

## IT'S RAINING BIRDS! Naser Al Sughaiyer Dubai

Last year, I found a dove in the middle of a road surrounded by two bulbul birds, a crow, and another dove. At first look, what I saw seemed like a ceremony of birds risking their lives while performing conflicting rituals of hospice. The two bulbuls were trying to push the dove's body off the road; the crow was trying to eat it, while the other dove was protecting it from the crow. These birds were constantly being interrupted by the approaching cars threatening to add more dead bodies to the scene. My car was one of those approaching four-legged monsters. I was pulled to stop, walk back and cross the road to join this gathering. I then carried the dove's body to the sidewalk for the birds to safely continue their gathering away from the road. After not knowing what to do for a few minutes, I decided to bury its body next to a nearby tree. This ceremony ended with sprinklers launching water into and around the soil where the dove was buried. I left with grief and so much confusion about what to do with that grief.



*1) Animated GIF of Dove Burial Location & sprinklers (06.03.2022)*

A month later, I happened to join an online course called "Facing Human Wrongs (FHW)" which was designed by Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures (GTDF) collective with the aim of supporting participants to expand their collective capacity to hold space for difficult and painful things without feeling overwhelmed, immobilized or demanding quick fixes or rescue from discomfort. Through various modes of (un)learning, one of which was "Forest/CityWalk", we were invited to practice "facing our shadows, composting our sh\*t and staying with the trouble in order to learn to weather storms of epic proportions together".

These two experiences moved my body to start walking more frequently throughout the city after having been grappling for a few years with feelings of despair and hopelessness, and isolating in my room. Over a period of a full year, I had walked hundreds of miles and hours throughout the urban veins of the city, guided by the water creek, the birds, and a persistent impulse to lose my way.

I was randomly walking almost every other day for a duration between 3-7 hours at each time without knowing where I was going. And all the while I was holding with me the troubling inquiries, complexities and paradoxes I was encountering during the FHW course, and moving them through my body and feet with the simple act of aimless walking.

During these walks, I have sung with countless living birds, hospiced dying ones, and buried countless other birds. I have used my bare hands to dig burial grounds all around the city for all kinds of birds (Dove, Crow, Bulbul, Egret, Myna, Indian Roller, Sparrow, Seagull, Peacock...). I have also buried many non-bird bodies (cats, lizards, insects...) and other crushed bodies that I could not even recognize. I even witnessed a bird falling from the sky on the ground, right in front of me during these walks.

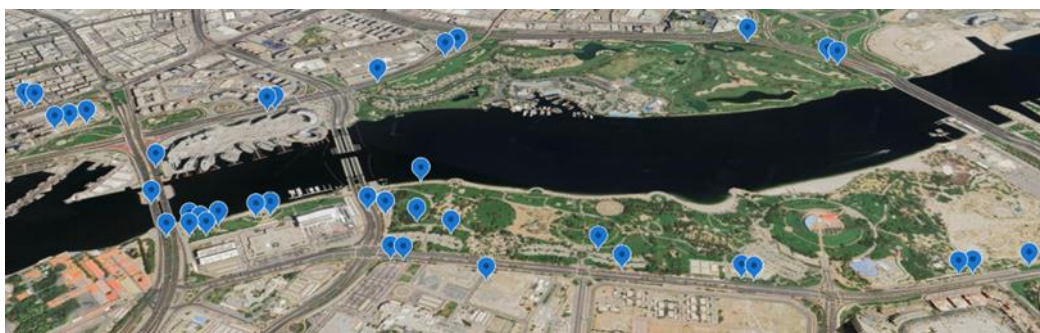


*2) Egret body at sunrise in city downtown.*

Two years ago, I made an important life decision to start making an effort in noticing birds and trees in the city. I started a regular practice of visiting mother trees at sunset to sing with the hundreds of birds preparing to roost in their branches. My desire then was to connect with the beauty of birds: their colorful feathers, magnificent wings, beautiful songs and more. Not only did I want to connect with their beauty, I also wanted to become pure and beautiful. I was receiving a generous lesson by birds on how to use my mouth, lips, tongue, throat and teeth to sound like them until I was able to mimic some of my bird teachers. I secretly wished one day to become a bird.

Deep down, I was desperately trying to shed away complex layers of my humanity that were becoming itchy and difficult to face. I also wanted to escape the concrete and plasticized city, where I had lived my whole life as a modern citizen. So, there I was standing under a tree, flapping my hands regularly hoping they'd become departing wings, and whistling my tongue hoping it would sing a farewell song to the city. Not until a few months later, when I met that dead dove who introduced me for the first time to the ugly side of birds: their featherless wings, their faded colors, their dismembered bodies, and their rotten smells. My hopes of escaping my complex humanity into beauty and purity became then muddled with the disturbing sight and smell of decay, dying and death.

The below map shows a sample area in the city (2.5 square miles), which is one out of many other areas where I had been walking. Using blue pins, I marked from my memory the locations of as many birds I buried there as I could remember.



*3) Map of Bird Burial Locations on a sample walking path*

When I am looking now at this map, I am hit all of a sudden:

“Wait! Are these mass graves?”

This led me to trace the photos in my phone camera where I rarely captured these rituals. I started recalling and gathering memory pieces of: The Red-vented Bulbul partners I found hit on the road; The Indian Roller I used to sing with and meet every day for months, whom I buried their young fledgling one day, and then found them hit on a bridge a month later; And the pigeon and the Indian roller I found nearby and buried next to each other.



4) Burying Red-vented Bulbuls



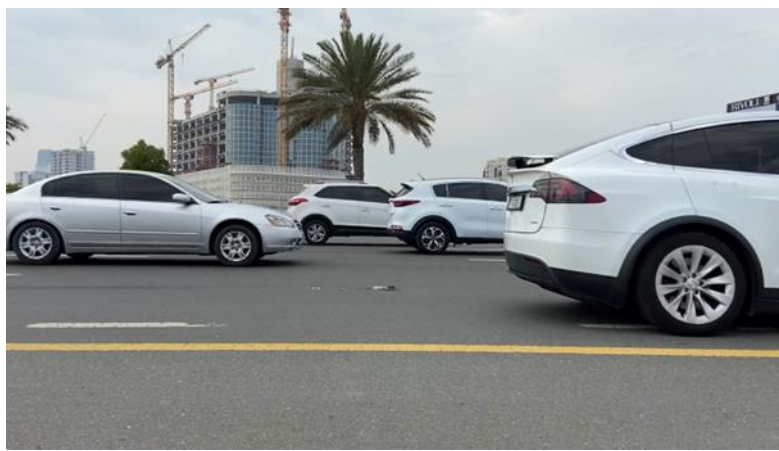
5) Indian Roller and Pigeon buried next to each other



6) Indian Roller Fledgling Body

This transgenerational burial of families of birds brought me closer to my own roots having been severed from my ancestors and from the lands in Palestine. As I am reminded of the genocides by the Zionist settler colonial machine that they witnessed and continue now to witness, it never occurred to me before that similar genocides were also actively happening so close to us at the heart of our modern cities (way closer than I thought!). Every day I, along with tens of thousands of fellow human drivers and citizens of the city, travel on that route not knowing that we are driving through mass graves. And not only that, but we are also directly participating in this birdicide of our neighbors, whereby from the comfort of our homes and car seats, we are inflicting violence on them as they cross paths with us on roads and windows. Many of the birds I buried were found on the road, so this means that they were killed in public under the eyewitness of at least tens of thousands of humans. I have always wondered why killing birds in public is sanctioned and, even worse, invisible to our senses!

When encountering bird's bodies on the roads, some are easy to reach, while others require taking risks while crossing roads and investing a few seconds to pull out their stuck bodies from the hot asphalt. For the birds I had found on wide highways or on roads with never-ending flow of passing cars, I had to sit by the side of the road waiting until I could find a less-risky chance to reach the bird, or until the wind generously carried one or a few flying feathers from the body towards me (In the latter, I try to honor the bird by burying their feathers instead of their unreachable body). In the cases when these two options proved impossible, I have often instead surrendered by the side of the road for some time watching the body getting run over again and again and crushed by the tires of an endless flow of cars, buses, trucks and motorcycles. The more I watched this sight, the more I witnessed how our collective human participation and complicity in violence is crowdsourced and distributed across the endless masses of human citizens. When we all do it repeatedly at the same time, no one is accountable. Response-ability gets shattered into micro response-abilities with every shattered piece of the bird's body. To even think about responding or acknowledging a dying bird becomes a hopeless fleeting thought.



7) Video of cars running over a rock pigeon.

It takes a few weeks and sometimes months for the bird body lying on the road to become invisible to the eye and disappear. This led my eyes to look again scanning my own car where I have begun to notice the sight of bird remnants and feathers regularly stuck on the tires and body of my car and other cars. They were always there but I never saw them. Not only the remnants of birds' bodies imprint themselves on our vehicles and roads, but also in our memories, senses and relations numbing them and widening further our sense of separability towards our neighbor birds. After this never-ending cycle of collectively driving our comfortable vehicles again and again running over birds on structurally-violent roads, not only do we stop seeing dead bird bodies, but also our senses slowly atrophy and become numb to birds, living, dying and dead... until one day, all birds fully disappear from our senses!

Meanwhile, response-ability never disappears. It becomes a silent whispering reminder over every inch our tires travel, every atom of asphalt we drive on, every bird-nourished tree and flower we smell, and every breath of air and bird decay we smell.



8) Video of feather traces on car body

Although underground burying may seem like an act of “hiding”, these invisible graves inside the belly of the earth are active territories where something else is always happening. They are complex webs of entangled relations intimately implicating us into their processes of metabolism, decay and growth. Every time I now walk or drive through the city, I feel enlisted in a field larger than my individual body through the many dying/death rituals of hospice and burial I have shared with the land, birds, trees, wind, my car, parking lots, bridges, plastic bags, and the many collaborators who participated in those rituals. I can spot the flowers blooming from a buried bulbul on my right. I can notice the steel bridge barrier stained with the blood of a seagull I buried to my left. I can feel the burning hot rock where it left a scar on my hand while digging a grave for a dove in a parking lot. And I can sense the skin of a peacock’s leg on my fingers carrying their heavy body and looking for deep-enough soil. Hospicing and burying our dead entangles us with land and the cities we live in, inviting us a step away from the notion of a concrete surface we thought we were “walking on”, and intimately closer into the living earth we are part of.



9) To the left, Seagull’s body. To the right, the same spot two months later after burial.

When people ask me what I do for a living, I usually freeze, not knowing how to respond. Most people would assume that in order to be able to relate with birds, one needs to be a scientist, bird expert, birding hobbyist, animal rescuer, a loyal citizen or even a “good human”. I find myself in neither one of those categories. I’ve been learning that this practice of hospicing and burying birds is not a field to become an expert in, neither a benevolent act of saving birds as helpless creatures, nor a moral stance of doing the right thing or redeeming oneself. This practice is an attempt to gesture towards restoring

relations with our neighbor birds and learning from/with them as our older-than-human ancestors. However, this restoring of relations with more-than-human beings often has no place within cities and modern ways of being. Not only is it not rewarded, but it can also become punishable. Within most modern cities, one can face consequences for attempting to bury a dead bird/animal kin for various reasons, of which the main one is the risk of being a potential carrier of viral diseases. Hence, they are categorized as waste to be disposed of through the authorized channels to prevent contamination of soil and groundwater. At times when I had reported dead birds through official channels, they were categorized and labeled as “incidents”, “Dead Animal Case” or “General Waste”.

It’s common too that when we attempt to ritualize efforts of restoring relations with our non-human neighbors, we risk being captured into stable categories of modern ways of being. These rituals beyond the margin, when framed within the logics of modernity, can fall into the trap of becoming transactional, extractive, moral, aesthetic, or even self-purifying. When I am asked what I do for a “living”, I prefer to trouble the question and ask myself: *What do you do for “living” and “dying”?*

With such a question, I find my body pulled to grow down and descend with the falling birds as they lose strength in their wings. With every bird I bury, I also bury a piece of my/our perceived humanity. In a way, I am burying both myself and birds. In this hot compost heap of bird-human remnants, my body has slowly been awakening to the existing and escalating sights, smells, and sounds of birds and bones everywhere I drive and everywhere I walk. Not only can I now recognize birds by their shapes, colors and sounds, I can also trace their dead bodies in vicinity by a reactivated (previously-exiled) sense of smell that is now no longer able to deny the wrongs I, you and our human tribe are inflicting on our neighbor birds. These wrongs will continue to rot and smell until we choose to face them and learn from them, or until the rot spreads so wide and deep that we become no longer able to hide ourselves from it or deny our complicity in harm.

But wait! When are we going to get to the most important question...Why is the sky raining birds?

Every time I attempt to trace an answer to this question for every bird I bury with reasons like “disease, road accidents, heat, window crashing, air/noise/light pollution...”, I am always left with an unsettling unease. No answer I found could bring me deeper insight. Could it be that maybe something is not enough about this question to begin with? It’s true that knowing the why and tracing back events to a single or a few causes can be helpful in bringing visibility, attention, and focused care towards reducing harm to our bird kin. It may translate into actions and policies whereby birds are invited once in a while back up in the hierarchy of beings worthy of living in dignity. However, our efforts to trace problems often lead us to bypassing the work that needs to be done, and instead leaping towards solutions that reaffirm our goodness and innocence. All the while we fail to uncover the deeper conditions in which birds are dying, and we miss to invest in restoring our broken relations with birds as neighbors with whom we share this land. In addition to asking why the sky is raining dead birds, I am learning with birds to trace other questions:

*What makes this rain invisible to us?*

What else is invisible to us that we might yet need to face?

How are we (un)consciously participating in inflicting harm on our other-than-bird neighbors?

What is our responsibility towards birds and bones?

How might we hospice the dying beings and entities within and around us?

What can we learn from/with birds living and dying with us and around us?

If all else fails, what might a world without birds and a neighborhood without neighbors be like?