on the horizon, while herons began to be eventual visitors of the abandoned cotton fields.



To document these birds, I started to register their presence on a digital map on *Google Earth* that includes the observed species, date, photos, and a brief text that describes my observations. This map's purpose is to leave a memory of its presence in the region³, since the transformation of the border, construction of residential areas, maquiladoras, and the disappearance of agricultural zones is leading to their displacement. I think of the map as a living and dynamic instrument for the registration of the birds, and, above all, an instrument that in the future can show the territory that was inhabited by different forms of life. The map may be consulted on the following site: bit.ly/3o61YUH

I like to think of this map as a way of representing the birds, my presence, and the experiences of other people in this border territory. More than a glance frozen in time, it is a cartography about how I walk and live in this territory with other species.⁴ It's really about a geographic, visual, and written memory. Through this project, I am interested in showing that this border, like many other cities, has been constructed from a notion of human exceptionalism, marginalizing other forms of life. Over the course of months, my registers have reached almost 100 observations on more than 20 different species, a number that is still far from being able to show the diversity in this city. Among the birds that appear most frequently on this map are quail, ringed plover, flycatchers, sergeant thrush, owls, and ducks. I have also been able to register seagulls, falcons, monjitas, white heron, and even fishing eagles. I have found some of these birds thanks to the observations of other people who have pointed out their location, suggesting that the map could be a collective effort.

³ Some ideas on documenting daily life were taken from the work of Karin Widerberg, one of their texts can be consulted in the manual edited by Helen Holmes and Sarah Marie Hall titled *Mundane Methods: Innovative Ways to Research the Everyday*.

⁴ The work of Amy Mulvenna and Chris Perkins, "Creative approaches to mapping," helped me to think about the role of the map in my project.

As I walked and explored the Rio Grande on my bicycle, I began to meet other people that were also curious and concerned for the local birds. This led me to document the stories of different people who worry about the border birds. And more than anything, they are actively looking for ways to create friendly spaces for them in the midst of the destruction of their habitat.⁵

The northern quail are particularly famous and charismatic. Because of this a group of neighbors have been trying to set up, for several years, a public park in an area where they live and that was about to be sold to build a shopping center. One of their leaders told me that this group decided to adopt the Rarámuri language to name the park, so they christened the incipient public area Parque Rochorí⁶ with the hope that the final design of the park could include areas for nesting and feeding.



Codorniz del desierto | Gambel's quail

"Vecinos Unidos del Valle del Sol" has been working on the recovery of public spaces and has developed an interest in the care of the quail. They found that the best way of caring for them is facilitating their access to clean water. Together with other neighbors, they have identified some trees—mesquite and palo verde, mainly—where this species nests. With a lot of creativity and enthusiasm, they have learned to install small metallic pots at the base of these trees to give these birds water and, simultaneously, to other fauna like the hares in that area.

⁵ Here I took up the idea of learning to live in a world in ruins from Anna Tsing, starting with identifying ways of collaboration between species.

⁶ *Rochorí* means quail in the Rarámuri language.

The burrowing owls and people have also found ways of cohabiting. You can frequently find families of owls inhabiting small hollows in the debris and trash left behind by the builders of new houses. David, a neighbor that I met while he carried water for watering his trees, told me that he often helps the owls to make these burrows underground, removing debris or digging directly in the clay.



Tocolote llanero| Burrowing owl

I like listening to these stories and finding people who do the activities described here, because I am convinced that they teach everyday ways of living with other species. To a large extent, these stories represent the next chapter in a previous work on stories about monarch butterflies, work that I did in previous years⁷, but that also echoes the work of other authors, such as Donna Haraway, who invited us to tell multi-species narratives that show creative forms of coexisting between human and nonhuman animals.⁸ At a time when stories full of pessimism are predominant, telling these stories of caring and coexistence contributes to the construction of a narrative of hope and much learning for future collaborations between species.

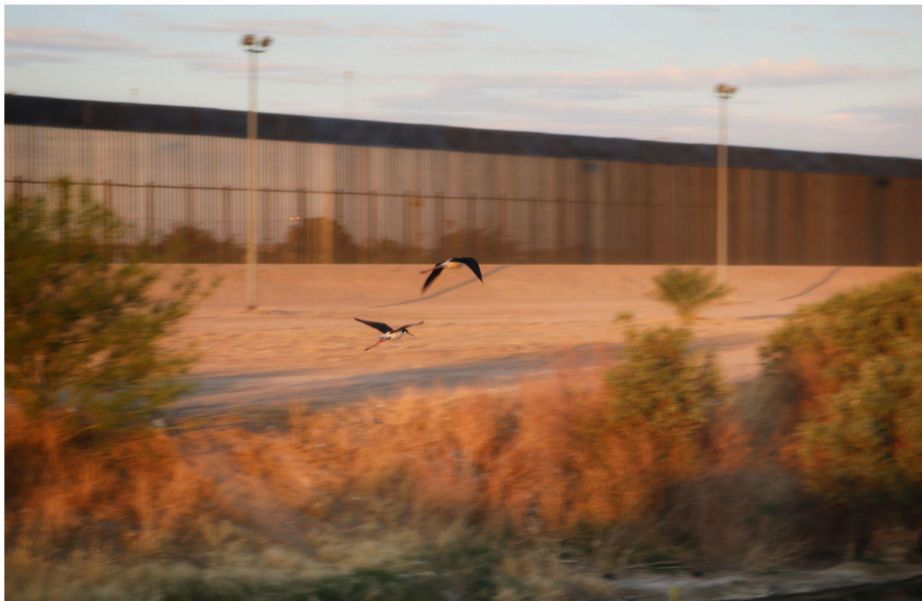
During 2023, I will continue to compile stories of people who maintain encounters with the border birds, and expand the information in the map. I plan to create didactic materials and do some educational workshops with students and teachers. This project has allowed me to construct forms of research that cross the borders of different disciplines and learn innovative methodologies that allow me to see the links between birds, people and the connections which

⁷ Readers can find more about these stories in the article "What local scientists are writing" at: http://www.scielo.org.co/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0123-34322019000200271

⁸ In particular, I refer to Donna Haraway's ideas in her book *Staying with the Trouble*, edited in Spanish by Consoni.

they are a part of. I have found that talking about birds detonates conversations, memories, and many emotions within people.

I am convinced that every research project has an important biographical burden. Which means, we research what is important to us or what impacts directly on our subjectivity and identity. Studying birds during my daily activities of exploring my surroundings and through the voices of other people who have learned to care for them intersect with my own immigration history and my process of putting down roots at the border. Perhaps the birds don't know, but their photographs, their songs, and other traces of their presence contribute to thinking about a city that is diverse and plural. As Gabriela, one of the people I interviewed, said, *"the right to live in the city does not belong just to people but also to the birds who occupied those spaces before we arrived"*.



Monjita | Black necked stilt

More of Roberto's texts and didactic materials can be consulted at:

<https://www.uacj.academia.edu/RobertoMendezArreola>

Roberto usually shares his ideas and other resources on his Twitter account :@robcmenendez

Photographs Courtesy of Roberto Méndez

Spanish to English Translation by Marcela Rodriguez