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ON THE EMPATHIC POSSIBILITIES OF A MULTISPECIES ETHNOPOETICS

ABSTRACT

In this paper, I delve into the difficulties of transcending species borders in literature. To what degree can the affordances of literature and its call to empathy provide answers to questions of animal experientiality? As the minds of animals are essentially, weirdly, unknowable, the animal Other confronts the human reader with a cognitive aporia. This article will offer a brief exploration of the use of empathy in reading animal literature, then investigate post-humanism as a troubling of the borders separating the human from the nonhuman animal. After discussing the moral dilemmas and multiple perspectives

intrinsic to terms such as post-speciesism, anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism, I introduce the new approach of a multispecies ethnopoetics which would be attuned to Thomas Sebeok's zoosemiotics. The intent is to demonstrate that the elisions inherent to the lyric offer spaces for writers and readers to thoughtfully engage with animal culture and possibly foster a multispecies empathy.

KEY WORDS: posthumanism, zoosemiotics, post-speciesism, multispecies ethnopoetics, empathy

All animals are equal,
But some animals are more equal than others.
— George Orwell, *Animal Farm*

INTRODUCTION

I begin with a desire to speak with the animals.² However, my voice—my *human* voice—inevitably obscures interpretation. Demonstrating the unknowable weirdness of the animal experience, Thomas Nagel reflects: “I want to know what it is like for a *bat* to be a bat. Yet if I try to imagine this, I am restricted by the resources of my own mind, and those resources are inadequate to the task.”³ Literature seems like a good starting point for embarking on a Dr. Doolittle expedition into the world of this animal experience, since it is often claimed that literature offers the reader an opportunity to exercise empathy or feeling-with. Where are the animals in literature and what do they say? What do they feel? Asking these questions requires an examination of the most likely literary arenas for ethologically accurate animal expression and an investigation into the literary possibilities of transcending the Cartesian construct of a human/animal binary described by Laurie Shannon.⁴ This investigation led first to posthumanism and then to the questioning of posthumanism in relation to speciesism. To what degree might a posthumanist literature fall prey to the speciesism coined in 1970 by Richard Ryder in *Victims of Science: The Use of Animals in Research*?⁵ This article will therefore offer a brief exploration of the use of empathy in reading animal literature, then investigate post-humanism as a troubling of the borders separating the human from the nonhuman animal. After discussing the moral dilemmas and multiple perspectives intrinsic to terms such as post-speciesism, anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism, I will move towards a new approach of a multispecies ethnopoetics which would be attuned to zoosemiotics⁶ with the intent to demonstrate that the elisions inherent to the lyric offer spaces for writers and readers to thoughtfully engage with animal culture and possibly foster a multispecies empathy.

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2 Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 1.

3 Thomas Nagel, “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?,” in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 169.

4 Laurie Shannon, “The Eight Animals in Shakespeare; Or, before the Human,” *PMLA* 124, no. 2 (2009), 474.

5 Lisa Jean Moore, “Speciesism,” *Contexts* 12, no. 1 (2013): 12.

6 Thomas A. Sebeok, “Zoosemiotics,” *American Speech* 43, no. 2 (1968): 142.

THE ANIMAL OTHER, LITERATURE AND EMPATHY

Delving into literature in search of the animal Other is not uncommon. In general, literary animals are frequently deployed as a prism through which aspects of the human, who is represented in contradiction, not juxtaposition, to the bestial, are refracted. Defining the human by taking recourse to what distinguishes him or her from the animal offers scope for variations on a theme: what constitutes human can thus be circumstantial and diachronic.⁷ In addition, literary animals often function as a form of Viktor Shklovsky's *ostranenie*: they force the reader into a novel, weird, defamiliarised vantage point on the world we cohabit—yet at the same time, we might recognize something oddly familiar about the unfamiliar. Animal Others also manifest as aporias in our knowledge—as Nagel points out, we simply cannot “know what it is like for *abat* to be a bat.”⁸ Lars Bernaerts et al. refer to this as “a *double dialectic* of empathy and defamiliarization, human and nonhuman experientiality.”⁹ A recent and obvious example would be Ian McEwan's 2019 novella *The Cockroach*; a Kafkaesque political satire narrated from the point of view of the eponymous cockroach. While the described sensations of the narrator and his co-conspirators constantly remind the reader of her unfamiliarity with the protagonist's experientiality, the plots and schemes of the cockroaches belie their obvious anthropomorphization. This genre includes works such as Anna Sewell's *Black Beauty* (1877),¹⁰ Jack London's *Call of the Wild* (1903) and *White Fang* (1906), Kafka's own cockroach tale *The Metamorphosis* (1915) as well as his “A Report to an Academy” (1917), Richard Adams' *Watership Down* (1972), and W. Bruce Cameron's 2011 bestseller *A Dog's Purpose*. Demonstrating the ease with which the animal Other can be posited as an essential humanist heuristic, Eugene Halton claims the bifurcation of *the animal* from *the human* occurred at the advent of civilization. This bifurcation simultaneously heralds a decomposition of the human:

7 Erica Fudge, Ruth Gilbert and Susan Wiseman, “The Human? Then and Now,” in *At the Borders of the Human* (Houndmills and London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1999), 5.

8 This chimes with China Miéville's definition of the weird as “abcanny” and “its insistence on a chaotic, amoral, anthropoperipheral universe.” The unknowability of the experientiality of the animal Other puts human consciousness, human morality and a humanist understanding of the mechanics of the universe in a peripheral position. China Miéville, “M.R. James and the Quantum Vampire,” December 19, 2011, <https://weird-fictionreview.com/2011/11/m-r-james-and-the-quantum-vampire-by-china-mieville/>.

9 Lars Bernaerts et al., “The Storied Lives of Non-Human Narrators,” *Narrative* 22, no. 1 (2014): 68–93, 69. <https://doi.org/10.1353/nar.2014.0002> (emphasis in original).

10 David Herman notes that in the case of *Black Beauty* “. . . the text's reliance on institutions and practices that include slavery as it was constituted in the nineteenth century, filial relations as based on the concept of the nuclear family, and others can be read as a superimposition of human frames of reference on equine experiences.” David Herman, “Animal Autobiography; Or, Narration beyond the Human,” *Humanities* 5, no. 4 (2016): 10. <https://doi.org/10.3390/h5040082>.

[T]he wild others are the original role models of the generalized other, through whom humans derived the significant symbols of ritual life, dancing and rhyming and signing them, impersonating them, hunting and gathering them, ingesting them, ruminating on them, and incorporating them into human identity and social life. Without the wild Others we are less than human: the process of ‘de-animalization’ from them, associated with domestication and civilizing settlement, marks the beginning of dehumanization.¹¹

This necessity of the animal Other to complete the human subject implies that our literature remains humanist. Nevertheless, scholars such as David Herman¹² and Bernaerts et al.¹³ have theorized that animal narrators can exist on a spectrum of authenticity, contingent on their allegiance to the veracity of the tale. Paula Rabinowitz reminds us, though, that the human interlocutor remains a necessity.¹⁴

Nonhuman narrators in literature, even those being spoken for by humans, trouble our conceptualizations of the human as a uniquely sentient, creative and story-telling being. It has also been posited that they can initiate and train a reader’s faculties for empathy. That reading literature enhances empathic responses is the position taken by scholars such as Alexa Weik von Mossner,¹⁵ Lars Bernaerts et al.,¹⁶ Geri Giebel Chavis¹⁷ and Helen Vendler.¹⁸ Others, such as Anthony Clohesy, propose that empathy helps us understand art and that this deeper understanding of art then helps us to live empathic lives.¹⁹ According to Bernaerts et al., “[e]mpathy is the imaginative process whereby readers temporarily adopt the emotional, or axiological perspective of a fictional character.”²⁰ Suzanne Keen concurs and further differentiates

11 Eugene Halton, “Mind Matters,” *Symbolic Interaction* 31, no. 2 (2008), 136–37.

12 Herman, “Animal Autobiography,” 6.

13 Bernaerts et al., “The Storied Lives of Non-Human Narrators,” 74.

14 Paula Rabinowitz, “Soft Fictions and Intimate Documents: Can Feminism be Posthuman?” *Posthumanism*, ed. Neil Badmington (Houndsmills and New York: Palgrave, 2000), 42–43.

15 Alexa Weik von Mossner, *Affective Ecologies: Empathy, Emotion, and Environmental Narrative* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2017), 9.

16 Bernaerts et al., “The Storied Lives of Non-Human Narrators,” 68–93.

17 Geri Giebel Chavis, “Looking Out and Looking In: Journeys to Self-Awareness and Empathy through Creative Juxtapositions”, *Journal of Poetry Therapy: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Practice, Theory, Research and Education*, 26, no. 3 (2013): 159–67, 165.

18 Helen Vendler, *Poems, Poets, Poetry: An Introduction and Anthology* (Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 1997), x-xi.

19 Anthony Clohesy, *Politics of Empathy: Ethics, Solidarity, Recognition* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 63.

20 Bernaerts et al., “The Storied Lives of Non-Human Narrators,” 73.

empathy from sympathy: whereas in empathy we feel *with*, in sympathy we feel *for*.²¹ One striking arena of inquiry in Keen's work is that of the empathy of writers: writers as a group score higher on scales of empathy than the population at large.²² While it may be that naturally empathic people are somewhat pre-disposed to the work of writing, Keen also allows, "*the activity of fiction writing may cultivate novelists' role-taking skills and make them more habitually empathetic*."²³ In this paper, I would like to look at poetry, rather than the novel, as a locus of empathic understanding: analogous to prose literature, scholars have also claimed that reading poetry exercises empathy.²⁴ I would suggest that this might perhaps be truer of poetry—particularly the shorter lyric—in that as a concise form, the poem contains more elisions than other literary genres and as such, according to Helen Vendler, "lyric depends on gaps, and depends even more on the reader to fill in the gaps. It is suggestive rather than exhaustive."²⁵ The work of reading into the gaps of poetry might exercise empathy comparably to that of novel writing. We can think of the reader's work in understanding the poem as akin to that of listening to oral folklore as outlined by Sandra Stahl: "the process of hearing the text is a creative act in which the listener's own large store of cultural and personal resources is used to produce a unified resonance of meaning."²⁶ This would also imply that each reader becomes a co-creator of a poetic interpretation and the poem could undergo a myriad of mutations in meaning.²⁷ If one were to look for a way to conflate animal voices and empathy into a trans-species literary understanding, one might logically then take recourse to the theory of posthumanism.

POSTHUMANISM, SPECIESISM AND ANTHROPOCENTRISM

It could be said that posthumanism is an emerging theory.²⁸ At its most basic level, posthumanism is a refutation of a human-centered worldview. In

21 Erica Fudge and Ruth Gilbert, *At the Borders of the Human* (Houndmills and London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1999), 208.

22 *Ibid.*, 221.

23 *Ibid.*, 221 (emphasis in original).

24 Giebel Chavis, "Looking Out and Looking In," 165.

25 Vendler, *Poems, Poets, Poetry*, xi.

26 Sandra Stahl, *Folk Literature, Folklore, Oral Tradition, Tales, Storytelling, Narration (Rhetoric)* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 2.

27 Clare Madge sums this up nicely: "for it cannot be predicted how a poem might be read, heard or understood or what response it might (or might not) evoke." Clare Madge, "On the Creative (re)turn to Geography: Poetry, Politics and Passion," *Area* 46, no. 2 (2014): 178–85, 180.

28 In his book *What is Posthumanism?* Cary Wolfe dates the genealogy of the theory to the invention of systems theory in the middle of the twentieth century and the arrival of the term in the humanities to the Nineties. Cary Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), xii.

distancing itself from a privileged anthropocentrism, posthumanism is often conflated with sci-fi and technological progress²⁹ and a re-engagement with other beings around us. Donna Haraway considers this re-engagement possible due to the breakdown in modern society of three essential boundaries: (1) the boundary separating the human and the non-human animal; (2) the boundary between the human and technology; and (3) the boundary between material and immaterial.³⁰ According to Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto," a successful re-engagement would free us from a phallogocentric literary history³¹ and herald a new plurality of voices.³²

It would also depose the myth of a totalizing, *human* language from its throne and replace it with an emphasis on voices from the margins—disparate as they might be. Haraway sees value in the margins. If "phallogocentric origin stories" are inherent in the technologies currently ruling the world and "have recently textualized our bodies as code problems on the grid of C³I,"³³ then "[f]eminist cyborg stories have the task of recording communication and intelligence to subvert command and control."³⁴ Here I am making an equivalence between the animal and the female—as Haraway indicates, both are seen as subjugated and relegated to the margins of a discourse largely dedicated to the white human male narrative. For Haraway, cyborg literature—literature from the margins that challenges the totalizing culture of human male domination—is a route to a feminist posthumanism. In its intermingling of the female and the animal, this feminist posthumanism might be more attuned to the animal voices calling from the margins.

Eschewing the strictly feminist/political angle³⁵ Cary Wolfe defines posthumanism as a form of systems theory—a definition that simultaneously abjures the 'popular' adherence of posthumanism to the realm of

29 Gillian Whitlock explains, "[i]n popular posthumanism, transformations of embodiment and temporality are almost always bioengineered by technology, with its capacity to generate avatars, mutations, cyborgs, and networks. Critical posthumanism, on the other hand, uses the 'post' as an opportunity to open up critical spaces for productive re-engagement with humanist ethics, epistemology and ontology in worlds that we occupy in real time and space." Gillian Whitlock, "Posting Lives," *Biography* 35, no. 1 (2012): x.

30 Donna Haraway, *A Cyborg Manifesto. Science, Technology and Socialist Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 10–13.

31 *Ibid.*, 57.

32 *Ibid.*, 67–68.

33 Haraway is here using the acronym for Command, Control, Communications and Intelligence.

34 *Ibid.*, 57.

35 A move criticized by Susan Fraiman as succumbing to a "carnophallogocentric" politics; not making a political statement in a politically charged discourse is a political statement of omission. Susan Fraiman, "Pussy Panic versus Liking Animals: Tracking Gender in Animal Studies," *Critical Inquiry* 39, no. 1 (2012): 89–115, 106.

technological adaptation.³⁶ Wolfe's 'post' in posthumanism invites a re-examination of the 'subject' assumed by humanism to *be* human (or at the very least, anthropomorphized) that would open the sphere of subjectivity "to the alterity of the other: not by 'taking thought' or by benevolent reflection but by the very conditions of cognition and communication, conditions that, in their constitutive 'blindness,' generate the *necessity* of the other."³⁷ Wolfe goes one step further than Haraway by identifying not only the stories as posthumanist but also the systems dictating how we critically interact with the stories we produce and inherit.³⁸

Would a posthumanist literature then democratize the hierarchy of species and allow voices from our co-critters to be heard? Surely if we consciously refuse to privilege human subjectivity, we have escaped the charge of speciesism? Speciesism can trace its genealogy through the intellectual constructs of racism, sexism and colonialism.³⁹ Humanism then, with its positioning of the human at the apex of the species hierarchy, is inescapably speciesist. Is posthumanism then the opposite? Is posthumanism postspeciesist?

Let us begin by defining the 'post' of postspeciesism. Postspeciesism is a newborn term, standing tentatively on freshly unfurled baby legs—so new that one of the only uses of it I could find was on the webpage of the ecofeminist and vegan sociologist Corey Lee Wrenn who defines it thusly: "[p]ost-speciesism is an ideology which suggests that species does not matter and/or that speciesism is either a thing of the past or that it is currently being adequately attended to."⁴⁰ There can be little doubt that we are far from a genuinely postspeciesist world. Who eats whom for breakfast? Xenotransplantation is also a one-way street wherein humans treat nonhumans as disposable resources even as we accept that their hearts beat just as ours: "[h]uman babies with baboon hearts evoke national ethical perplexity—for animal rights activists at least as much as for the guardians of human purity."⁴¹ One could, however, argue for an interpretation of postspeciesism that would mirror that of posthumanism. The

36 Wolfe gives technological sci-fi posthumanism short shrift. He names this instead 'transhumanism'; the desire to meld the human animal with technology (embodiment, prosthesis and hybridity) to such a degree that the *homo sapiens sapiens* element is eclipsed—or at least overshadowed—by its additions and adaptations. However, Wolfe notes that the premise of being 'post' human in transhumanism is predicated upon the teleological progress of humankind's ideals; "in this light, transhumanism should be seen as an *intensification* of humanism." Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?*, xv.

37 Ibid, 122.

38 Ibid, 126.

39 Michelle Westerlaken, "Speciesism," *Critical Posthumanism Network*, August 24, 2018, <https://criticalposthumanism.net/speciesism/>.

40 Corey Lee Wrenn, "What Is Post-Speciesism?," accessed July 20, 2020, <http://www.coreyleewrenn.com/what-is-post-speciesism/>.

41 Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto," 35.

‘post’ of postspeciesism would thus be analogous to the ‘post’ in posthumanism in that it would also open critical spaces that allow for a new interrogation of the ontological positionality of beings without blind adherence to a Linnaean taxonomy. While this postspeciesism would not deny that speciesism exists, it would investigate posthumanist subjectivity through the particular lens of speciesism as a widening of the sphere of empathy. Another, less contentious, term could be multi-species-isms as Michelle Westerlaken defines it: “a concept that can account for multiplicity, while still sticking to the idea of ‘species’ as a useful reminder of the violence that is inflicted upon other animals.”⁴² Multi-species-isms would also tidily incorporate the recognition that no [wo]man is an island. Both Haraway⁴³ and Timothy Morton⁴⁴ have written on how bodies should no longer be considered as single-organism entities. Haraway’s term is “holobiont” whilst Morton refers to “[t]he extended phenotype view [which] de-aestheticises life forms, who according to environmental ideology are bounded things nestled within their bounded niches.”⁴⁵ In our cyborg reality and our increasing awareness of the suffering and sentience of nonhuman animals our precariously constructed assumptions of human exclusivity and clearly defined species borders are currently coming unmoored. We are approaching an understanding of our own insignificance in the grand scheme of things; a sentiment shared with posthumanism.

This understanding also forces readers to re-evaluate our inherent anthropocentricity. This might mean denying Frans de Waal’s anthropode-nial, “the *a priori* rejection of shared characteristics between humans and animals.”⁴⁶ However, Dario Martinelli—like Nagel—has emphasized that humans simply cannot transcend our species.⁴⁷ Pauliina Rautio agrees and notes, “humans as a species cannot escape their biophysical conditions, and thus experience and communicate the world as any other species but the one they necessarily are.”⁴⁸ While a default anthropocentrism might then be considered ethically unbiased, the choice to ignore or attend to it can have profound implications. One such implication is anthropomorphism, the attribution of

42 Michelle Westerlaken, “What is the Opposite of Speciesism?,” <https://michellewesterlaken.com/2019/08/29/what-is-the-opposite-of-speciesism/>.

43 Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 60.

44 Timothy Morton, “Ecology as Text, Text as Ecology,” *Oxford Literary Review* 32, no. 1 (2010): 1–17, 8.

45 *Ibid.*, 8.

46 Frans de Waal, *Primates and Philosophers: How Morality Evolved* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 65.

47 Dario Martinelli, “Anthropocentrism as a social phenomenon: Semiotic and ethical implications,” *Social Semiotics* 18, no. 1 (2008): 79–99.

48 Pauliina Rautio, “Being Nature: Interspecies Articulation as a Species-Specific Practice of Relating to Environment,” *Environmental Education Research* 19, no. 4 (2013): 445–57, 447. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504622.2012.700698>.

recognizably human characteristics to nonhuman entities. By ignoring our differences, we might also misattribute feelings, desires and intentions. Yet Rautio points out that while anthropomorphism might stray from the adherence to truth that Bernaerts et al. predicate authentic animal narrative on, it does help readers conceptualize alien experiences and forge kindly feelings with Others.⁴⁹ Anthropomorphism might be the tenuous bridge connecting the human mind to the weird unknowability of the animal experience. There is a fine line separating the specious anthropomorphism that denies an animal's authenticity, and an ethically productive anthropomorphism that might, via a shared empathy, inspire a reader or human interlocutor of an animal voice towards advocating for the benefit of the animal.

A MULTISPECIES ETHNOPOETICS

However, I am left wondering if even after our best efforts at the denial of anthropodenial or a critical acknowledgement of our default anthropocentricity, literature can be made into a true multi-species-ism. If the other members of the prokaryotic and eukaryotic empires never write back, we are left with an anthropocentric autopoiesis. In the Marxist dialectic of base and superstructure, the animals are always basic. With the non-human animals perpetually stuck in the base with only a one-way interaction of submission with the superstructure, I will never get to speak with the animals or to know “what it is like for a *bat* to be a bat.”⁵⁰

Need it be so? The suggestion that animals might shuck the yoke of submission and become active agents in the social praxis of literature is a radical one and yet, recent critical interventions have made this suggestion increasingly common. For example, Cynthia Huff and Joel Haefner find that “subjectivity has been problematized by animal studies scholars who draw on recent scientific research to contest the privileging of human beings as uniquely able to write and speak.”⁵¹ Investigating this animal communication should trouble our assumptions of humanity's idiosyncratic invention of literature and might also instigate a new empathic understanding of our multispecies existence. Weik von Mossner claims that “there is a certain consensus that emotionally powerful renderings of human-nature relationships play an important role in our engagement with environmental narrative and that such engagements can have substantial repercussions in the real world.”⁵²

49 Rautio, “Being Nature,” 450.

50 Nagel, “What is it Like to be a Bat?” 169.

51 Cynthia Huff and Joel Haefner, “His Master's Voice: Animalographies, Life Writing, and the Posthuman,” *Biography* 35, no. 1 (2012): 157.

52 Weik von Mossner, 9.

One way of navigating the complexity of divining animal experience and fostering an interspecies empathy from animal voices with human interlocutors could be a new multispecies ethnopoetics. I formulate this concept on the back of the seminal work of Kirksey and Helmreich who introduced the adjacent concept of a multispecies ethnography. Their work demands a critical engagement with “the alterworlds of other beings”⁵³ as well as biological anthropology, eco- and bioart “to craft new genres of naturalcultural criticism.”⁵⁴ If we consider the participant-observer status inherent to the ethnographer, we might find it accords nicely with the role of posthumanist writer outlined by Wolfe. By attempting as accurate as possible a transcription of animal voices such a writer/ethnographer would, as previously discussed, interrogate the assumed humanity (or anthropomorphism) of the subject by embedding that interrogation within a second order of “externality and ahumanity”⁵⁵—by acting as an impartial ethnographer rather than a creative agent, the writer/ethnographer distances their humanity from the discourse. I propose that the related field of ethnopoetics could be most germane to this investigation. Ethnopoetics can be broadly described as an ethnographic description and/or transcription of oral or performed verse. According to Robert Moore, “ethnopoetics has not primarily involved the ethnographic study of nonliterate peoples’ explicit ideas *about* narrative, as reflected, perhaps, in native terminologies. It has, rather, been an intervention into the presentational (printed) form of texts, a way of arranging the transcript of an event of oral narration so as to reflect or recuperate the true rhetorical architecture of denotational text.”⁵⁶ The term was coined by Jerome Rothenberg, who has also claimed that “ethnopoetics can be seen as a strategy—one of many—aimed against closure and the ‘authoritative’ version—allowing the individual voice to emerge and to free itself (in Richard Huelsenbeck’s old Dada prophecy) ‘from the tutelage of the advocates of power.’”⁵⁷ When we trouble the borders delineating the human from the animal, it becomes plausible that we could include nonhuman animals under the aegis of “folk” and consider them in an ethnopoetics. If the role of ethnopoetics is less a rumination on what stories mean to different (human and nonhuman) cultures and more a description or transcription of poetic folklore, then the accurate representation of aesthetic animal language in human poetry can be seen as an ethnopoetic pursuit.

- 53 S. Eben Kirksey and Stefan Helmreich, “The Emergence of Multispecies Ethnography,” *Cultural Anthropology* 25, no. 4 (2010): 545–76, 553.
- 54 *Ibid.*, 565.
- 55 Wolfe, 126.
- 56 Robert Moore, “Reinventing Ethnopoetics,” *Journal of Folklore Research* 50, no. 1–3 (2013): 13–39, 14.
- 57 Jerome Rothenberg, “Ethnopoetics & (Human) Poetics,” *Conjunctions* 6 (1984): 232–40, 234.

If one were to engage in a multispecies ethnopoetics, one would need to attune one's self to zoosemiotics, a term coined by Thomas Sebeok in 1963 "within which the science of signs intersects with ethology [and which is] devoted to the scientific study of signalling behavior in and across animal species."⁵⁸ Paying attention to the zoosemiotics around us, and working with them, resonates with how Rautio defines interspecies articulation: "finding and composing connections to our surrounding nonhuman world."⁵⁹ In paying attention to zoosemiotics for the purpose of a multispecies ethnopoetics, the focus should be on identifying forms of animal folklore and, where possible, animal poetics. Jay Mechling has persuasively argued that nonhuman animals have a culture worthy of study and that they deserve a place in "the folk."⁶⁰ Tok Thompson agrees with Mechling, and elaborates: "[i]n animal studies, specialists are now having to confront the study of animal culture, animal communications, and animal mentalities, all of which lead towards the discussion of personhood beyond the human."⁶¹ Heeding cultural or poetic zoosemiotics would be the first step. Incorporating them into human-transcribed texts would be a second, whereby a multispecies ethnopoetics would be initiated. If the human-inscribed texts were lyric, and the reader of the text could be considered to exercise her empathy by reading into the gaps of the text, this empathy might, in the words of Clohesy, "make us more receptive to the transformative power of Art, which, in return, can make us more empathically attuned to the lives of others."⁶²

CULTURAL AND POETIC ZOOSEMIOTICS

Regarding de Waal's assertion that animals communicate in a state of perpetual presentism,⁶³ we might look to elephants as a possible rebuttal. According to Halton, "[e]lephants possess far greater memory capacities than humans, and exhibit mourning."⁶⁴ Do elephants communicate their memories and their mourning? If they are able to do so with any form of "speaking"—even corporeal 'body language' interpreted by other elephants—might this communication move from mere speaking to de Waal's language? That they might even do so aesthetically is not impossible. Caitrin Nicol asserts that "[s]ome elephants . . .

58 Sebeok, 142.

59 Rautio, 446.

60 Jay Mechling, "'Banana Cannon' and Other Folk Traditions between Human and Nonhuman Animals," *Western Folklore* 48, no. 4 (1989): 312–23, 318.

61 Tok Thompson, "Listening to the Elder Brothers: Animals, Agents, and Posthumanism in Native versus non-Native American Myths and Worldviews," *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore* 77 (2019): 160.

62 Clohesy, *Politics of Empathy*, 63.

63 Frans de Waal, *Are We Smart Enough to Know How Smart Animals Are?* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2016), 106.

64 Halton, "Mind Matters," 136.

make art of their own accord—mostly, as it appears, abstract, but some bordering on representational.”⁶⁵ These artistic elephants have produced paintings when supplied with art materials and even make use of random stones to scratch out imagery on their cell walls.⁶⁶

Elephants are not the only species to indulge in aesthetics. In his 1962 book *The Biology of Art* Desmond Morris studied the artistic development of apes; he found that although there were certain common elements to most of the pictures produced there were also individual idiosyncrasies: “[b]riefly, [it can be established] beyond doubt . . . that, in the drawings of a chimpanzee, it is possible to demonstrate not only a change of style over a period of time . . . but also a distinct and undeniable sense of design and patterning.”⁶⁷ If elephants and apes can engage in this type of non-practical, individualistic and aesthetic image making, perhaps they would also be capable of creating a representational narrative. Maybe they already *are* and, like the apocryphal tree falling in the woods with no humans around to hear it, we are just not listening.

In *Other Minds: The Octopus and the Evolution of Intelligent Life* Peter Godfrey-Smith distinguishes between species that overproduce communication and species that over-interpret communication, placing cephalopods firmly in the first category. Discussing the colorful displays of cephalopods as a form of visual language he “find[s], as a result of their heritage of camouflage, an immensely rich expressive capacity . . . Cuttlefish and other cephalopods are brimming with output. Publish or perish.”⁶⁸ Godfrey-Smith is not convinced these displays can be interpreted along practical lines: “a lot of their wild chromatic output is surely lost on watchers.”⁶⁹ If the displays serve no practical purpose, could we not classify them as aesthetic? If it can be demonstrated that octopuses communicate—or “publish”—through chromatic flashing, might such displays be akin to poetic language?

In addition to drawings and chromatic flashing, I would like to present sounds and soundscape ecology⁷⁰ as a fecund locus of aesthetic and cultural zoosemiotics—and one that could prove especially germane to a multispecies

65 Caitrin Nicol, “Do Elephants Have Souls?” *The New Atlantis*, no. 38 (2013): 31.

66 *Ibid.*, 32.

67 Desmond Morris, *The Biology of Art: A Study of the Picture-Making Behaviour of the Great Apes and its Relation to Human Art* (London and New York: Methuen & Co, 1962), 21.

68 Peter Godfrey-Smith, *Other Minds: The Octopus and the Evolution of Intelligent Life* (London: William Collins, 2017), 132.

69 *Ibid.*, 132.

70 Jeff Titon explains, “[s]oundscape ecology combines with the older field of zoosemiotics . . . to study orality in the natural world. The acoustic niche hypothesis suggests that inter-species animal sound communication proceeds in a particular soundspace, in terms of timbre, frequency, duration, melody, and so forth.” Jeff Tod Titon, “Orality, Commonality, Commons, Sustainability, and Resilience,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 129, no. 514 (2016): 486–97, 488.

ethnopoetics. One reason for this is the theory that a particularly aesthetic form of sound, the song, developed as a multi-species-ism. According to Halton, “humans did not invent music but evolved into being immersed in it, in birdsong and other living audio manifestations of ecological mind.”⁷¹ De Waal agrees: “[s]cience increasingly views human speech and birdsong as products of convergent evolution, given that songbirds and humans share at least fifty genes specifically related to visual learning.”⁷² Martin Rohmeier et al. argue that although animal songs may lack semanticity (and they stress that this lack has thus far been almost entirely untested), they could be considered as comparable to our music and that “music and human language may be regarded as constituting a continuum of forms of communication that is distinguished in terms of specificity of meaning.”⁷³

One particularly intriguing example of aesthetic and cultural zoosemiotics is whale song. Whale song is fascinating partly because despite their enormous size and wide-ranging migratory patterns, whales are one of the most enigmatic species for humans to contemplate; they leave no traces of their peregrinations besides our recordings and their skeletons. While we do not have evidence to confirm that whale song operates symbolically, as Rohrmeier et al. stated, we have not tested animal song (including whale song) for symbolic representation extensively enough to know that it does not. Whale communication is aesthetically pleasing and cultural-specific. These songs are also plastic like human language:

The [humpback] whales in one pod sing the same song, which changes over time in pitch and sometimes volume. Whales in the same area tend to sing the same song, but humpbacks elsewhere sing completely different songs, and patterns are not revisited over time, as one nineteen-year-long study has shown . . . It seems as if humpbacks have discrete, shared songs that evolve over time, just like human language does.⁷⁴

The parallel between whale song and human lyric poetry has also been noted by David Rothenberg who experimented with interactive clarinet/whale voice duets and found that whale vocalizations adhere to formal patterns, contain analogues to our literary motifs and even that “[s]ome of the phrases end with

71 Halton, “Mind Matters,” 127.

72 de Waal, *Are We Smart Enough*, 109.

73 Martin Rohrmeier, Willem Zuidema, Geraint A. Wiggins, and Constance Scharff, “Principles of Structure Building in Music, Language and Animal Song,” *Philosophical Transactions: Biological Sciences* 370, no. 1664 (2015): 10.

74 Margret Grebowicz, *Whale Song. Object Lessons* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 20.

the same contrasting sound, so they can be said to rhyme.”⁷⁵ Rothenberg’s assertion is supported by Mattila et al. who state that “humpback whale songs are composed of a sequence of discrete themes which are repeated in a predictable order; each sequence of themes is considered a song.”⁷⁶ Furthermore, Charles Foster’s essay on his encounters with orcas and their linguistic capabilities brings to the reader’s attention that our default anthropocentricity deprives us of much of whale communication: “[s]o far, by and large, we’ve looked only . . . at those frequencies cetaceans use that are also audible to us. Yet those frequencies are a tiny fraction of what the whales themselves use. Slow down the white noise of a beluga and you’ll hear an intricately orchestrated symphony over hundreds of octaves.”⁷⁷ Despite the fact that we might not have auditory access to all of it, whale song can nonetheless be recorded for human consumption by hydrophone and subsequently transcribed using sound spectrogram technology.⁷⁸ The fact that some whale song differs according to pod indicates that it is cultural-specific and learned and should therefore be considered as a type of whale folklore.

EXAMPLES OF A MULTISPECIES ETHNOPOETICS

If the previous section elucidated various forms of cultural and aesthetic zoosemiotics, the present will give two examples of poetry that could be said to engage in a multispecies ethnopoetics. These two examples should demonstrate how a human transcriber can write poetry which engages with authentic animal voices and simultaneously induces the reader to read into the gaps, exercising empathy and, according to Vendler, “[let] us into the innermost chamber of another person’s mind, and [make] us privy to what he or she would say in complete secrecy and safety.”⁷⁹ My two examples of a multispecies ethnopoetics will be the zaum poetry of Velimir Khlebnikov and Aleksei Kruchenykh as well as the poem “Sounds a Raven Makes” from Claire Caldwell’s latest collection *Gold Rush* (2020).

In the *zaum*, or beyond sense, poetry of Velimir Khlebnikov and Aleksei Kruchenykh the meaning of the poem, such as there might be, is not disclosed via traditional syntax. Semanticity was not rigid—arguably barely even present. The meaning of a *zaum* poem would come to fruition emotionally and hearken

75 David Rothenberg, “Whale Music: Anatomy of an Interspecies Duet,” *Leonardo Music Journal* 18 (2008): 47.

76 David Mattila, Linda N. Guinee, and Charles A. Mayo, “Humpback Whale Songs on a North Atlantic Feeding Ground,” *Journal of Mammalogy* 68, no. 4 (1987): 880.

77 Charles Foster, “On the Language of the Deep Blue,” *Emergence Magazine*, 2019, <https://emergencemagazine.org/story/on-the-language-of-the-deep-blue/>.

78 Rothenberg, “Whale Music,” 49.

79 Vendler, x.

back to an ur-symbolism of ancient Slavic languages. The similarities between *zaum* and animal song were not lost on Khlebnikov, who called *zaum* the “language of the birds” and used it in both the poem “Wisdom in a Snare” (1914) and his supersaga “Zangezi” (1922). “Zangezi” opens with an exposition on the sound plane layers of which the poem is constructed. These sound planes can be read as forms of soundscapes as defined by Bryan Pijanowski et al: “[t]he collection of biological, geophysical and anthropogenic sounds that emanate from a landscape and which vary over space and time reflecting important ecosystem processes and human activities.”⁸⁰ The first soundscape Khlebnikov introduces is the birds:

(These are the birds’ morning speeches to the rising sun.)

CHAFFINCH

(from the very top of the fir tree, puffing out its silver throat)
Peetpatetveechan! Peet pare tveechan! Peetpatetveechan!

YELLOW BUNTING

(quietly, from the top of a walnut tree)
Kree-tee-tee-tee-tee-ee – tsuey-tsuey-tsuey-ssueyee.

TREE SWALLOW

Vyer-vyorveeroosyek-syek-syek! Ver-verveeroosek-sek-sek!

MOUNTAIN SPARROW

yorteeyedeegredee *(he sees people and hops into the tall fir tree).*
Tyorteeyedeegredee!

GREEN CHIFF-CHAFF

(alone, fitting over the green sea of the pine grove, grazing waves that the wind keeps forever in motion)
Prueyn! ptseerepptseerep! Ptseerep! – tsehsehseh.

YELLOW BUNTING

Tsuey-suey-suey-ssuey *(rocks back and forth on a twig).*

BLUE JAY

Peeoo! Peeoo! pyak, pyak, pyak!

80 Bryan C Pijanowski et al., “What Is Soundscape Ecology? An Introduction and Overview of an Emerging New Science,” *Landscape Ecology* 26 (2011): 1213–1232, 1214. http://iinsteco.org/people/publications/almo/2011/2011_What_is%20soundscape_ecology.pdf.

BARN SWALLOW

Tseeveets! Tseeveets!

BLACK-BANDED WARBLER

Behbotteh-oo-vehvyats!

CUCKOO

Koo-koo! Koo-koo! (*rocks back and forth on a treetop*).

(*Silence. A young birdcatcher passes, with a cage on his back.*)⁸¹

Not only are the words of the birds in these poems remarkably accurate in their onomatopoeia, Raymond Cooke advises that we should not “neglect the semantic implications of this bird language, since Khlebnikov was well aware that different bird sounds reflect different moods.”⁸² Khlebnikov’s assertion that *zaum* was a cognate of birdsong and that both might communicate a meaning without recourse to traditional human grammar and syntax leaves ample space for the reader to read into the gaps of his poetry. In reading into Khlebnikov’s transcribed zoosemiotics the reader is reminded of their default anthropocentrism for he or she cannot definitively decipher the denotation of the bird language. However, the premise of *zaum* indicates that its practitioners believed a more meaningful connotation could be derived. *Zaum* might thus be considered a liminal state of language between human and animal song.

More recently, Claire Caldwell has demonstrated the multilayered interplay between human and bird noise. Her short poem “Sounds a Raven Makes” aptly illustrates how the encroachment of anthropogenic sound into the raven’s soundscape has vastly altered its repertoire of mimicry:

Smoker’s laugh, bedsprings, stone skipped
across the river. Raven imitated by kids
flapping parka sleeves on a skating rink.
Raven imitated by a miner who’s not seen
people in days. Rusty bike chain,
3:00 am. phone call, snow melting off roof.
Raven imitated by raven. Coin dropped
in a tip jar. Dog locked in a truck.⁸³

81 Velimir Khlebnikov, *Collected Works of Velimir Khlebnikov*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 332–33.

82 Raymond Cooke, *Velimir Khlebnikov: A Critical Study. Cambridge Studies in Russian Literature* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987), 87.

83 Claire Caldwell, *Gold Rush* (Halifax and Prince Edward County: Invisible Publishing, 2020), 32.

Mimesis for the raven is no longer a re-presentation of raven sounds so much as a re-presentation of human sounds, and the sounds of humans re-presenting the sounds of the raven re-presenting their sounds. In such interactions, where the utterance is generated by both species and is possibly equally comprehensible/perplexing to both, the distinction between human and animal voice becomes mired in an interspecies muddle of mimetic representations. Yet, despite our difficulties in distinguishing voices, no reader is perplexed by who has transcribed the voice: the poet, in making written text out of what could plausibly be an animal's poetic zoosemiotics, has become the creator of a multispecies ethnopoetic piece. The raven, for her part, is selecting elements of her soundscape to mimic with, presumably, little practical purpose. The raven seems to be creating her own ethnopoetic performance, translating into Raven a curated selection of anthropogenic noise in her soundscape. The reader of the poem, reading meaning into the elisions inherent to the lyric, is invited to exercise empathy and place him or herself into the mind of the raven and question what the soundscape of the raven feels like, pervaded as it is by so much anthropogenic noise.⁸⁴

CONCLUSION

While there is still no conclusive evidence that literature provokes or flexes empathy, there are indicators that writing literature might do so. The act of writing forces the writer to think in ways that might ostensibly seem unthinkable—for example, trying to accurately write animal experientiality which, due to our anthropocentrically delimited cognition, is by definition inconceivable. Literature that “stresses the implacable alterity of its aesthetic and concerns,” as an indefinitely indecipherable transcription of animal utterance is, conforms to China Miéville’s definition of the Weird.⁸⁵ The particular literary form of poetry, with its increased call for creative work on the part of the reader/listener, could then be posited as an ideal form in which to exercise empathy. In melding post-humanism and a multispecies ethnopoetics, I hope to have offered one possible approach to an accurate, authentic transcription of animal culture which could inspire an increased empathic awareness of the animal Other. □

84 Elizabeth Derryberry et al. offer fascinating and contemporary look at how anthropogenic noise can affect oscine song by demonstrating that songbirds in the San Francisco Bay area adapted not only the volume and frequency of their songs, but also increased their complexity. When the birds no longer needed to shout over the sound of traffic, their musical output became more nuanced and perhaps more artistic. Derryberry et al., “Singing in a silent spring: Birds respond to a half-century soundscape reversion during the COVID-19 shutdown,” *Science* 370, no. 6516 (30 October, 2020), 575–79.

85 China Miéville, “M. R. James and the Quantum Vampire,” December 19, 2011, <https://weirdfictionreview.com/2011/11/m-r-james-and-the-quantum-vampire-by-china-mieville/>.

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