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Writing Towards & With: ethological poetics and non-human lives

Stuart Cooke

Abstract:

In this article I argue that the appreciation of non-human poetic forms, or an ‘ethological poetics’, is a necessary but neglected mode of ecological relation, and is especially important in the Anthropocene. Motivated by my own creative practice – in particular, the composition of *Lyre*, a book of poems about different animals, plants and landforms – I consider important examples of ethological poetics, before outlining how my compositional method attempts to incorporate insights from the environmental humanities and animal studies. Rather than insisting on their essential difference from human worlds, I argue for an attentive, ethical and imaginative engagement with non-human lives, through which surprising and unusual forms of poetry might emerge.

The Anthropocene is, first and foremost, about death on an unimaginable scale. Human-induced climate change and habitat destruction have wiped out 60% of mammal, bird, fish and reptile populations since 1970,¹ and we are currently causing anything from 200 to 10 000 extinctions each year.² As exploding human populations bring us into ever-closer proximity with dwindling populations of other species, and as our industrialised cultures become ever-more inextricable from other species' extinctions, the need to acknowledge the importance of non-humans in human worlds is becoming increasingly pressing. In this context, understanding non-human poetics "helps us to see the Earth as something else than we often do: a place with other life, other presence, other beauty;"³ in turn, we might develop an awareness of what Kate Rigby calls "the semiosis of the more-than-human world," in an effort to overcome a "perilous condition of self-enclosure" that renders industrialised cultures "dangerously oblivious" to our relations with other creatures.⁴ In this article I consider the implications of a liminal zone where such poetics might merge with more familiar, human forms. I refer to 'ethological poetics', or the study of non-human poetic forms, and in particular to their influence on my own poetry. Over the past 6 years I have been writing a collection of poems that attempts to articulate something of the lives of non-human animals, plants, and landforms such as volcanos and estuaries. While the project began with a relatively simple objective – to respond, as a poet, to the songs of other species – my motivations were various. On the one hand, I was interested in rescuing non-human subjects from the backdrops of human dramas, in creating art that "puts into place a creative interruption of the ways in which humans habitually look at animals."⁵ On the other hand, and perhaps less nobly, I was also interested in writing compelling and original poetry. Les Murray's 1992 collection, *Translations from the Natural World*, remains one of my favourite books, not least for how its cross-species explorations lead the poet in to some of his most experimental and linguistically remarkable poetry. What for many critics was an unfortunate deviation from Murray's more conventional poetics,

¹ Damian Carrington, "Humanity has wiped out 60% of animal populations since 1970, report finds," *The Guardian*, 30/10/18.

² See http://wwf.panda.org/our_work/biodiversity/biodiversity/ (Accessed 18/4/19)

³ Paraphrasing David Rothenberg, *Thousand Mile Song: whale music in a sea of sound* (New York: Basic Books, 2008). p. 7

⁴ Kate Rigby, "Animal Calls," in *Divinanimality: animal theory, creaturely theology*, ed. Stephen D. Moore (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014). p. 117

⁵ Steve Baker, *Artist/Animal*, Posthumanities (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 2013). p. 37

Translations remains for me an indelible example of my argument here, that multi-species collaborations can produce the most incredible events.

Ethically and aesthetically, then, I had a sense that an ethological poetics was important both for the planet and for my poetry. However, in attempting to respond to the songs of other species and, where possible, to translate their calls into poems, I soon realised that ‘songs’ were only the most sonorous of the vast array of non-human expressive forms. While I started with a relatively naïve interest in bird songs, my research very quickly began to engage with the implications of biosemiotics and speculative forms of ethology. Inspired by Vicky Kirby’s expanded understanding of Jacques Derrida’s ‘open system’, where literate expression is dispersed across not only human forms, but throughout “the weaving of life itself”, I was confronted with the possibility that I could look for expressive examples of textuality not only in other animals, but in all manner of organic and inorganic forms. For Kirby, even a photon can become a subject of “cognitive and agential entanglement and observational intention.”⁶ If everything, in these terms, can be considered to be ‘alive’, it is not, as Gilles Deleuze points out, because everything is an organism or organised as such; rather, the organism is one of many possible diversions of life itself.⁷ I was and remain excited by symbiosis and synthesis, as opposed to enforcing categorical distinctions and hierarchies of evaluation.

I am also aware, however, that while various links between art and biology have been made, willingness to assign real correspondence between human culture and the rest of the biosphere, to quote James Sherry, “has been partial and threatening to most [Western] intellectual frameworks.”⁸ It is one thing, therefore, to follow the important work of people like Isabelle Stengers and Deborah Bird Rose in reclaiming symbiosis and mutualism, rather than cut-throat competition and differentiation, as “utterly fundamental to life on earth.”⁹ But it is something else entirely to propose that such symbiotic relations might find ground in poetics – in other words, that aesthetics might actually be a more-than-human concern. As Timothy Morton argues, however, aesthetics is absolutely central to animal politics:

⁶ Vicky Kirby, *Quantum Anthropologies: life at large* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2011). pp. ix-x

⁷ In Brett Buchanan, *Onto-ethologies: The Animal Environments of Uexküll, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Deleuze*, SUNY series in Environmental Philosophy and Ethics (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2009). p. 185

⁸ James Sherry, *Oops! Environmental Poetics* (Buffalo, NY: BlazeVOX[books], 2013). p. 17

⁹ Deborah Bird Rose, "Cosmopolitics: the kiss of life," *New Formations*. no. 76 (2012). p. 109

One of the deepest questions is not, “Can animals think?” but “Are animals capable of aesthetic contemplation?” Why? This would mean that the aesthetic was not a ‘high’ function of ‘greater’ cognitive powers, but a ‘low’ one. What if the aesthetic were the default mode of sentience as such?¹⁰

As I have proposed elsewhere, an ‘ethological poetics’ refers to critical methodologies for the reading of non-human art.¹¹ By studying examples of creative expression in non-humans, ethological poetics deconstructs anthropocentric conceptions of ‘art’, ‘culture’ and ‘language’. Of course, such an endeavour can’t escape important questions about aesthetic categories – is a bird’s song really a song, for example? – but such questions aren’t necessarily the *right* ones (after Vinciane Despret). Beyond concerns of categorisation, the important point is that when we consider compositions as complex as, say, those of the Albert’s lyrebird or the humpback whale, we are compelled to extend the bounds of art – both in terms of what it is and where it comes from. In doing so, we are not only bringing the realm of aesthetics ‘down’, in Morton’s terms, from the transcendent realm of human cognition but, perhaps more importantly, we are becoming attentive to other creatures’ communities, and to their desires and aspirations. To direct attention to the *umwelten* of our non-human companions is the objective of an ethological poetics, therefore, which follows, and then departs from, the now-common ‘eco[logical] poetics’. Ecopoetics tends to refer to human poetry about broader, environmental processes, or to those environments *in which* organisms live and die. Environments aren’t generic containers into which organisms can be placed, however, but are created and shaped by these organisms.¹² As Morton writes, “the idea of ‘our’ environment becomes especially tricky when it starts to slither, swim, and lurch toward

¹⁰ Timothy Morton, “Ecocentrism: unworking animals,” *SubStance* #117. 37, no. 3 (2008). p. 79

¹¹ See Stuart Cooke, “Towards an Ethological Poetics: the transgression of genre and the poetry of the Albert’s lyrebird,” *Environmental Humanities*. (in press). Whereas ethology generally refers to the observation of other animal species, I use the term to refer to the observation of all non-human (animal, plant or otherwise) expression. Following Serenella Iovino, “every material formation, from bodies to their contexts of living, is ‘telling’, and therefore can be the object of a critical investigation aimed at discovering its stories, its material and discursive interplays, its place in a world filled with expressive forces.” See Serenella Iovino, “The Living Diffractions of Matter and Text: narrative agency, strategic anthropomorphism, and how interpretation works,” *Anglia*. 133, no. 1 (2015). p. 70

¹² Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 2012 ed. (Cambridge, Mass. & London: Harvard University Press, 2010). p. 51

us”.¹³ In a way, then, by side-stepping concern with ‘the natural world’, ethological poetics responds to Morton’s claim that *ideas* of nature, environment and so on are “getting in the way of properly ecological forms of culture, philosophy, politics, and art.”¹⁴ An ethological poetics directs thought towards organisms, however these may be conceived, and their myriad signals that we can’t immediately see or hear or understand. As a politics, ethological poetics corresponds with what Morton would call a “leftist ecology”: opposed to fascist conceptions of “a greater whole,” ethological practice resides “in the singularity of, and conscious commitment to, the other.”¹⁵ Here, of course, ethics is no longer concerned with the correct response to a radical alterity, but with how we respond to and care for “the lively relationalities of becoming of which we are a part.”¹⁶

As John Balcombe writes, “The question is no longer Do animals think? but What do animals think?”¹⁷ Nevertheless, Despret argues that it remains the case that animals are suspected much more often than humans of lacking autonomy, particularly “when it concerns actions, such as *cultural* behaviours, that have for a long time been considered as proper to man” [my emphasis].¹⁸ This situation is particularly acute in Anglophone literature, both in terms of its production and its criticism. While innovative eco- and animal-art has an established history in the West, literature lags well behind. For at least the past 250 years, Sherry points out that much of the western literary avant-garde has focused on “social life in cities,” which “obscures the truism that human activity is not unnatural or separate from nature.”¹⁹ According to Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, the reasons are various:

... literature, with its traditional emphasis on plot, character and psychological states, has been seen perforce as being focused on individuals or groups of humans, or at least anthropomorphised animals... And while literature has certainly dealt with the fates and even the psychologies of animals, these have – at least until recently – been highly

¹³ *Ecology without Nature: rethinking environmental aesthetics*, 2009 ed. (Cambridge & London: Harvard University Press, 2007). p. 99

¹⁴ *Ecology without Nature*. p. 1

¹⁵ “Ecologocentrism.” p. 93

¹⁶ Barad in Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet*, Posthumanities (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008). p. 289

¹⁷ John Balcombe, *Second Nature: the inner lives of animals* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010). p. 29

¹⁸ Vinciane Despret, *What Would Animals Say If We Asked the Right Questions?*, trans. Brett Buchanan, Posthumanities (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016). p. 5

¹⁹ Sherry, *Oops! Environmental Poetics*. p. 133

anthropomorphised, acting more often than not as a staple of fiction for children rather than adult readers. For western writers, at least, it has been more difficult to anthropomorphise the environment which... has been regarded as a mere backdrop against which human lives are played out. And even when writers have given some attention to the natural (extra-human) environment, critics have generally downplayed its significance in their own considerations of the work.²⁰

Clearly, Huggan & Tiffin are focused more on narrative-based genres such as the novel and the short story than on poetry. Because it need not rely so squarely on human plot or psychology, however, poetry has arguably been more open to the possibilities of non-human semiosis. There is also a more obvious formal correspondence between the musical heritage of poetic genres such as the lyric and, for example, bird songs. Indeed, many attempts to describe bird song with standard musical notation have resulted in the researcher being “driven into poetry” instead.²¹ A notable, early example of such poetry is Walter Garstang’s *Songs of the Birds* (1922), which collates his “nuanced transcriptions of bird songs” as a series of sound poems and lyrics. Notable both for Garstang’s “rigorous, exact transcription” of the structure and timbre of avian songs, and the way in which he “stretch[es] language towards the limits of syntax,” *Songs of Birds* is a fitting testament to how careful observation of the non-human can tend towards a kind of poetry, and of how that poetry is invariably highly original and surprising.²² Certainly, the situation has changed dramatically in more recent decades, with Murray’s and Garstang’s titles but parts of an array of remarkable works of both fiction and poetry, which also includes Barbara Gowdy’s *The White Bone* (1999), Laline Paull’s *The Bees* (2015) and Gianni Siccardi’s *The Blackbird* (2018). Nevertheless, it remains the case that when we compare this array with the abundance of human-centred literature, it is clear that there is a relative paucity of fiction and poetry that seeks to venture beyond superficial description of non-humans, and to rigorously observe and articulate their ontologies. The lacuna suggests that language and the language arts remain what Donna Haraway would call one of those “last beachheads of human uniqueness.”²³

²⁰ Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: literature, animals, environment* (London & New York: Routledge, 2010). pp. 16-7

²¹ David Rothenberg, *Why Birds Sing: a journey into the mystery of bird song* (New York: Basic Books, 2005). p. 54

²² *Why Birds Sing*. pp. 47 & 49

²³ In Aaron M. Moe, *Zoopoetics: animals and the making of poetry* (Plymouth: Lexington 2014). p. 47

In large part, this failure to imagine non-human others is indicative of the legacy of European colonisation and hegemony: colonialist classification and interpretation “necessarily resulted in the destruction or erosion of alternative apprehensions of animals and environment, blocking understandings of those crucial interactions between the human and the ‘extra-human.’”²⁴ A sign of neocolonialism in much contemporary thought is the pervasive fear of anthropomorphism, which even rears its head in the larger quote from Huggan & Tiffin above. While the filmed, photographed or painted animal can remain enframed and, therefore, at a distance, it seems that the animal who speaks in language inflames that very prejudice that many of us, otherwise, would condemn: that only humans can speak of things and know of them as things; that animals, in Martin Heidegger’s terms, are “poor in world”,²⁵ that an animal language is only a product of human imagination. But, to be blunt, these claims have little interest for me. With Val Plumwood, my feeling is that the charge of anthropomorphism too often shuts down discussion, rather than opening up enquiry about compelling instances of cross-species relation.²⁶ As Aaron Moe has put it, anthropomorphism is only a “fallacy” when one ignores the innumerable, compelling continuities between ‘human’ and ‘animal’ spheres.²⁷ While of course we can reject “the facile and basically imperialist... move of claiming to see from the point of view of the other,” Haraway reminds us that “the philosophic and literary conceit that all we have is representations and no access to what animals think and feel is wrong.”²⁸ Disregarding the fantasy of climbing into one another’s heads, we can still make “some multispecies semiotic progress” based on all manner of ethological, biological and neurological evidence. To refuse, or “[t]o claim not to be able to communicate with and to know one another and other critters, however imperfectly, is a denial of mortal entanglements... for which we are responsible and in which we respond.”²⁹

As a poet, my creative practice takes this challenge – to pursue multispecies entanglements within a literary milieu that is still largely afraid of dealing with them – as

²⁴ Huggan and Tiffin, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism*. p. 17 For more discussion about the relationship of colonialist and non-human poetics, see Stuart Cooke, “The Songs of Others: contemporary poetics and the more-than-human,” *Plumwood Mountain: an Australian journal of eco-poetry and eco-poetics*. 4, no. 1 (2017).

²⁵ Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: world, finitude, solitude*, trans. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995). p. 177

²⁶ In Thom Van Dooren, Eben Kirksey, and Ursula Münster, “Multispecies Studies: Cultivating Arts of Attentiveness,” *Environmental Humanities*. 8, no. 1 (2016). p. 8

²⁷ Moe, *Zoopoetics*. p. 17

²⁸ Haraway, *When Species Meet*. p. 21

²⁹ *When Species Meet*. p. 226

a source of inspiration. After all, Derrida points out that “thinking concerning the animal [...] derives from poetry”. Poetic thought constitutes “what philosophy has, essentially, had to deprive itself of;”³⁰ situated at the limits of philosophy, the poem necessarily contends with the limits of human cognition as well. Indeed, my interest in ethological poetics stems from the direction that my poetry has taken over the past decade: in seeking to articulate more-than-human *umwelten*, I have been confronted repeatedly with the fact that my own mode of expression is but one of many in a much broader, ecological array. A writer in this position quickly becomes preoccupied with finding “language that coheres with evolution, with our destiny as animals among other plants and animals.”³¹ For human language to ‘cohere’ with a more-than-human earth, the process of *translation* is of paramount importance; it’s no accident, for example, that Murray’s collection is named *Translations from the Natural World*. Rather than enacting dangerous leaps of imaginative imperialism, such poetry is a thoroughly necessary mode of ecological relation. As a form of ethological enquiry, it can take language and, with it, imagination to the very edges of human perception; here, in this open, indeterminate region, what we think we know might mingle and even start to merge with what is thoroughly unfamiliar. The unfamiliar is vital because the ‘coherence’ of language and earth cannot become a domination of the former over the latter: the translation must produce a sense of the earth’s otherness, rather than attempt to harness its agency; the rules of language must be stretched, rather than religiously obeyed. I make this claim not only in the interests of good ethics but also of good poetics: as much as language is a cognitively rich, phenomenological process, following Martin Harrison I argue that there is no immediate symbiosis between language and thought. Rather, writing produces an inevitable, and necessary, gap between thought and the written composition, a gap which is at the heart of poetic effect. A good poem, therefore, is driven towards both construction *and* deconstruction. Without this interplay between assemblage and disassemblage, between a work’s apparent coherence and its capacity to always slip beyond the bounds of any determination, concept and sensation are subsumed in one another. Thus, language will revert to being a merely representationalist medium and the

³⁰ Jacques Derrida and David Wills, “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)” *Critical Inquiry*. 28, no. 2 (2002). p. 377

³¹ Evelyn Reilly, “Eco-Noise and the Flux of Lux,” in *(ECO(LANG)(UAGE(READER))*, ed. Brenda Iijima (New York: Portable Press, 2010). p. 257

constructive, ongoing, and compelling energy of poetic meaning will be weakened.³² As the poem is weakened, so too is the potential for us to imagine its subject. At its best, as a compressed form in which language is “its most agile and expressive,”³³ poetry provides the potential for meaning, sound and [typographic] design to weave, like the non-humans that surround us, ceaselessly in and out of our normative fields of comprehension.

I mentioned earlier that multispecies collaborations often produce extraordinary results. The focus of Moe’s *Zoopoetics*, for example, is on how the attentiveness to non-human species has produced remarkable formal and stylistic innovations in North American poetry for more than a century.³⁴ The presence of the non-human in such work need not be made explicit, or its language translated in full. In Wendy Burk’s *Tree Talks* (2016), for example, the poet’s encounters with individual trees produces a growing absence at the heart of the book, as it becomes increasingly apparent that, indeed, trees *don’t* talk. However, rather than nullifying their presence in an imposed silence, the poet renders the possibility of talking trees more *likely*. Structured as a series of interviews with particular trees across Southern Arizona, Burk asks each of her arboreal subjects a set of starkly prosaic questions (“Do the dogs bark at all times of the day?” she asks a velvet mesquite in Tuscon, “Do you get used to it?”³⁵) and then provides elaborate transcriptions of the responses. Interestingly, Burk’s transcriptions account for all kinds of peripheral noise, human and otherwise, while the trees themselves remain tantalisingly on the edge of written language, their responses rendered non-alphabetically with different arrangements of diacritical marks such as slashes, open brackets, commas and colons. Her typographical arrangements are extremely open, too, producing a hybrid, audio-visual complex: pages are marked with horizontal and vertical repetitions of different sounds, and with clusters of differently sized fonts. Central to all such cacophony is the ongoing fact of the trees’ silence but, as we move through the book, slowly this silence starts to acquire an ineluctable density. As Burk continues to ask questions, and as the trees continue to respond with non-semantic gestures, the poems

³² See Martin Harrison, *On Composition: five studies in the philosophy of writing* (Sydney: Vagaond Press, in press).

³³ Brenda Iijima, "Metamorphic Morphology (with gushing igneous interlude) Meeting in Language: P as in poetry, poetry rhetorical in terms of eco," in *ECO(LANG)(UAGE)(READER)*, ed. Brenda Iijima (New York: Portable Press, 2010). p. 288

³⁴ Moe, *Zoopoetics*. p. 24

³⁵ Wendy Burk, *Tree Talks: southern Arizona* (Lockport, NY; Fort Collins, CO; Salt Lake City, UT: Delete Press, 2016). p. 49

form homes for what these gestures – these commas, open brackets and colons – *might* mean. That silent ‘void’ becomes, in the Nietzschean sense, productive: it is the catalyst for a reorientation of understanding. What the poems produce, in other words, is a field in which a conversation with trees becomes possible.

When we come to a poem like Murray’s ‘Strangler Fig’, then, we find that the virtual or speculative region mapped out by *Tree Talks* has suddenly, and gloriously, been made actual.³⁶ ‘Strangler Fig’ imbues its subject with an expansive syntax and fleshy vocabulary that is characteristic of much of *Translations*. Rather than a repressive, photo-realist portrayal of the fig or the framing of a static body, however, the poem is a moving form, accreting waves of flow. The point is not to ask of such poems, Is this real? Or, Could a tree *really* talk like this? Rather, the point is to ask, Is this *possible*? In the case of ‘Strangler Fig’, the answer is ‘yes!’ ‘Strangler Fig’ constitutes the actualisation of an imagined, affective world; the poem “particularises the corporeality of figness”, to quote JC Ryan.³⁷ As it slowly drips down the page with viscous, fibrous weight (“muscling in molten stillness down / its spongy barrel”), fig and poem merge. The fig-poem’s drive to completion is the realisation of a translated mimesis: as the “bird-born” fig itself slowly takes hold of its host, as it compels everything beneath it into its own pronoun (the poem ends: “I one”), it also becomes the host for Murray’s lexical prowess. Thus, the fig grows according to the skeletal structure of the poem, in the same way that a ‘regular’ fig would use its host tree for support. Consequently, a continuous, enjambed sentence slowly makes its way down the fourteen lines of a sonnet, a structure which the language simultaneously relies upon and strangles into near-disappearance: between each of the fourteen lines is a line-break, all thirteen of which suggest the lines of an older sonnet form presiding like a ghost beneath this new articulation. The position of the non-human is not subsumed by the verse form, therefore; indeed, it could be quite the opposite (as fig subsumes host tree, so too does it subsume sonnet). Ryan, following Karen Barad, calls this “radically relational”, where the voice of this vegetal form becomes inextricably bound up in the poiesis of the lyric.³⁸ Of course, the process at work here is an incredibly violent one, but if we are to seriously attend to the *umwelt* of the strangler fig then we

³⁶ In Les Murray, *Translations from the Natural World*, 1994 ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1992). p. 17

³⁷ JC Ryan, "Poetry as Plant Script: interspecies dialogue and poetic collaboration in the Northern Tablelands of Australia," *Transformations: Journal of Media, Culture and Technology*. no. 30 (2017). p. 132

³⁸ "Poetry as Plant Script." p. 134

cannot make moral judgments about such violence (at least, not if such judgements will prevent our engagement); the fig, and any poem attentive to it, can only exist via a most radical, suffocating form of relationality.

Interested in exploring such radical relationality, much of my creative practice of the last decade has involved many more-than-human collaborations. My most recent poetry collection, for example (*Opera*, 2016), is a series of collaborations with particular places, where each place was as important to the process of composition as my own imagination. Part of the collection's generative impetus comes from an engagement with a broad, Deleuzian sense of ethology: here, the world is alive with all kinds of entities, from rivers to bowerbirds to sand dunes, which "have distinctive ways of life, histories, and patterns of becoming and entanglement, [or] ways of affecting and being affected."³⁹ Broadly speaking, work like this is reliant upon an expanded understanding of the different communities that compose a 'culture', and the possibility of making creative translations across cultural and biological domains. As I turn to focus on specific creatures, bodies or places, I am inspired by Sherry's contention that similarities of form can emerge at many different scales of existence, and that by engaging with an organism I am also engaging with forces and flows – with what Deleuze and Guattari would call lines of flight – that both constitute it and entangle it with others.⁴⁰ Thus, for a while now, my poetry has not been "a monospecies event".⁴¹ Through cultivating practices of ethological attention and creative translation, I have been committed to exploring the roles of non-humans in aesthetic production.

My forthcoming collection, *Lyre*, could be based on the premise that non-humans "are not some nicety or metaphorical convenience in poetry; rather, poetic intelligence is 'bound to animals' profoundly, and necessarily so."⁴² Cultivating such attention has immediate and profound implications for the kind of poetry that one writes, and for the way we understand where that poetry comes from.⁴³ Essentially, each poem in *Lyre* attempts to translate the expression of a particular, Australasian species or landform (such as a house fly, a tea tree, or an estuary) into human language and, in order to do so, incorporates the discourses of biology and ethology, Indigenous knowledges, poetry

³⁹ Van Dooren, Kirksey, and Münster, "Multispecies Studies." p. 4

⁴⁰ Sherry, *Oops! Environmental Poetics*. p. 40

⁴¹ Paraphrasing Moe, *Zoopoetics*. p. 24

⁴² *Zoopoetics*. p. 28 (quoting Paul Shepard)

⁴³ Stuart Cooke, *Lyre* (Perth: University of Western Australia Publishing, (in press)).

from multiple languages, and my own poetry and detailed field notes. The collection implicates itself ecologically by working ethologically – that is, the collection establishes an interconnected community of different bodies by paying attention to the fleshy lives of particular bodies. But the actual ‘ecology’ of species and landforms in the collection is based less upon a scientific imperative to present an accurate cross-section of any one ecosystem, and more upon personal idiosyncrasies to do with where I live and travel, and what I am most interested in writing about. Rather than producing accurate surveys of a certain ecosystem, then, I want to engage with ecology as a *methodology* as well as an aesthetics, which means not only attending to ecological subjects in my writing but also developing a compositional process that accounts for broader systems of human and non-human participants.⁴⁴ Literally, this involves combining material gathered from three distinct processes, often painstakingly. Drawing on a process devised by US poet and scholar Jonathan Skinner, for each poem I assemble:

- 1) notes gathered from the relevant scientific, naturalist and ethnographic literatures;
- 2) sections of relevant poetry and fiction from different languages;
- 3) my own field notes, composed in particular sites in close proximity to the species or landform in question.

Steps 1 & 2 are largely scholarly, in that they require substantial research and reading, and synthesis of the information found therein. However they also require keen editorial skills, as I am not interested only in the informational content of these sources, but in the kinds of language they use as well. The challenge here is to mould together the various syntactical patterns and vocabularies of, say, a scientific paper, a naturalist’s blog and a Brazilian poet, without erasing their particularities – in other words, to produce a blended text of multiple, divergent voices and rhetorical modes. My method for step 3 is quite distinct from 1 and 2. In order to attend to what can often be a disorderly profusion of signs produced by the species or landform in question, for process 3 I engage in what Wendy Wheeler has called a “free-floating attentiveness.”⁴⁵ I spend considerable time in the species or landform’s proximity, sketching out speculative translations of its language, and imagining, often quite wildly, the textures and rhythms of its *umwelt*. More theoretically, what I’m doing in this process is trying to liberate some of those

⁴⁴ See Huggan and Tiffin, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism*. p. 13

⁴⁵ In Baker, *Artist/Animal*. p. 31

forces contained and produced by the organism or body enough so that I/us/language can enter into relation with them: the Deleuzian ethologist proceeds “by unravelling the reified solution posed by the organism” and untangling some of the affects that are clustered around and within it.⁴⁶ Of more interest than the animal as a body in itself – as an object that might be framed, for example – is what that animal (or plant, or river) is capable of doing affectively. When my focus turns to affect, it is trained “toward what escapes the nodal terms [of the organism]”;⁴⁷ in other words, I am interested here in the trans-corporeal potential of affective charge, of its capacity to strike out from one body to others, and to bind us together into a new becoming.

Of paramount concern has been that I don’t simply echo the procedures of so many other poets, for whom animals are rarely more than objects to be looked at, or to be described in representational language, as if they were little more than semi-autonomous machines. I want to get closer (which often involves recognising that I am actually quite far away), to write *towards* the other or, ideally, *with* it – recognising, in other words, that ‘the other’ is a region to which I’m already bound. In more concrete terms, the biological roots of my humanity compose about 0.1 percent of my genome;⁴⁸ already I’m almost entirely other, anyway. To quote Rose, “[h]umanity is an interspecies collaborative project.”⁴⁹ But the desire to write towards must also be coupled with a concern for the outcome with relation to the subject in question. As Van Dooren et al point out, it is not enough just to celebrate “multispecies mingling”; rather, one must always ask “who benefits when species meet?”⁵⁰ I am motivated by the challenge to “leave the mystery of the animal and its world intact while calling attention to its existence,”⁵¹ and have incorporated a variety of compositional procedures in order to do this. Most obviously, I resist adopting conventional and familiar modes of expression, any of which might induce an illusion that the subject of the poem is present in its totality, free of any kind of mediation or opacity. Furthermore, the texts often transgress the quadratic limits of the page, so that many poems feature lines that continue horizontally or diagonally across multiple pages, which can open multiple possibilities

⁴⁶ Buchanan, *Onto-ethologies*. p. 161

⁴⁷ *Onto-ethologies*. p. 185

⁴⁸ Morton, *The Ecological Thought*. p. 126

⁴⁹ Deborah Bird Rose, *Wild Dog Dreaming: love and extinction*, Under the Sign of Nature (Charlottesville & London: University of Virginia Press, 2011). p. 11

⁵⁰ Van Dooren, Kirksey, and Münster, "Multispecies Studies." p. 16

⁵¹ Ron Broglio, *Surface Encounters: thinking with animals and art*, Posthumanities (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 2011). p. xxxi

for the direction of reading/navigation. This means that there is never a single way of 'reading' or understanding the subject of the poem: not only is the language many-sided, but often the eyes themselves cannot rest on a single, readily apparent path through the text.

In addition, using the list of materials above means that any perspective which claims a unique authority regarding the animal, plant or landform in question will always be contrasted with, or contested by, other points of view. For example, in the composition of my field notes in step 3 I might be inclined to venture well beyond the reality of my relation (or lack thereof) with a particular species, and enter highly speculative realms that have little basis in anything other than the whims of my imagination. However, the revision process ensures that the texts from such speculation must always contend with the different kinds of scientific knowledge gleaned from step 1. Necessarily grounded in collaborative, peer-reviewed enquiry, and in the repeated testing of hypotheses across different populations in multiple field sites, scientific literature is in a sense the direct antithesis to my own, individual and highly localised speculations. By the same token, scientific literature is invariably absent of any account of interspecies interaction or entanglement, particularly concerning the researchers themselves with the species under analysis. By and large, the genre of writing in the natural sciences reflects what Rose and Plumwood would call a "hyperseparation" between the analytical mind of the scientist and an unthinking, 'instinctive' natural world.⁵² The use of my own field notes, as well as fragments from poems by other poets, goes some way to counteracting this separation.

On the one hand, this process is necessarily experimental, speculative, and improvisational. But in performing the experiment I am affirming what Brian Massumi would call "an expressive force of variation" which, based upon aesthetic and ontological orthodoxies, proceeds by unsettling them:⁵³ I am taking poetry into the Open, within and beyond which all kinds of unpredictable encounters might coalesce into radically unusual articulations of ecological fields. Famously, for Deleuze and Guattari, the improvisation might be a hazard, but "to improvise is to join with the World, or *meld* with it" [my emphasis].⁵⁴ On the other hand, though, my interest in

⁵² Rose, *Wild Dog Dreaming*. p. 12

⁵³ Brian Massumi, *What Animals Teach Us about Politics* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2014). p.

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⁵⁴ In Baker, *Artist/Animal*. p. 229

anthropomorphic form does not blind me to the perils of anthropocentric poetics: the extraordinary proliferation of stale, self-reflexive modes of confessional poetry across the world is confirmation that egocentric indulgence leads to little else but itself. I do not, therefore, want to leave things entirely to the predilections of my personal preoccupations. In order to cultivate what Anna Tsing has called the “art of noticing,”⁵⁵ I source different knowledge bases, such as zoology and plant biology, each of which provides a detailed but distinct perspective on the creature, plant or landform in question. Along with poetry, and occasionally fiction, in a number of languages, it is my hope that such knowledges can be combined into a ‘thick account’⁵⁶ of the distinctive world of another body. I want to emphasise, accentuate even, what Despret argues is the more-than-human condition of all art: the artwork is not the act of a single being, but is inscribed “in heterogeneous ecological networks.”⁵⁷ For Despret, the very material of the work – here, my notes and quotes, not to mention my body, and the bodies of those non-human subjects – is the source of captivation of both the audience *and* the artist: “the artist is not the cause of the work and... the work alone is not its own cause; the artist carries responsibility, the responsibility of one who hosts, who collects, who prepares, who explores the form of the work.”⁵⁸

This assembly of activities – hosting, collecting, preparing, and exploring form – are all of equal importance to my process. Indeed, when I began to explore other ways of articulating non-human language and expression, it became clear that such work would require not only an openness to different kinds of language, but also that the very forms of the poems reflect the vastly different *umwelten* of their subjects. Accordingly, the arrangement of the poems became as much to do with questions of design and visual composition as with those of vocabulary and prosody. In each case, the shape of the poem needed to reflect fundamental features about how the subject moves through the world and produces meaningful expression. But in changing the form of poetry so dramatically and frequently, the poems aren’t meant to offer some kind of simplistic mimesis of the subjects’ shapes – something that a nature photo could do far more effectively. Rather, I’ve wanted to let that ‘block of becoming’, to use Deleuzo-Guattarian language again, produce something new entirely. In other words, the subject

⁵⁵ In Van Dooren, Kirksey, and Münster, “Multispecies Studies.” p. 5

⁵⁶ “Multispecies Studies.” p. 6

⁵⁷ Despret, *What Would Animals Say If We Asked the Right Questions?* p. 5

⁵⁸ *What Would Animals Say If We Asked the Right Questions?* pp. 119 & 121

of the ethological poem needs to take part in a re-writing and re-forming of how a poem can be read, and how it can look. In Evelyn Reilly's terms, this could be "a relational poetics," or a shift from the classical poetical and biological obsessions with naming the subjects under observation, to emphasising "processes of interaction and change... to enact connections rather than to mark distinctions."⁵⁹ Here, somewhere in between grand, transcendent conceptions of 'nature', 'the environment' and complex ecological systems on the one hand, and the naming and objectification of bodies as if they were parts of a machine on the other, lie my ethological intentions; ever since Darwin, species are no longer "eternal 'forms' created by a rigid intelligence," but are "open, shapeshifting, creative events."⁶⁰ If the governing principle of one's process is a mutability prompted by unforeseen encounters with such events, then, following Andrew Schelling, the poetry that results "must also be emergent, open, shifty, organic, projective."⁶¹

As Ron Broglio argues, animals challenge those forms of language and representation that have become abstracted, disembodied, regimented. "To make thought move and do real work at the horizon of the unthought," he writes, "representation should create a friction, reciprocity, and exchange between the human symbolic system of representing and the physical world shared with other creatures."⁶² The point is to keep our epistemological loops open, to check our "stupendous capacity to ignore this very world within which our lives are sustained," with which the violence of the Anthropocene is perpetuated, its "extravagant wastage of lives and of earth."⁶³ A multi-species, collaborative poetics, therefore, implies a distribution of the body (or bodies) that think, "creating a distribution of states or plural centres for valuing, selecting, and marking/making a world."⁶⁴ In formal terms, this implies a radical approach both to the normative rules of grammar as they manifest in conventional syntax, to the relationship between sound and expression, and also to the relationship between meaning, marking and expression. Clearly, then, an aesthetics of realist representation, or a framing of the animal that wants to pretend that the frame doesn't

⁵⁹ Reilly, "Eco-Noise and the Flux of Lux." p. 258

⁶⁰ Andrew Schelling, *Wild Form & Savage Grammar: poetry, ecology, Asia* (Albuquerque: La Alameda Press, 2003). p. 77

⁶¹ *Wild Form & Savage Grammar*. p. 78

⁶² Broglio, *Surface Encounters*. p. xxxi

⁶³ Deborah Bird Rose, "Slowly: writing into the Anthropocene," *TEXT*. no. 20 (Special Issue) (2013). p. 2

⁶⁴ Paraphrasing Broglio, *Surface Encounters*. pp. xxxi-xxxii

exist, is inadequate to the task at hand – here, thought is taken nowhere, but rests instead with what it already assumes to be self-evident. Politically as much as aesthetically, the tendency to ensnare life within representations of value or identity must be avoided; what comes from the unknown cannot be packaged in predetermined forms. Rather, a new world needs to be envisioned, and for each encounter; the challenge posed by the ethological poem is analogous to the challenge posed by another animal, entangled with us even as it resists us.

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