

Petrina Chan

Global Cities

Professor Stanton

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Starlings Ordering Starbucks: How Birds Can Destroy Problematic Urban/Nature Binaries

I. Comments over Coffee, Crumbs over Concrete

12:06 p.m. -

Seeking shelter from the brisk February winds, I warm my hands on a tall americano in the Starbucks at Assembly Square, then point my camera out the window to focus on a Northern Mockingbird fighting over crumbs strewn about the sidewalk with two European Starlings. With a slightly inquisitive expression, the elderly gentleman to my right remarks, “Is it possible to be natural, even with this...”, gesturing first to the birds, then toward the part of the counter which is obstructing part of our view of the outside. I smile back, showing him the photographs I had taken, thinking he might like to see them. Though not completely certain about his comment’s meaning, it was clear that he was questioning the juxtaposition of the birds, which would be generally considered part of the wild, and our position inside this man-made structure. He was wondering whether my photograph could reflect the “natural” aspects of the birds, despite being taken from inside a Starbucks, which shielded us from the outside, as if the brick wall encapsulation creates a divisive barrier between the “natural” world of the birds, and the “unnatural”, manufactured, urban world. I would like to tell him how animals, like wild birds, and other factors that many would consider independent of our man-made landscape, can help us

realize the blending of two realms —“urban” and “nature” — that are so often thought of as separate planes, and why this separation is both erroneous and dangerous.

II. Field Feelings - Forcing and Fuzzing of “Urban (vs.) Nature”

10:35 a.m. (~2.5 hours earlier) -

Along the banks of the Mystic River is Assembly Square, consisting of both the former Ford Motor industrial plant, now turned mixed-use center, and Sylvester Baxter Riverfront State Park, with grassy and marshy areas leading into the waters of the Mystic. Efforts to demarcate the urban city and surrounding nature are obvious through the physical and cartographical designations of the park and the rest of Assembly Square. The clean, concrete sidewalks create a clear border against the wet, quaggy ground. As I walk along the sidewalk, though only inches away from touching the soft and grassy soil, I feel a disconnect from the marshy river bank. After carefully stepping off the path, hearing the quiet squish of moist earth underneath my canvas shoes heightens awareness of the foliage, waterfowl, rocks; elements largely considered to be parts of the “natural” world. Many people, myself included, are conditioned to feel this rift between “urbanness” and “nature”; their elements inhabit separate mental and schemas, but are these internalized schisms appropriate?

10:43 a.m. -

A monotonous hum fills the sonic landscape around the park. This hum is a nearly indiscernible mixture of passing cars and constant wind. Facing the river, which is frozen in patches and flowing in others, I hear tinkling glass windchimes, however, no chimes are in sight. Upon closer observation, this sound is being produced by shards of ice pushed against each other

by the waves. It is difficult to distinguish between “natural” and “artificial” sounds and the categorization of their agents of production..

III. Back to Birds and Beyond

11:02 a.m. -

As an ardent birder overlooking the river, I pay special attention to the many Herring Gulls and Mallards dotting the area. One gull is wrestling with a grey fish, while another is poking through vividly colored bottles and wrappers embedded in ice. Mallards sleep both on the sandy-brown, rocky shore and on a bright red shopping cart, floating on its side in the water. Eating and sleeping are both process that are intrinsically “natural” and would likely never be argued otherwise, however, these actions are dictated by “urban” influences of litter. Humans too have natural processes shaped by our own innovation, our sleep habits and diets contingent on manufactured aspects of our environment; comfortable beds and processed foods, to name the obvious couple. Perhaps we are not so different from our animal neighbors than many tend to think.

12:06 p.m. -

How “natural” it seems to watch a songbird flit around and forage for food. But the crumbs it eats are presumably originated from the Starbucks kitchen, and the cracks it prods with its beak are embedded in concrete poured by human hands and machines. I reflect on the trash and fish-eating gulls, Mallards snoozing on brown rocks and in red shopping carts. These birds and their behaviors, then, cannot be definitively classified as “wild” and “natural”, nor as “man-made”, as aspects of both have become an essential part of their being. This blurring of

lines between what many may consider “nature” and “urban” can be further extrapolated to other aspects of our environment.

Urbanness and nature do not exist as stark binaries, but rather as both the objects and subjects of each other, as the city influences and shapes its “natural” counterparts, like a growing city pushes out its hinterlands, so then does the “natural” world shape the city, such as providing the resources that allow the city to continue growing. Resources, like the ones that allowed the assembly plant to take off, thrive, and evolve into the center that it is today, come from the earth. Feats of man and urbanization cannot be separated from the “naturally occurring” world; just as the sounds of cars and wind mix seamlessly with the glass-like twinkle of the ice. It is crucial to recognize that “urbanization” both has effects on and is affected by what people generally consider the “natural world”. Ignoring this is ultimately deadly, as our human-manufactured structures and developments cannot exist without those we often consider as “naturally-occurring”; as one evolves so does the other.

We build structures and businesses that thrive because of both provisions of the earth and human craft, while the rise of these developments change songbird diets and waterfowl habitats; categories continuously leak into one another, inseparable and interdependent on each other. The threads are so interwoven that pulling one out would cause the destruction of the entire fabric, and enforcing a mentality that separates them into two dimensions and prioritizing and glorifying aspects that classically fall into the “urban” category is dangerous and ultimately unstable. To the gentleman who sat next to me: yes, it is possible to be “natural” and complemented by “urbanness”, and vice versa; in fact, most everything that we see and experience in this modern

world should be regarded as such; our propensity for sorting into distinct categories is often mistaken, as the lines attempting to distinguish them are rather blurred.