
El silbo de oro

Yapci Ramos can whistle
like no one.

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I

Yapci Ramos can whistle like no one. She can whistle long, loud, and like a bird.

She can, in fact, whistle just like a tropical Honduran bird, and can also whistle loud enough to stop a New York City taxi from three blocks away.

II

Her whistles stopped me in place in her sound work *Freedom* (2016-2019), a collision between the recorded song of a real bird, species as yet unknown, and what I will call Ramos-song, a complex sequence of bird-like-whistle-sounds. So, in a little room in the Centro Atlántico de Arte Moderno, one listens to one bird and then another, singing at you from the corners of a room.

Yet one of *Freedom*'s birds is "free" while the other is not. Ramos recorded the authentic bird in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, out the window of a seventh-floor room in what she describes as a virtual fortress in the city center, in a neighborhood specifically blacklisted by the safety guidelines she was given. The bird was singing amid intermittent gunfire (which the audience of the work never hears). The setting for our "free bird", Tegucigalpa, has a justified reputation for lawlessness. In 2013, there were twenty times as many murders per-capita as London¹.

Birds themselves are archetypal symbols of freedom; their ability to fly where they chose suggests a lack of constraints on their liberty.

III

Was the bird safe from the gunfire? (Many would not worry about the bird's welfare, but I do.) Was Ramos safe? In considering these sounds in the theatre of our minds, we are

taken from a small White Cube at CAAM in Las Palmas to Tegucigalpa and back. The territory of Ramos narrative is large and hemispheric – like the path covered by a long-distance migrating bird.

The loop of *Freedom* starts with Ramos' whistles, not the bird's, and if one listens to the loop carefully, her human accent becomes audible. It is perhaps even a little comic², and possibly loud and ballsy, akin to her act of writing with menstrual blood in *Red-Hot*, which was just upstairs from *Freedom* in the CAAM installation.

IV

"Why 'Freedom'?" I asked Yapci.

She told me what it was like to return to the Tegucigalpa hotel at the end of the day. She said she meant she did not want to be a "bird in a cage."

V

Birds in cages have no freedom of movement but they enjoy some safety from the violence of the world outside. In Tegucigalpa, Ramos was just that – a "bird in a cage", listening to another species sing of its freedom from beyond her cage. For her, freedom is both freedom of movement and also freedom of expression. Who knows what exactly the two birds in conversation mean, but they need to be free to whistle. We cannot be free if our lives are in peril or if we live in "a state of fear", like in Tegucigalpa in 2016.

VI

The psychologist Abraham Maslow located physical safety at the essential base of his pyramid of human needs. Without safety and security, freedom is impossible. Indeed, Ramos has

¹ Leith, W. (February 24th 2018) Is Tegucigalpa the Crime Capital of the World? The Spectator. <https://www.spectator.co.uk/2018/02/is-tegucigalpa-the-crime-capital-of-the-world/>

² Ramos is of course not the first artist to imitate bird song or the sounds of nature, particularly in a droll way. Louise Lawler imitated birds to great comic and satirical effect in *Birdcalls* (1972/1981), in which Lawler makes bird-like sounds from the names of famous male artists (Cy Twombly, Vito Acconci, etc.)

spoken to the issues of women's safety and freedom before in her series *Perras y Putas*, in which the audience cannot forget that the artist also put her body in jeopardy and her life on the line.

VII

“There are ethical limits to freedom: liberation should not impinge on the freedom or safety of others. We cannot be free if the state invades our privacy. We cannot be free if other people impede our individual freedom. We cannot be free if women do not have control of their bodies.”

VIII

Ramos' whistles allude to *el Silbo Gomero* (for English readers, the Gomeran Whistle), a system or “register” of whistles corresponding to phonetic Spanish, which developed on the Canarian island of Gomera and allows communication up and down the rugged hills and across the deep valleys. The *Silbo Gomero* predates the Spanish colonization and goes back to the Guanche culture and its lost language, thought to be based on the Tamazight family of languages spoken by the Berbers of North Africa³. Scientists have documented whistling registers in Tamazight, Greek, and other languages⁴.

The *Silbo Gomero* was an endangered species by the 1990s, falling out of use as electronic communications spread. Then in 1999 the local Gomeran government inserted it into the primary and secondary school curriculum. Ten years later UNESCO named the system to the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, declaring “... Its use, development and survival are due, on the one hand, to extensive knowledge of the natural environment in which the inhabitants of La Gomera lived for generations, and on the other, to the close relationship that the islanders established between their environment and their everyday and social lives.” Indeed, *Silbo Gomero's* relationship to the landscape is echoed by Ramos-song's relationship to her “confinement” in Honduras.

Unlike the *Silbo Gomero*, however, what I have termed Ramos-song does not refer back to Spanish or some other human language; it is instead a series of evocative sounds, meaningful as much as bird song is meaningful. Its individual sounds do not denote something external but function more like the notes of music than the components of speech or whistled language.

IX

Is Freedom a whistle for help? Not exactly. But it's a playful, droll, semi-musical, and ironic call for the human liberty of safety and security. As Ramos imitates a bird, I cannot help but chuckle to myself, free that I am, aflight.

³ Meyer, J., Gautheron, B., Ridouane, R. (2015) «Whistled Moroccan Tamazight: phonetics and phonology». <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Whistled-Moroccan-Tamazight%3A-Phonetics-and-Meyer-Gautheron/4c8f7954d65b69c166d9642fbddd31a936735433>

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Published in UNESCO. <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/whistled-language-of-the-island-of-la-gomera-canary-islands-the-silbo-gomero-00172>