1. Wallace Stevens, stanza V from "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" (1923):

   I do not know which to prefer,
   The beauty of inflections
   Or the beauty of innuendoes,
   The blackbird whistling
   Or just after.

2. Leila Aboulela, *The Translator* (NY: Black Cat, 1999), 4

   In this country everything was labelled, everything had a name. ... Tropical plants cramped in the damp warmth and orange fish in running water. Whistling birds flying indoors, the grey sky irrelevant above the glass ceiling.


   Twelve years after our migration north, the González clan had decided to return. And once they left I'd be alone in this country, a severed limb twitching.
   
   I told [Abuela] that I was not going back with them, that I wanted to finish my master's degree. *Six pills, seven.* I told her that I'd be okay, at twenty-two years of age; I was a grown-up now, financially independent. *Eight pills. Nine.*
   
   I didn't tell her, however, that I was afraid of my hungry gay body.
   
   I was afraid of the light in the mornings, and the birds chirping from the branches of the tree outside my window.
My remarks might more accurately be entitled "Three Ways of Looking at Linguistic Diversity in English." I have three examples (see above), each one capturing a certain effect of birdsound in English: the "blackbird whistling" from one of Wallace Stevens's famous "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird"; the "whistling birds" from the beginning of a novel set mostly in Scotland by the Scottish/English/Sudanese writer Leila Aboulela; and the "birds chirping" from Rigoberto González's *Autobiography of My Hungers*. All of these examples seem to be more about the poetic trope of birds in English than about linguistic diversity; or, if about language, more about the interrelation between human and animal language. But I want to claim that to understand each of these examples one would need to consider a multiplicity of different languages in order to do justice to the sound of these birds.

How do you do justice to the sound of a bird in English? This is the guiding question behind my remarks. It's a version of a question I developed for a workshop at Columbia a couple of weeks ago ("Workshop for Poetry as Pluriverse: Thinking Global Language Justice"), the beginning of a projected two-year seminar on "Global Language Justice." Thinking of "Global Language Justice" (whatever that might mean) is quite relevant to our topic today, the question of language diversity in teaching and studying English. Many of the issues discussed at that Columbia event had to do with questions of social justice and language. One speaker [Daniel Kaufman] addressed the challenges posed by the enormous number of endangered languages worldwide -- and he spoke at length about the hidden multiplicity of indigenous Mexican languages spoken in the New York area (something that might be especially relevant for Rigoberto González's *Autobiography of My Hungers*). Another speaker [Isabelle Zaugg] addressed the
technological question of accessibility to script on the internet -- her example was
Ethiopic script.

Both of these examples have an important bearing on my attempt to answer the
question of doing justice to the sound of birds in English. To simplify drastically, I want
to make two rather different claims. First: English cannot do justice to the sound of birds
because it imposes a single language and with it a single script (the roman alphabet). It
marginalizes the sound and script of other "whistling" or "chirping" birds. But then
second, at the same time I want to claim that English depends on a hierarchy of sound
and script, an injustice of language that highlights in turn how English is produced by the
very diversity of languages and scripts it seems to exclude.

So, now, turning to the first example on the handout, the speaker of Stevens's fifth
way of looking at a blackbird equivocates between the "beauty of inflections" and the
"beauty of innuendoes." I'm inclined to allegorize a reading of that difference in terms of
my two claims about English: first, the imposition of an English blackbird "whistling" in
an American landscape; and second, the innuendo that the sound of a "blackbird" in
America may be undoing the "English"ness of its "whistling" (the blackbird isn't a
European blackbird at all, but maybe a grackle, or a mocking bird). This doesn't really do
justice to the poem, but I want to gesture toward a reading of Stevens I've developed in
my contribution to the book I co-edited on Mocking Bird Technologies, where I speculate
that Stevens's "blackbird" might be related to the European starling, an invasive species
brought to North America in the 1890s and quickly displacing other species to occupy a
dominant place in our ecosystem. Depending on your viewpoint, the "whistling" of this
bird may not have quite the same beauty (of "inflection" or "innuendo"). But at the very
least one might ask: How many birds have been displaced in Wallace Stevens's "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird"? And -- no less important, I think -- how many more linguistic and philological traditions than the "thirteen ways" sedimented in the English word "blackbird" of Stevens's famous signature poem?

Let me just add to that last point. It's not just that a bird is classified differently in different languages. The appearance, or disappearance of a bird in a line of poetry carries with it a plurality and contest of different linguistic and philological traditions, of contested ways of reading and writing the trope of the bird's flight (or "whistle") through space and time, through multiple and contested versions of history. So the thought that Stevens's "blackbird" might actually be a starling concerns not only an important set of questions of biodiversity (the appearance and disappearance of specific kinds of birds), but also attendant questions of linguistic and literary diversity. How does the poetic trope of the "blackbird" (like the starling) relate to (or displace) varieties of indigenous American languages and literary forms? And how does the poetic trope of the European starling carry with it, condensed or displaced, the trope of the mynah bird found in ancient Sanskrit, more modern Arabic, and also Chinese poetic traditions? Food for thought and afterthought. "The blackbird whistling / Or just after."

The sound of the "whistling birds" in the second example -- from Leila Aboulela's *The Translator* -- might more easily be identified with the label European starlings. The novel (at least this part of the novel) is set in Scotland and, having grown up in Scotland myself, I can tell you from personal experience that the place is full of starlings and their distinctive (and not altogether pleasant) whistling. But these "whistling birds," appearing on the second page, belong to a more complicated setting of the scene of the novel than
simply illustrating its Scottish landscape. The line just above the "whistling birds" -- "In this country everything was labelled, everything had a name" -- extends a description of the physical location of Aberdeen's famous Winter Garden setting to a cultural contrast between English and Arabic: between an English sense of order and taxonomy and the Arabic sense of identification with "home" in the Sudan attributed to the main character, the "translator" of the title who works as a translator at Aberdeen University, translating between English and Arabic. So actually these "whistling birds" might be read as part of the translation effect between the romanized print form of the English we are reading and the Arabic script to which the novel repeatedly turns as its underlying sense and sensibility. In a more extended reading of this novel, I would try to explore how the imagery of birds relates to the thematic contrast the novel develops between a sense of "freedom" attributed to the scriptworld of roman letters (or the language of "Western liberalism") and a sense of "justice" attributed to the scriptworld of Arabic letters (or the language of Islam).

One of the points to explore in this work of translation to and from Arabic and Roman scriptworlds is that there's a gap between language and what I've called scriptworld referring to the world scripts of Arabic and Roman letters. (The term "scriptworld" is taken from David Damrosch's "Scriptworlds: Writing Systems and the Formation of World Literature" [Modern Language Quarterly 68: 2 (June 2007): 195-219].) Although Roman and Arabic letters evoke contrasting worlds for the characters in the novel, the novel's English mediates the work of translation in a number of different ways. So, for example, the reader is compelled to stumble over differences between Scottish and English ways of reading roman letters as well differences between Sudanese
and Arabic ways of reading Arabic letters. This is clearest in the case of the name of the
the main character's dead husband, spelled "Tarig," a spelling explained early in the novel
when the Scottish academic, Rae, mistakes the spelling of the name for "Tariq" -- "Yes,
it's written with a qaf but we pronounce the qaf as a g back home" (6). This example
highlights how English as worldscript works in at least two different ways. On the one
hand, English imposes roman letters on other languages and scripts (the way names and
places are imposed on the map of Africa in "Heart of Darkness" -- and that's an example
developed by this novel). Yet on the other hand, English unearths other scripts and
languages (e.g. the latter qaf) that keep tripping up the English use of roman letters.

How, then, does this novel's English do justice to the sound of those birds? In this
case, you would need to explore the complex Scottish, English, Arabic, and Sudanese
senses of the words and the birds; as these are refracted through the linguistic diversity
captured (or released) by the scriptworlds, or worldscripts of Roman and Arabic letters.
Leila Aboulela's "whistling birds" are both trapped by and freed from the "label"ling of
roman letters.

So now, to conclude with the "birds chirping" in Rigoberto González's
Autobiography of My Hungers. Let me just say a couple of things, and ask a bunch of
questions. One thing to note is that these "birds chirping" seem the most ordinarily
English form of bird sound one could possibly expect. In a book with remarkably few
references to birds, this makes me wonder what it indicates about the space of English
used to convey the book's identification across the borders of Mexico and the US,
Spanish and English, hetero-normative and queer. This is the moment when the
autobiography recounts that "the family was moving back to México."
Why is he "afraid" of "the birds chirping"? Is it just an ordinary, everyday trope? Is he afraid of what that English trope of birdsound excludes? Does it speak to the anxiety of remaining on this side of the border between Spanish and English? Does the English cliché of "birds chirping" impose an English monolingualism on the speaker's sense of identity? Or does it somehow evoke a difference, a linguistic diversity, a queer identification with the very space of English the Autobiography creates?

In one of the later fragments entitled piedrita (these piedrita are interspersed throughout the prose-poem sequence), we read --

*Spain, Brazil, Scotland, Costa Rica, Switzerland*

*but I always come back to the first word -- chúscuta* (75)

The first word -- the premise of the Autobiography's English and Spanish -- perhaps the premise of the "birds chirping" -- comes from the language Purépecha, as it's explained very early: "'I want to learn more Purépecha,' I said to Abuela as I put my head to her breast; she had just taught me to say tortilla -- chúscuta. But then Abuela burst in: 'Don't be stupid. You'll have to learn English where you're going'" (12).

We're all here, learning and studying in English. In what sense is our "first word" -- the first word of our own hunger and longing -- not also a word that comes from languages displaced by dominant languages and scripts? At the same time, it is English we are using to try to capture that diversity of languages and scripts we long to do justice to.