

thINKIngDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Christine Cieslak

Neighbor Watching

by Emilee Lord

For Lorena Marin, multidisciplinary Colombian performance artist and founding director of Robus Dance Theatre Ensemble, everything she's interested in eventually becomes a project. This time? It's bird watching, biodiversity, and urban conservation. But how does a choreographer, whose work generally interrogates what it means to be an audience and where dance can happen, dig into these areas? In Marin's case, it began on a run.

Marin tells me, "It's not just the stage—we can make art anywhere. I'm a runner, and I've been very curious about birds and bird watching. I live very close to Prospect Park. During the pandemic, I explored it. And I've been exploring their [local birds'] movements and how they migrate, as well as their interconnection with community and human beings. That's how the project *As Birds We Heal* was born. It looks at the intersection of dance, birdwatching, and community education and is designed to help people better understand avian urban life through movement and mindfulness, while deepening their connection with local ecosystems."

Christine Cieslak, a scientist and educator working in avian conservation, met Marin during a run. Cieslak and Marin became close friends and began collaborating after learning about the decline of a certain local species from a report published by the [NYC Bird Alliance](#) and, more recently, Cornell's [2025 State of The Birds](#) report. Cieslak shares, "We're especially concerned about the rapid decline of species like the Black-Crowned Night Heron in New York City and Brooklyn. Recent studies suggest that these majestic birds may soon disappear from urban areas unless we take action."

Cieslak has tackled avian conservation in many ways throughout her career: "I've been in education as a teacher, working in both formal classrooms and sometimes taking kids and adults out to parks to do birdwatching. But now I'm really focused on the research aspect and looking at ways we can actually conserve birds." She is currently working with waterbird conservation and is overall interested in how green roofs and green infrastructure can help support wildlife in urban spaces.

I asked Cieslak and Marin if the conversations around preservation of species and the environment are too hard to digest. Marin responded, "I think it's such a heavy conversation. You don't know where to start. Everyone is overwhelmed. If the news is not about politics it's about climate change and everything is life-threatening. So that's the part where we want to find a moment of joy and ask how do we build community around these things without being overwhelmed? How can I use my platform of dance and theater and Christine's background and knowledge to help this?"

Cieslak added, "We see all of these species in the park so close to us. We have these important neighbors that we don't know much about. People forget that biodiversity is a part of city life as well. I'm trying to find ways to make people aware without the conversation getting off-putting. We have to do it and be aware. And we're trying to make something more friendly. Because sometimes I think with my lens, with the scientific approach, it can get kind of lost, murky, hard to understand."

Cieslak went on to say, "I do a lot of photography as part of how I interact and how I learn and I've documented a lot of different things. And I guess the part about New York City that I found and that has I think kept me here is the amount that is here and the help that it needs. It's not a place where people think about biodiversity conservation. They think about far away or they think of places like that are just untouched and pristine. But there's 25 million migratory birds passing through NYC throughout the year and up to 300 species can be seen throughout [Prospect] park and these are things that are changing."

"These neighbors are here, and we're sharing resources in a sense," Marin adds.

It's interesting to think of conservation as something that can happen in a city, and how wildlife comes here for the same reasons people have been drawn here. This area is an immensely rich landscape that fulfills many needs. "In collaborating with local scientists, we're raising awareness, building community engagement, and encouraging stewardship of bird habitats—especially in neighborhoods that often lack access to environmental education," says Marin.

So what is *As Birds We Heal*? It starts as a dance piece and continues as a bird walk into Prospect Park, Brooklyn. Marin is choreographing from Cieslak's photos, videos, and the resources she brings to the table, and this fall Brooklynites will have an opportunity to learn from them. This is just one of a few different ways that Marin and Cieslak are combining efforts, building learning materials, movement, guides, and experiences for Prospect Park and neighboring community gardens. It's in this ripe place of gathered research becoming wind filled wingspans, tender steps, and patterns. It's in a place of piecing together what matters and finding how it can engage.

What strikes me about the conversation I had with this researcher/educator/creator collaboration is the outpouring of passion and dedication, each to their specific craft, and each to the process they are in together. Collaboration can be a flighty bird but what I witnessed was a lot of love and commitment to each other, the art, the data, and the birds—our neighbors. I'm looking forward to wandering my neighborhood with them, now that bird watching has been defined for me as writing choreographies.

An Interview in May 2025 with Lorena Marin and Christine Cieslak on the process behind their ongoing project, [*As Birds We Heal*](#), Brooklyn, NY.

Homepage Image Description: *Caught in mid flight against a blurred background of golds, oranges, and blues, a Warbler arches its head up and pushes its wings down together in a lifting stroke. It has a golden brown head with a white throat under its small pointed*

beak. There is a small gold patch above its tail feathers and its wing and tail feathers are shades of black, grey, brown, and white.

Article Page Image Description: Balanced on a fallen tree in a wooded area a dancer poses wearing maroon pants and a blue long sleeved crop top. She balances on her right foot, touching her pointed left foot against the right ankle. Her left hand reaches across her midsection with the hand and fingers spread wide. Her right arm reaches up over her head, fingers spread wide, palm down. She softly gazes down, her mouth relaxed open.

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