

SPECIAL SECTION

“A canary is supposed to sit in a cage and look at someone else’s happiness”: Domestic rewilding in fin-de-siècle St Petersburg

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Abstract

In this paper, I suggest a new way of looking at the aesthetically motivated invitation of the putative wild into the inner sanctum of human artifice, the domestic sphere. I use the urban historical geography of Russia as my example. Rather than interpreting such interventions as simply the transplantation of the wild in time and space, the biological recovery of an often imaginary rural past, I argue that the paradoxes of what I call “domestic rewilding” deserve particular attention, as they reveal the aesthetic and political preoccupations motivating such projects. I put a special stress on the gendered cultural politics of canary-keeping in fin-de-siècle St Petersburg, which saw a craze for canaries in the homes of all classes. In many cases, it was women who bought, trained, and traded these birds in order to beautify – via an ecological imaginary– the cultural spaces that had been created with the objective of keeping the non-urban wild at bay. By installing these acoustic artefacts in the heart of the home, these women obtained a covert licence to go out on a figurative limb. The human/non-human symbiosis of canary domestication provided a cover for women’s incursions into traditionally male public formats of organised societies and scientific publications. The paradoxes of domestic rewilding thus subversively re-constituted the gendered spaces of St Petersburg’s urban modernity.

KEYWORDS

domestic rewilding, gender politics, St Petersburg, the Ovsianka canary, urban rewilding, winged geographies

1 | INTRODUCTION

The central mythos of St Petersburg made much of the conquest of nature, though the hubris of Peter the Great’s imperial fiat was inevitably exposed by the savage cold and the barely tameable waters that interpenetrated the city. Rivalled among European capitals only by Oslo in its proximity to the Arctic Circle, St Petersburg required its citizens to trudge

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through snow and ice in darkness for much of the year. When the city's main river, the Neva, was not frozen, it often refused to stay within its banks. The city was built on swamp land, and for much of its history it remained under the threat of floods both routine and devastating. Nevertheless, by the end of the 19th century it had become one of the most populous cities in the world (Bater, 1976), displaying a sometimes alien modernity, awkwardly grafted onto a barely accessible and backward empire. St Petersburg's rapid expansion in the latter half of the 19th century – cut short only by revolution – meant that for nearly three generations its population was dominated by recent migrants who retained strong village connections, much to the disquiet of cosmopolitan critics. As one observer sardonically noted, “St Petersburg was a big village” (Abozin, 1896, p. 8). This complicated the urban–rural divide associated with modern life and challenged the city's iconic separation from the natural world. Rurality was reinforced by the non-human migrants, sometimes bred far afield but often reared and kept in the city's surrounding countryside. While most of St Petersburg's animals were brought in to labour, as elsewhere, a few arrived to offer companionship and entertainment to their human keepers. They embodied a form of urban nature or a “domestic wild” that speaks to St Petersburg's incomplete transition to modernity rather than to a decisive separation from the natural world (Ginn, 2016).

Canaries, notably neglected in the historical discussion, uniquely embody St Petersburg's incomplete transition to modernity and precarious separation from nature. Their story illustrates Franklin Ginn's domestic wild (“encountering the wild in the familiar and, conversely, cultivating the familiar out of what appears wild”: Ginn, 2016, p. 2), which I use here in the sense of “domestic *re-wilding*” to iterate a concept of *re-wilding* that espouses rather than rejects the contrivance involved in the aesthetic construction of the wild and sees it as intimately connected to the prerequisites for human care and responsibility. While I have previously argued that canaries are icons of an “unnatural” history of birdsong, here I want to explore more broadly the intersection of this aestheticised and domesticated wildness with the gendered politics of late imperial St Petersburg.

2 | THE RUSSIAN CANARY

In their conquest of the fashionable cities of the world, Atlantic Canaries did not skip St Petersburg. The first breeding manuals published locally appeared in the late 18th century. The market remained small, however, so long as it relied on imported birds. That changed only in the second half of the 19th century with the advent of a domestically bred canary (Teplov, 1792; Vladimirskii, 1893a). The winds of fashion that elevated it were unique. Unlike its British-bred counterpart, it was prized for its song, and unlike its German or American cousins, its repertoire was meticulously composed by breeders and trainers to sound *natural*, rather than to imitate man-made instruments or melodies. Natural it was not, however, in any conventional sense. The Russian Canary, as the dominant local breed came to be called, was prized for its convincing imitation of the yellowhammer's unadulterated song, which city-dwellers in Russia associated with the countryside and forests that so many of them had only recently left behind (Mit'urnikov, 1894; Petri, 2019).

Natural in connotation only, its painstakingly orchestrated echoes of the countryside – played back in the enclosed spaces of late imperial St Petersburg, including bedrooms, boudoirs, parlours, pubs, and exhibition halls – underscore the validity of the now familiar critiques of the dichotomies between wild and domestic, rural and urban, modern and primordial, or even between successful containment and uncontrolled release. In his discussion of “ecological imaginaries”, for instance, Matthew Gandy calls for a move away from the idea of the city as antithesis to an imagined bucolic ideal; instead, says Gandy, we should reject a “view of the synthesis of nature as a kind of ‘equilibrium’ independent of social relations” (Gandy, 2006, p. 71).

The story of the Russian Canary encapsulates this critique within the historical geographies of modernity, where the objective is not the search for alternative ecological futures, as it is in present-day conservation projects. Instead, we are looking at the construction of a thoroughly aestheticised and even imaginary ecological referent. The urban and the rural, the domestic and the wild, were blurred long before the advent of contemporary environmental concerns. While William Cronon long ago proposed the concept of a ‘historical wilderness’ as a way to resolve certain difficulties in present-day conservation, this concept can also be usefully inverted to critically examine projects where the objective is not the construction of a historically faithful account linked to a place or an ecosystem, but rather the use of flora or fauna in the construction of a historical myth, particularly when transplanted from the great outdoors to urban settings. Whereas for conservation policy distortions in concepts of the wild cause obvious problems, from the perspective of historical cultural geographies of urban life these distortions are themselves interesting and deserve to be studied in their own right. As Gandy argues, “the aesthetic manipulation of the urban realm has not yet been systematically explored in relation to (late) modern subject formation” (Gandy, 2022, p. 27).

To be sure, this paper will hardly complete such a vast undertaking, but it may offer a useful contribution in that direction, particularly where the gendering of urban modernity and its ecological imaginaries is concerned. The installation of the Russian Canary in the domestic spaces of late imperial St Petersburg adds a story that illustrates how an imagined rural past was enlisted to construct urban cultural landscapes and modify gender politics in the context of an ultimately doomed effort at national modernisation. In the broader policy field, “grappl[ing] with the temporalities implied by the *re-* in rewilding” is an important corrective, but this effort also pays dividends in revealing the instrumentalisation of an unexamined position about “wildness” for the construction of the historical cultural geographies of the domestic sphere and urban gender politics (Lorimer & Driessen, 2016, p. 645).

The story of the Russian Canary, its keepers and St Petersburg illustrates a form of “rewilding” that holds that term in suspension, since it co-opts the concept to describe a creative cultural and political project or assemblage that never aspired to the faithful reconstruction of an ecological past. More than any other reintroductions, the installation of the putative wild into an urban domestic setting is a cultural intervention that invites scepticism about the “re-” as well as the “wild”. Far from pernicious, however, these paradoxes were themselves productive. Insofar as the process of rewilding extended beyond the bird and its setting to its keeper, the fashion for domestic canaries enabled a group of women to engage in traditionally male-dominated areas of cultural production and distorted distinctively urban features of containment and domesticity.

Indeed, the implied shift of emphasis from antagonistic renegotiation to intimate symbiosis in domestic rewilding supports a gendered critique of modernity in the Russian imperial capital. Counterintuitively, canary-keeping as a domestic activity opened the cage for some women at least to participate in the life and leadership of organised societies and contribute to the production of scientific knowledge about canary breeding and husbandry. This paper tells their story, and that of their companion animals, in order to conceptualise rewilding, at least in some instances, as an aesthetically motivated response to the politics of behavioural and ecological containment. This concept can be applied to human animals themselves, as well as the ecosystems, such as city apartments, that are least conducive to rewilding via the supposed unwinding of human artifice.

The discussion I set out in the rest of this paper progresses by successive reductions in geographical scale: I start with the business of canary breeding and trading, which geographically connected the city to various ecological and social systems outside of the city. Next, I look at bird-keeping societies and women who published papers about canary breeding. Finally, I return to the conceptual discussion of rewilding in its application to domestic space and gender politics and, more broadly, to the role of human aesthetic preferences in the cultural historical geographies that ultimately shape the co-evolution of human and non-human species.

3 | BREEDING CANARIES FOR URBAN HOMES

Let us start with the veritable canary craze in St Petersburg in the last decades of the 19th century (R-ch., 1893, p. 123). “In a rich, expensive cage or in a simple wooden cage,” as one local canary expert writes, “the canary is always considered a favourite of the family” (Mulert, 1902, p. 5). “No household was complete”, a colleague pointed out, “without a representative of the feathered kingdom” (“Akvarium”, 1910, p. 1). While this was almost certainly hyperbole, St Petersburg may have been second only to New York in terms of the number of canaries living there (Russ, 1899). The vast majority of these canaries were so-called “Russian Canaries”. This type of bird was the product of interbreeding in the early 19th century between the Yellow Canary, a breed perfected in Germany, and several Russian wild birds including the Siskin, Serin, and Linnet (Bogdanov, 1889). Already, then, we have a kind of domestication of wildness: the breeding of a bird that represented not merely nature and the countryside, but a specifically Russian nature.

Originally bred to be more robust and resistant to the harsh northerly winters, Russian Canaries were – at least in the period of their ascendancy – hatched in rural households as a side-activity. Perhaps as a by-product of the relatively low technological and scientific sophistication of rural breeders, Russian Canaries sometimes picked up the songs of wild birds. By contrast, their relatives, the Yellow Canaries known as Harz Rollers, which also competed on the St Petersburg market and for a long time continued to dominate in the highest-priced segment, were bred in huge hatcheries in Germany and trained there to reproduce a standardised repertoire of melodies reminiscent of human music and inculcated using specially adapted instruments (Anderson et al., 2012; Birkhead, 2014; Nevskiï, 1898). Towards the middle of the 19th century, however, fashions changed and the auditory repertoire of Russian Canaries became a celebrated distinguishing characteristic (Aleksandrov, 1892, p. 375).

Among the Russian Canaries on offer, birds replicating the song of the Yellowhammer (*Ovsianka* in Russian) became the most popular avian commodity of the Russian capital (Petri, 2019). The identification of the breed with the song of the Yellowhammer ultimately ran so deep that the Russian Canary came to be synonymous with the “*Ovsianka* Canary” in reference to the Yellowhammer and its song. Aside from this tune, the Russian Canary had very little in common with the Yellowhammer. The two species are not even capable of producing joint offspring (Birkhead, 2011).

The stress here is on the production, via training as well as breeding, of a wildness that is domesticated in multiple and compound ways. The reliable reproduction of the Yellowhammer's tune was achieved at scale via scientifically underpinned training techniques, which were introduced to satisfy an ever-expanding urban market. These relied on the pronounced malleability of the Canary's song, even if the underlying neurological phenomena would only be ‘scientifically’ studied in the 20th century. The training introduced by German and Russian breeders co-opted the Canary's natural propensity to quote and imitate sounds from its surroundings. In Germany, this often involved the use of mechanical instruments. In Russia, breeders targeted an auditory aesthetic reminiscent of the countryside, the soundtrack of which birds such as the Yellowhammer provided. The Yellowhammer breeds in the undergrowth, often in shrubs and forests, and it is not particularly wary of humans. It was known to visit human habitations to scrounge for food and its melody could frequently be heard near settlements, but it was associated with the wild due to its breeding habits. In the cities, it was simply absent (Petri, 2019).

Historical manuals and ornithological publications specify that in training so-called Russian Canaries to sing like the Yellowhammer and other birds found in the countryside, cages containing young Canaries were placed next to ones containing captured birds, or left in a safe place from which the former could hear, respond to and imitate the songs of free birds (Fedorov, 1891; Kulagin, 1892, p. 378; Vladimirskii, 1893b). The tune of the Yellowhammer was particularly prized by late 19th-century bird-lovers in St Petersburg for its supposedly natural-sounding undulations, its particular suitedness to the canary's voice, and the variability of its performance: the bird ‘does not belt out just any sort of ballad, but throws in sounds, plays with them, makes the most unexpected transitions ... In each bar, one can hear the expanse and depth, which almost visibly characterise [the bird's] nationality’ (Fedorov, 1891; Mit'urnikov, 1894, pp. 172, 173, 175). In an empire for which the “conquest of nature was central to the autocratic authority”, this was especially significant (Randall, 2014, p. 479). Pursued at a quasi-industrial scale, the song training of Russian Canaries enabled the *recording* and urban *broadcasting* of avowedly wild melodies in the imperial capital. It provided a diminutive and decidedly non-threatening token of the landscapes associated with the city's dominions and its residents' biographical past. It rendered audible a national trope of a symbolically subjugated nature that underscored the relative safety of the urban domestic sphere and the authority of the country's imperial masters (Petri & Howell, 2020).

4 | FROM BOUDOIRS TO LECTURE THEATRES

What role did women play in the production of this domestic wildness? Aside from ecological and aesthetic dimensions, the domestication of the Russian Canary also had implications for gender politics. In his play *The Wood Demon*, later reworked into *Uncle Vanya*, Anton Chekhov gives a fictional account of provincial life, inflected in part by impressions of the city as a distant possibility, perhaps an avenue of escape. Diadin, the impoverished aristocrat, offers sage advice to the young wife of his neighbour, a retired professor:

The great Russian poet Lomonosov fled from the Arkhangelsk Province and found his fortune in Moscow. This, of course, is noble on his part ... But why did you run? After all, your happiness, if you reason conscientiously, is nowhere to be found ... A canary is supposed to sit in a cage and look at someone else's happiness, well, sit tight. (Chekhov, 1889–1891 [1978], p. 182; author's translation).

But many women refused to heed such patriarchal and patronising advice, familiar from many associations between women and caged birds. Mariia Markova, for instance, the wife of a military officer, had a remarkable, if short, career in late imperial St Petersburg as an expert on practical ornithology, as her subject came to be called, and as an organiser of wildly popular bird shows. In historical records she first appears around 1891, as a contributor to the book review section of the *Avicultural Bulletin*, a prominent ornithological periodical. Unusually, Markova rose quickly to become its editor-in-chief in Markova, 1894a, 1894b, 1894c, 1894d. Furthermore, her name appears on the list of members of the Imperial Bird Society (henceforth, the “Society”) from 1892 onward. Membership was awarded by invitation on the basis of special contributions to ornithology and the science of bird-keeping (Russkoe

Obshchestvo Ptitsevodstva, 1885). At the Society's annual meeting she led the prominent and well-attended Canary section. Aside from publishing in the *Avicultural Bulletin* and participating in the Society's work as a jury member for bird shows, Markova wrote a well-regarded book about canary breeding and keeping, which won the Society's most prestigious medal in the category of "outstanding scientific contributions."¹ On the occasion of her retirement in 1896, her life's work on canary breeding was honoured by none other than the Czar's own brother, Grand-Duke Nikolaï ('Otchet o deiatel'nosti Obshchestva ptitsevodstva za 1895 god', 1896, p. 1).

Djadin's advice, the story of the Russian Canary, and Markova's scientific and organising work are reminders that "domestication practices have ... a political content ... that not only defined the relationship of humans with certain animals but also intrahuman relationships between groups defined on the basis of race and gender" (Anderson, 1997, p. 465). These relationships were characterised by recent tectonic shifts, including the freeing of the serfs and the reforms of Alexander II (1857–1881), during whose reign "feminism had first erupted" on Russian soil. By the turn of the century, women had won "the right to higher education, but were denied access to universities, state degrees and service status and pensions" (Edmondson, 1992, pp. 78–79). Against this background, the *Avicultural Bulletin* and the Society offered Markova an alternative forum for her intellectual talents and an opportunity to use her organising skills.

By no means was she the only researcher and would-be-organiser to take this route, although it was, of course, primarily accessible to members of a burgeoning urban bourgeoisie (Smith, 2017). There were many others: Olga Orlova developed the Society's regulations, including the rules for bird shows (I. R. O. Ptitsevodstva, 1911, p. 14), and Inna Sokolova officiated as its treasurer (Russkoe Obshchestvo Ptitsevodstva, 1892a, 1892b, p. 3). This was all the more remarkable given that only about 10% of its members were women (I. R. O. Ptitsevodstva, 1912, pp. 3–14; Russkoe Obshchestvo Ptitsevodstva, 1887, pp. 7–8; 1888, pp. 6–8; 1891, pp. 3–7; Russkoe Obshchestvo Ptitsevodstva, 1892a, 1892b, pp. 3–9). Noteworthy too is the fact that many women participated in the role of experts presenting papers about canary breeding and keeping (for example at the All-Russian Conference of Bird Keepers in 1892).² The Society's work even gave rise to a few female entrepreneurs, who set up schools for practical ornithology (Elagin, 1893, p. 402; Ptitsevodstva, 1913, p. 46; Russkoe Obshchestvo Ptitsevodstva, 1892a, 1892b, p. 92) (Figure 1).

The successful forays of women like Markova into scientific discourse, the administrative life of the Society, and related businesses, all meant pushing the boundaries of normative gender roles, but doing so in a manner that was anything but defiant given the cover provided by the link to domestic practices of decoration and animal husbandry. Anja Rosenholm and Irina Savkina argue that in late imperial Russia the patriarchal cultural canon still controlled the practices of women's writing, largely restricting it to pedagogical literature for children, the poor, and less privileged women (Rosenholm & Savkina, 2012; Edmondson, 1992, p. 80). In the scientific world, contributions from women were typically limited to the literary review sections of journals and periodicals addressed to women readers. This is where Markova started as well. But the Imperial Bird Society, composed mainly of men, as well as the *Avicultural Bulletin* still offered unique openings for women. In a cultural environment, where femininity was "defined as inherently less intellectual and more close to nature" and "ideal womanhood and 'the home' had become conjoined" (Gates, 1998, p. 3), writing about domestic birds provided an alibi for incursions into the traditional male spheres of behavioural ornithology and the life of organised societies (Anderson, 1997, p. 476). In this context, Markova could unabashedly take issue with the conclusions of celebrated domestic and foreign ornithologists in articles about canary breeding, and argue the merits of her own innovative training techniques (Markova, 1891, 1893, 1895a, 1895b). There are plenty of instances where women might have placed birds in cages, but refused to stay in those cages themselves.

Read abstractly and without this gender-based context, the story of the Russian Canary might simply have served to reinforce ideas about human or national exceptionalism that had their "material basis ... in domestication of the non-human world" (Anderson, 1997, p. 475). However, when one adds to the mix Markova and other women, who were not only bird keepers, but also leaders in the science and business of the Canary's domestication, another side of the story becomes apparent. A perhaps unexpected "symbiosis between creatures" emerges, one that illustrates the mutuality of rewilding as a pendant to the "mutuality of domestication" and breaks the mould of ever-intensifying mutual constraint (Cassidy, 2020, p. 2). Here, rather than synergistic incarceration and care, a certain licence "to be wild" is opportunistically extracted from the incoherence of generalised containment strategies. Canaries, because they are caged, small and entirely non-threatening, obtained the permission, but also the imperative, to broadcast the sounds of a distinctively Russian countryside in a city, from which non-human nature in its unruly capacity had been effectively excluded. By the same stroke, their women keepers faced less overt opposition than in other contexts as they engaged in scientific discourse and the traditionally male life of organised societies. Canaries allowed such women to impinge on a world that was in other ways closed to them.



FIGURE 1 A woman writer and a caged bird. Like Markova, she is an officer's wife who is doing statistical work, some years after Markova was active.

Source: TsGAKFD Spb, B5542, Zhena General-Mayora N.I. Kalugina, Mavra Ageevna za peregiskoi statisticheskikh dokumentov, 1914–1917, photographer unknown

5 | THE ART OF REWILDING

It is no accident, I would argue, that the absorption of an aestheticised “constitutive other” into St Petersburg apartments would create such an opening for the countryside to look in on the city and an alibi for Markova's incursions into the public sphere. An association with domestic elegance went a long way in legitimising both. As with the salons in previous centuries of aristocratic matrons of the arts and letters, the association of public activity with the intimacy of the elegant home has long provided opportunities for women of talent and privilege. That this tendency would extend to bourgeois women of late-19th-century St Petersburg as well is of little surprise in itself. The closer context, however, is significant, as it reveals an intrinsic feature of domesticity in the context of urban gender politics. Relegation of the domestic sphere to the responsibility of women also implies at least partially delegating the authority to defend it against the entropic forces of decay and the incursions of a constitutive other. This delegation creates a platform for women to understand, challenge, and explore the boundaries between the domestic sphere and all that lies outside it, including a hostile nature, human ignorance, or any other form of subversive violence. In this context, the tension between domestication of the wild and conquest of man-made urban habitats by non-human animals is, I would argue, the central practical and conceptual challenge. It is not a minor complication susceptible to being tamed via definitional fiat. Taking this tension seriously, as the story of the Russian Canary forces one to, means emphasising the agency of the human and non-human animals involved, framing as they did the aesthetic compromises inherent in any political ecology of containment or exclusion.

A symbiotic view of this domestic rewilding accepts the project as both an aesthetic and an ecological pursuit, its paradoxes inherent to an appeal that is at once constructive and subversive. This domestic rewilding contrasts with ecological programmes in which nature is the active party making an incursion, while humans, at most, grant it spatially circumscribed reprieve (Owens & Wolch, 2019, p. 285), or in which humans, taking the initiative, simply reintroduce flora or fauna into settings in which they were previously present. The attractions of both forms are clear, but so are

their problems, not least their reliance on ahistorical conceptions of nature and the wild, and the dualism of nature and culture. Such projects also advance fatalistic paradigms that insist on minimum human interference with the specific natures that are being let into the city, or else blithely ignore the human communities and interests surrounding the re-introduction of wildlife and other natural species.

Several definitions of urban rewilding respond to these fallacies. We might reconceptualise rewilding as something that conforms to negotiations, obeys the rational and presumably safe constraints of ecological programmes, and generally takes place at a prescribed place and a slower pace (Jørgensen, 2015; Lorimer et al., 2015; Owens & Wolch, 2019). But I would argue that in practical terms, these arguments do not address the fundamental flaw in the concept, since rewilding is simply the old concept of the domestication of nature in a new guise. Accepting this critique need not render the term superfluous, however, and I suggest rewilding as an alternative that refuses both rewilding's spatial separation of nature and culture and the primacy of restoration as its temporal signature. The linguistically explicit paradoxes of the domestic wild may be more effective in making space both for marginal creatures and marginalised communities. Domestication must always remain the pursuit of an ideal, whether applied to its human agents or non-human subjects, but such domestication is both disciplinary in nature and a foundation for resistance, even transgression.

Domestication's corollary of infiltration by a variously conceived wild both subverts and reconciles (via an aesthetic intertwining) the pernicious binaries underlying our traditional political ecologies and gender cultures. To a modest degree, our example of the Russian Canary demonstrates this. As I have tried to show in this brief investigation of the story of the Russian Canary in late imperial St Petersburg, fashion, aesthetics, and human preferences are all factors that should not be ignored when exploring the production of the domestic wild and the process of domestic rewilding. In the case of the Russian Canary, the forces unsettling the containment strategies applied to birds and humans were neither irresistible ecological pressures nor conscious concessions by higher authorities. Rather, the subtle pull of aesthetic preferences lent a helping hand, or wing.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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ENDNOTES

¹ See Elagin (1891, p. 302). Further works by Markova were published in 1891, 1893, 1894a, 1894b, 1894c, 1894d and 1895a, 1895b, 1895c). Regarding her work as a jury member, see, among others, I. R. O. Ptitsevodstva (1910), Russkoe Obshchestvo Ptitsevodstva, 1892a, 1892b and Russkoe Obshchestvo Ptitsevodstva (1894, 1983).

² See, for example, M. Sablina, N. Lebedeva (Russkoe Obshchestvo Ptitsevodstva, 1891).

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