

Charles Campbell

Actor Boy: Travels in Birdsong

The daily voyage of birds at dusk, along the inlet's corridor, are constant reminders of the circadian rhythms shaping collective behaviour. Together they stream overhead in an impressive exodus, calling to each other as the sky shifts from misty peach and deep rose hues to solemn blues. They are reminders of the need for habitats – places to travel toward, places to gather and springboard from, places to rest. And of the broader occurrences of instinctual and forced migrations – seasonal movements for feeding, breeding or congregating, or the displacement of animal and human cultures from their homelands due to ecological precarity, the pursuit of vanishing resources and shifting labour patterns, or war, enslavement, and threat of persecution. Reminders that while migrations can be of necessity, displacements are rarely desired, though they are sometimes acts of resistance; for deeper reasons, they may become habitual. And that endangerments, perceived extinctions and absences require closer, intuitive, consideration. As do their re-appearances.

Why birdsong? we ask Actor Boy. The question echoes, but not because of emptiness. Telepathic silences travel across time and space, through electronic mediation, and through our imaginations. He does not always answer the way we desire or expect. He tells us, in a room filled with birdsong, that sound is slippery, evanescent. It exists only when it is going out of existence, yet because of its impermanence, remains free. Sounds and their vibrations enter bodies differently than visual communication; the ear being the first organ to develop in the womb. Through both listening and feeling, aural and haptic, it washes over and passes through us, transforms something, and disappears. We might try to capture it – as one would a bird, a human, a memory – but sound's recorded trace is secondary to the initial experience. It is fleeting.

Birdsong is expression, a melodic utterance between two points in time and place. The songbird's sharp decline over the past 40 years, caused by human interference, climate change, and habitat loss, has left a soundscape filled with urban, industrial and electric noise.¹ Often we react through noise abatement, filling our ears with music from the cloud – with sounds we can control – unaware of the songbirds' disappearance. Yet these birds are bellwethers of our broader ecological health: the absence of their voices point to intersecting forces that cannot quite be articulated; something going awry, something we must listen and pay attention to. The horizon of human potential wavers, through technological advances and each lost song.

Actor Boy is a character from an alternate future. His roots stem from the cultural traditions of Jamaica when slavery was abolished across the British Empire in 1833 – specifically the carnival celebration Jonkonnu, when slaves upturned the social order by mimicking their masters' dress and behavior. Such revelry often led to open slave revolts. Actor Boy is both witness and instigator, a shamanic character whose own dress – a geometric mask recalling both utopias as-yet-unrealized and the profound astrological knowledge of the Dogon peoples – refracts and calls up different realities. Bringing aspirations from this distant past into the present, he holds open a space for the imaginary, transmitting a vision of a different type of future, and acts in ways that enable us to move closer to that future. A six-dimensional being capable of folding time, he connects moments from different timelines, shifting from our "known" universe to other parallel possibilities in other universes. He taps into lines of flight – the disruptions and elusive moments when change occurs, when thresholds between dimensions are crossed and an array of infinitesimal possibilities open. He reveals intersections – points from which to listen, re-interpret and act: points of potential agency.

Hitching a ride on birdsong's sonic frequencies, Actor Boy travels time and space. Up the Atlantic coast from the Caribbean to North America, he traces the histories of Trans-Atlantic slavery, emancipation, migration and settlement. Transporting to

Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, in the early 1800s, he finds the Bog, home to a racially-mixed community of African-Islanders and working class poor, which included freed slaves who made new lives for themselves. It spanned four blocks down Rochford Street, from Euston Street and Black Sam's Bridge to Richmond Street, bordered by Government Pond.² Songbirds in the pond's marshes once told of a community that emerged and then dispersed within a hundred years. Today, birdsong is silenced in a conscious act of ecological and historical forgetting. The pond has been paved over; existing on large parts of the Bog are now Government Administrative buildings.

Transporting to the 1980s, Actor Boy finds historian and folklorist Jim Hornby piecing together the initial outlines of the Bog. Jim folds time as well, uncovering and charting a suppressed past for present-day awareness. While often characterized in official records as a place of "squalid misery" – racism, violence, bootlegging, prostitution and petty crime – Jim discovers the Bog's strong community ties and resilience: a free school that educated over 1,000 children, legendary personalities and love stories, athletic clubs, and family lines whose names continue on the Island to this day. Glimpses of unofficial histories within the archives that sit in-between the lines. By the early 1900s the Bog district dissolved, dispersed by the area's redevelopment, persistent discrimination, and opportunities and larger communities that beckoned elsewhere.³

It's a very interesting story; the fact that it's been covered up and ignored, is itself very powerful, Jim says.⁴ Knowledge of the Bog became obscured by dominant narratives – of gentility, of Confederation, of a largely white Canadian history. But histories are messy, multiple, and defy resolution. They find ways to resurface.

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Synchronous events land in unexpected ways; the records speak differently over time. Leaping forward to the 1990s, Actor Boy locates musician Scott Parsons, reading Jim's book *Black-Islanders*

while coincidentally living on the very site of the Bog.⁵ Integrating these discoveries into the threads of his own Black, Milk'naq, English and Scottish heritage, Scott folds these narratives into his music, which also traverse time and space. Jupiter Wise, a black slave known as a crafty rebel, was accused and convicted of assault while stealing rum for an escape party in 1785. Avoiding the death sentence he was instead deported by ship to slave colonies of the West Indies, granting his desire for departure but not freedom. His name lives on through Parson's band. Dimbo Suckles, an industrious and respected man, arrived as a slave from Africa and, eventually freed, went on to own a large farm and raise a family. Many of the worn graves in the pioneer cemetery of Lower Montague are said to have once borne this surname. Then there is the tale of Thomas Williams, killed by his master, George Hardy, near Malpeque Bay. Hardy was accused of murder but escaped trial with a plea of self-defence – the all-too familiar dynamic of violence and systemic biases that echo in the present. The site of the killing is mapped on a Department of Fisheries map as “Nigger Point.”⁶ These legends existed for hundreds of years as fragments and oral histories. Through Parson's music and Jim's research, the stories of violence, struggle, and discrimination are again remembered.

Once histories are made visible, understandings begin to change. Thieves become heroes, but the lawyers, judges and governors that hung black boys for stealing bread and allowed white killers to walk free remain men of their time. Still, new energies conjoin as contexts shift, and those with African-Islander heritage begin to come forward. Charlotte town finds itself on new migration routes. Students from Kenya, Ghana and Barbados arrive and settle as do refugees from Sierra Leone, Somalia, the Congo. Collective initiatives form – in societies and activities such as Baraka Day – linking past and present black communities. Those who have grown up on the Island activate energies in new directions, bringing about a confluence of voices and broader interest in African-Islander, African and Caribbean cultures and histories.⁷ Lines shift and unexpected points intersect, creating chance openings. These energies are sometimes met with resistance, as power structures reassert themselves, but now they respond collectively. As histories

also include unofficial representations, narrative traces, utterances, and accumulations up to the present, we might reconceive a wider definition of what “founding populations” means.⁸

Actor Boy observes how displacement and migrations complicate a singular narrative, creating new potentials, multiple chances for individuals and communities to form relationships with themselves and others. He collects pathways through time and space, and birdsong which intones stories that have been submerged, so that new understandings might emerge. He places them in memory vessels – dirigible-like caskets that recall slave ships crossing the Atlantic. The shape, its smooth surface, simultaneously attracts and repels. But the vessels then become something else, opening like tropical seedpods that bear life: their geometries gesturing toward the larger metaphor of interiors and exteriors, then beyond binaries.

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We enter this room, these memories, this space of appearance. Vessels hang in a large open torus; we walk through them. Here, Actor Boy interrogates the unsettled narrative sediment; figures from the past whose voices we cannot hear. *What forces led to the historical erasure of black communities across Canada, their rediscovery, and their reappearance? How can we resist historical amnesia?*

But then the tables turn; it is now Actor Boy being questioned. *Yes, it's important to tell these stories. No, I don't expect this to change anything, but I do it anyway. These stories are not of the past; they shape the present. Yes, the erasures are wilful and persistent. Your flayed skin is only visible now because they think it's in the past.*

The other side of the conversation we imagine tells us more about ourselves than the other.

Why sound? We ask Actor Boy. He rests his head thoughtfully against the brick wall. Birdsong moves throughout the space; distant chatter and the swish of cars pass by. He shows us how

sound is an event, like performance, with a special relationship to time and presence. In primary oral cultures, language is a mode of action, aggregative and outward, situationally embedded in the world; not simply a sign of thought. Oral conversation requires participation, listening, engagement.⁹ Orality shapes consciousness and thought in ways different than writing. *Winged words* – “lifting the fier free of the ordinary, gross, heavy, objective world.”¹⁰

Sound in shared space connects interiors deeply. In conversation, it links one’s consciousness to another’s across that frontier we call self; it invites unity, requiring our interiors to be vulnerable. Sound refuses the weight of history, but it can still take us there. What was saved within our interior chambers and transmitted through sound, or even psyche?

Contemplating longer swaths of time – other frontiers, coastlines and borders – Actor Boy confronts the primary disruptions of cultures that produced traumas we are still feeling reverberations of today. Today, there are ecological imbalances: boreal rainforests afire while deserts flood, and the appropriation of winged messengers – silent tweets that hurl damage back and forth. There are mass populations migrating across borders near and far to find safety, to find homes. Monuments fall, as they must. Crises, precarity, imbalance and rupture surround us. The structures are already crumbling; narratives have fractured over time, revealing their frayed edges, their gaps. Some cultures among us have already experienced their own apocalypse – the death of a vision that can no longer hold its promise – and have developed the skills to survive, even thrive.¹¹ Sound, Actor Boy tells us, may then be our anti-monument: a way of retaining, protecting, and carefully transmitting what is cherished, so as to transform once consciously released. So as to find continuities within these disruptions.

– Joni Low

¹ North America has lost over 1 billion birds since 1970, according to recent surveys by Partners in Flight. Dozens of species have lost more than 50% of their populations between 1970 and 2014, and songbirds – including tree, field and barn sparrows – have seen a 70% drop. See: <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/saskatoon/are-the-prairies-getting-quieter-songbirds-are-declining-in-number-1.3002029> and <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/technology/science/report-finds-north-american-skies-quieter-by-15-billion-fewer-birds/article31876053/>.

² Jim Hornby, *Black Islanders* (Island Studies Series, No. 3, Charlottetown: 1991).

A second edition of this book with more information is currently forthcoming.

³ *Ibid.*, 45-72 and 91-102.

⁴ Conversation with Jim Hornby, August 2017.

⁵ Conversation with Scott Parsons, August 2017. For more information on Parson’s music, see: <http://scottparsons.net/>

⁶ Hornby, *Black Islanders*. See the chapter, “Lives under Slavery, 1784-1832,” 15-43, for this paragraph’s references, in addition to Parsons’ music.

⁷ Scott Parsons and Kendi Tarichia are among the new members of the Black Cultural Society, which conjoins with the energies of the earlier formed Black Islanders Cooperative. Conversation with Parsons, August 2017.

See also: <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/prince-edward-island/pei-black-cultural-society-1.3428933>.

⁸ Charmaine Nelson, “Neither Indigenous, Nor Settlers: The Place of Africans in Canada’s ‘Founding Nations’ Model,” *Canadian Issues* (Summer 2016), 43-46.

⁹ Walker J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the World* (Routledge: London and New York, 1988). See the chapter, “Some Psychodynamics of Orality,” 31-76.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 76.

¹¹ Conversations with Charles Campbell, July - August 2017.

Biographies

Charles Campbell is a Jamaican-born multidisciplinary artist, writer and curator. He has curated exhibitions in the UK, Canada and Jamaica including *Anything With Nothing: Art From the Streets of Urban Jamaica* at the National Gallery of Jamaica where he was Chief Curator. His work has been exhibited at the Havana Biennial, the Santo Domingo Biennial, the Cuenca Biennial, Brooklyn Museum, Alice Yard, the Museo de Arte Contemporaneo, Puerto Rico, the Houston Museum of African American Culture and Rideau Hall, Ottawa. He has written for numerous publications including *Frieze* and *ARC Magazine*, a Caribbean arts journal. Campbell holds an MFA from Goldsmith College and a BFA from Concordia University. His work is concurrently on view in *Relational Undercurrents: Contemporary Art of the Caribbean Archipelago* at the Museum of Latin American Art in Los Angeles. He lives and works in Victoria, BC.

Joni Low is a writer and curator from Vancouver, presently curator-in-residence at Or Gallery. Recent curatorial projects include the symposium *Underground in the Aether* (2017: VIVO Media Arts Centre); *Chloë Lum and Yannick Desranleau: 5 Tableaux (It Bounces Back)* (2016: Or Gallery), and *Hank Bull: Connexion* (2015-2017: national tour). She has written essays for exhibition catalogues and publications including *Canadian Art*, *C Magazine*, *Momus*, *The Capilano Review* and *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*. She is a member of the Doryphore Independent Curators Society.

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