

HERE AND FAR AWAY

Yasmin Nurming-Por

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Written by Yasmin Nurming-Por

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Here and Far Away reflects curator Yasmin Nurming-Por's engagement with the people, ecologies, and structures surrounding the corncrake. The text features Yasmin's accounts of travelling to remote parts of Ireland and Scotland, as she comes to understand the significance of the bird across science, agriculture and local folklore. More broadly, this text is an interrogation of perceptions of place in which the concept of remoteness is challenged as a subjective assertion.

About Yasmin

Yasmin Nurming-Por is a curator based in Toronto, Canada. She is co-director of the contemporary art gallery Two Seven Two. She has held curatorial and research positions at the Art Gallery of Ontario, the Walter Phillips Gallery, Global Affairs Canada Visual Art Collection, Images Festival, and Sheridan College amongst others. Recent and upcoming projects include the Buffalo Institute of Contemporary Art (NY), Sagrada Mercancia (Santiago, CHIL), Atlas Arts (Isle of Skye, UK), Xiao Museum of Contemporary Art (Rizhao, CN), National Museum of Women in the Arts (Washington, DC), and Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity (AB). Yasmin is a PhD student in the Art History Department at the University of Toronto.

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Here and Far Away was published as part of *The Sky is Falling!*, a group exhibition featuring contributions from Ceara Conway, Seoidín O'Sullivan, Scott Rogers, and Christopher Steenson. Featuring new and existing works, the exhibition was the culmination of several years of research into the corncrake, a species of bird approaching extinction in Ireland and the UK.

The Sky is Falling! was curated by Caimin Walsh and supported by the Arts Council of Ireland and Limerick Arts Office.



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In the distance a sheep bangs its head against a metal object. This sound reverberates across the misty valley—a failed agricultural startup-cum-quarry. The hoofed trespassers appear unbothered by the unpaved road and its warning notices that signal unidentified, yet caution-worthy, dangers. Curtained off, a barbed wire acreage of nettle flourishes with wild abandon in contrast to the neighbouring wasteland. A strange circumstance led to the field’s existence, when the aforementioned startup—a mushroom farm—closed down, its owners dumped its contents on top of a nearby bog. Even more curiously, this nettle island has become a highly sought-after habitat for the enigmatic corncrake. A bird more commonly heard than seen, it pays seasonal visits here in unusually high numbers. Here the corncrake’s call accompanies the other sounds of a night ensemble.

Perhaps this is a regular Tuesday night for the birds and the sheep, but I find this scene unnerving. A Canadian city kid, I was a late bloomer to loving nature. Since my early twenties it has taken me to some far-flung places where I’ve learned from challenging environments and the people that live within them, as well as testing my own physical and psychological limits. On this occasion, I found myself on the Bellmullet Peninsula in the northwest of Ireland, with curator Caimin Walsh and my collaborator artist Scott Rogers, late in the evening listening for corncrakes. Different from previous experiences of seeking them out where the bird felt at a far distance—their body performs a strange twisting choreography to create a call that reverberates and seems to come from different directions—here the bird felt as if it was talking directly to us, as if mocking us, knowing that we wouldn’t dare cross a barbed wire fence into a bog full of stinging nettles. We returned to our campsite on a secluded beach, following the kind directions of a conservation field worker. An especially clear evening, he had earlier referred to the weather as a “fox day”, encouraging us to appreciate the moment but not be fooled by our good fortune.

It’s probably worth mentioning that I know almost nothing about birds, never

mind the corncrake. While that might sound self-deprecating, my ignorance is intentional. The corncrake is special to me not for its scientific significance, but rather for the kinds of relationships it enacts and encourages – more specifically, how these relationships offer ways of thinking about the different places people live and how they observe the world around them.

The thing about corncrakes is that the grass (or nettle) in which they nest can only ever grow so high, so densely. They like to scurry around in approximately knee-high grasses and plant life where there is space between the stalks. More specifically, they prefer land that is being worked, or at least has been in recent history—land laboured by low intensity agriculture, where gathering crops occurs at a pace closer to the human than to the push of capital. This happens in places we might now consider remote, like the Outer Hebrides of Scotland and the northwest of Ireland, where communities were once connected by boats rather than roads, as well as other places like Ukraine, where wheat is abundant and regularly harvested. The unique Bellmullet mushroom bog serves as a kind of corncrake utopia—thirteen of the approximated 218 calling birds in Ireland were counted in close proximity to our visit—though over time its untended and happenstance characteristics will probably result in an untenable habitat for the birds.

As we packed up our camp the next morning on the beach, two grey-haired men in an SUV appeared. With sparse words, they indicated their intention of driving past us, even though our campsite was located near the end of the road and they must have known they would simply have to turn back. Nor were they willing to wait for us to move our cars. They simply drove their vehicle over a large sand dune next to us, observing us as we packed up. We weren't asked to leave or told that we were trespassing. I couldn't tell if this was a gesture of curiosity or suspicion as to what we were doing. This wasn't the first time that a corncrake-adjacent event reminded us that even in what might seem, to an outsider, remote locations, there will always be people watching, taking note of our comings and goings.

A year prior, on North Uist in the Outer Hebrides of Scotland, an island with a population of approximately 1,200 people, a group of us (Scott, myself, and the team from ATLAS Arts) volunteered to help a bird conservation officer with an emergency call. We had initially planned to meet him to speak about his corncrake-specific projects, but that morning an elderly farmer called him: a grouping of rare little terns had laid eggs on his field, a sandy plot surrounded by lush machair, which he needed to fertilise. The chicks being flightless, he requested help moving them. An absurd scene ensued: a group of us walking in front of the tractor at an obscenely slow pace for nearly two hours looking for baby terns, scooping them up and transporting them to safety. It was incredible how well they had camouflaged into the crop. Picking them up was both nerve-wracking and joyful: they looked like

caricatures of Easter chickens. This is a species with less than three-hundred breeding pairs in the UK. Scott, an actual birder (unlike myself), was chastised for stopping to look at a rare bee: our undivided attention was required. Later that evening at the pub, a local told us he'd seen us and inquired why we would spend so long walking slowly in front of a tractor.

Unless you live there already, getting to these places is its own kind of adventure. My collaborator doesn't drive, so I was tasked with quickly figuring out how to drive a manual car on the opposite side of the road in rural contexts. In each of these situations, across both Scotland and Ireland, I had travelled from the most densely populated city in Canada to rural communities. And each time, I found myself taken aback by the eager willingness of people to talk about the bird.

In late June, following a harrowing ferry ride with waves crashing over the stern of the boat, Scott and I found ourselves on Toraigh, a five-kilometre-long island off the coast of Donegal and the most remote inhabited island in Ireland. Upon arrival we were met by artist and local corncrake expert Anton Meenan. He offered us a ride, then spoke a rapid-fire introduction to local history spanning the influence of Egyptian Coptic Christian iconography, remnants from a sixth century monastery, customary kings, and the division of the island between pagan and Christian values. After he dropped us at An Club (the local pub) we set up camp nearby, and at night we were serenaded by a mixture of live music in the pub and calling corncrakes. Like the mushroom bog, there are a high number of birds who make this small island one of their summer homes. Their habitat here is carefully maintained by both residents, conservationists, and members of the Corncrake LIFE team.

We woke to another "fox day". The landscape had transformed into a sunbathed paradise, a stark contrast to the bleak day before. We both got terribly sunburnt. We visited the local handicrafts shop that offered many corncrake-related items. As she rang us up, one of the attendants shared that as a curious and quite rotund child—she used her arms to indicate a sense of girth—she had gotten stuck inside one of the island's landmarks, a torpedo. Washed ashore sometime after World War II, the military object had been painted red and erected near the halfway mark on Toraigh. The woman chuckled as she told us that her siblings pried her out by her legs.

Later that afternoon at the local hotel, whose mascot is also a corncrake, two fishermen struck up a conversation with me. One spoke English and translated between his Irish-speaking friend and I. (It was later explained to me how rare it is now to meet someone who only speaks Irish, even though Toraigh Island is a Gaeltacht, a stronghold of Irish speakers.) They were friendly, asking what we were doing on the island. After some time,

the Irish speaker asked his friend to translate the question: *do you have corncrakes where you come from?* This simple question struck me. Not because we don't have corncrakes anywhere on Turtle Island/North America—apart from one miraculous appearance of a severely lost bird in Newfoundland—but that, from a different point of view, corncrakes could be imagined anywhere. The bird is common on Toraigh. There was no reason for him to assume it was uncommon elsewhere. He's likely aware that hundreds of people travel to this island to hear, or try to catch a glimpse of, a corncrake. I appreciated that he didn't seem to think it unusual that I would travel so far to see a bird I could also hear at home, and that he was interested in finding similarities between our places.

This encounter reminded me of one a few weeks earlier on Skye. While hosting a workshop for children, Scott and I asked if they had ever seen a corncrake. One of the youngsters enthusiastically said “yes!” much to the surprise of her parental chaperone. After some prodding around where and when she had seen it, she replied “in Glasgow”.

The corncrake is an atypical conservation story. Humans are included in its conservation habitat. A visit to Balranald on North Uist reshaped my idea of what that could look like—the reserve included large swaths of agricultural land that gave way to a rich machair and an incredible peninsula. That morning, in a grassy patch near the side of the road, I heard my first corncrake. Considerably loud from a distance, it went quiet as soon as I came near. Although I understand that its call has nothing to do with me, I have always found it ironic that for all its racket, the bird has no interest in being visible. In the same way, I've come to realise that I don't need to see the corncrake either. I'm already witnessing the work it does with and for people, land, and culture.



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