



PROJECT MUSE®

Mockingbird Resilience

Catriona Sandilands

Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities, Volume 1, Number 1, Winter 2013, (Article)

Published by University of Nebraska Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/565571>

Mockingbird Resilience

CATRIONA SANDILANDS

One March morning the year after we moved back to Toronto from the country, I was awakened by the sound of an extraordinary dawn chorus. In our new urban townhouse, I had so missed the birds: all that fall and winter I had mourned the absence of the jays, cardinals, chickadees, juncos, sparrows, finches, and woodpeckers that had been such lively presences around our backyard feeder; and the ducks, geese, grackles, cowbirds, crows, blackbirds, nuthatches, waxwings, orioles, and owls that visited the trees and wetland behind the house. And so on that morning, as I listened to the *cheeps* and *twitters* and *screees*, I felt intensely happy to be once again enmeshed in bird-worlds.

As I came into fuller consciousness, I realized that there was something rather odd about this chorus. I recognized some of the songs, but others were strange: What birds were singing the *wheet wheet* and the *pirr pirr pirr*? Where was that emblematic spring red-winged blackbird *conk la ree*? Why was I hearing a very persistent gull? And why was there only one song at a time: chickadee, gull, sparrow, *pirr pirr pirr*, *wheet wheet*, jay, gull, *wheet wheet*, sparrow, *pirr pirr pirr*, chickadee, jay?

Eventually, I realized that this dawn chorus was courtesy of a single bird: a northern mockingbird (*Mimus polyglottos*) had taken up residence in the line of spindly landscaping trees between our townhouse and the commuter railway line to the east of the complex to which we had moved. He (only the males sing) was simply mimicking all of those other birds. And the *wheet wheet* and the *pirr pirr pirr* were actually his renditions of car alarms: These tunes are as much a part of our soundscape as are the songs of birds, so why would I expect an urban mockingbird to make a distinction between the avian and the automotive?

On one level I was enchanted with my new companion. The more carefully I listened, the more clearly I could pick out the different songs he added to his repertoire: here was a cardinal; here (eventually) was a red-winged blackbird; here was the mechanical *cuckoo* of a pedestrian crossing for the visually impaired (more likely than an actual cuckoo). In the midst of my sense of loss for the rich avian tapestry of the country, I was greatly buoyed by his presence. On another level the sad irony was inescapable: there was only the *one* bird to satisfy my craving for multiplicity, only the one song to remind me of so many. This opportunistic, city-loving creature (sound familiar?) was both a thriving, active participant in our shared world, and also a rather melancholy reminder of the much more species-complex one of which I was, so pointedly, no longer a part.

My relationship to this mockingbird exemplifies many aspects of what *resilience* means to me. Understanding this city as a place for the ongoing cultivation of layered and mutually enriching multispecies relations in the face of dramatic ecological change means paying attention to what (and who) *is* there, and not only mourning what (and who) *isn't*: to adapt well is to accept and understand the ecological potential that lies in the *present*, and to work to cultivate persistent possibilities for respect, diversity, reciprocity, and conviviality in the midst of ongoing transformation. Cities shelter so-called exotic species as much as they do indigenous ones (an overwintering mockingbird in Toronto is not unusual in 2013, but he would have been a rarity fifty years ago), and resilience means developing the political and social will to insist on strategies by which our current cosmopolitan urban ecosystems can sustain and increase potential for thriving multispecies relationships.

At the same time, however, such thriving requires that we respect the loss that inheres in these changes: this mockingbird is with me in Toronto, in the thin trees by the railway, because we have unintentionally increased its grassland habitat at the expense of the needs of other species (e.g., cuckoos, who prefer forest edges). This bird has ended up playing stand-in for a larger, distant avian community partly because we are increasingly creating cities according to a model of habitat uniformity rather than diversity, and only those species (indeed only those forms of human sociality) that thrive in conditions of condominium, turf grass, bedding plant, and stunted tree are being encouraged to participate. Sprawl is not resilient; neither is intense infill housing develop-

ment that destroys wetlands and woodlots indiscriminately in the service of extracting as much real estate value as possible out of the land. I cannot help but think of E. O. Wilson's "Age of Loneliness," in which humans will inhabit the planet accompanied only by the roster of critters that thrive in the midst of the monochromatic urban habitats we seem so intent on creating: raccoons, rats, robins. But the rest, the ones about whom we need to think most carefully because their needs so clearly do *not* accord with ours, will be gone.

As a result, I am a bit skeptical of the growing popularity of resilience talk, which in some articulations seems to be yet another anthropocentric, instrumental way of saying, "Let's see how we can make the best of things for some people in the midst of the inevitable diminishment of everyone and everything else." To this talk I would say: diminishment is *not* inevitable, and it is very important to imagine and demand much more than adaptive management strategies by which some people might respond, more or less well, to the current course of development. We need to hold on to a more utopian project, one in which notions of justice and diversity and wellbeing take center stage so that adaptation is not simply a matter of settling. But perhaps the notion of resilience can be allied with this more utopian project. If, for example, we are forced to realize that urban resilience *requires* the ongoing lively presence of many other species, then insightful planning might require us to think more seriously about ways in which cities can not only sustain, but also increase, diverse habitats for creatures other than ourselves. Here thinking about resilience may help create conditions for *flourishing*.

So for now, I'm happy to know that the mockingbird is there with me, broadcasting the continued existence of other songs in among the car alarms: a form of resilience in itself, I suppose. But what he really reminds me is that a truly flourishing city will require that we pay much more concerted attention to the kinds of spaces we create for the unfolding of other species' lives in the midst of our own.