

*Jonathan Skinner (Warwick)*

## Call the Pulsing Home: Poetry, Fascination and Resonance in Ecocritical Environments

In the following slice of thinking and sounding (with) animals, I aim at two concepts from communications theory that articulate what it might mean for communication to occur between species: fascination and resonance. I appropriate these concepts from social theorist Niklas Luhmann's notion of communication as "the differentiation of special experiential objects that are either extraordinary or fascinating".<sup>1</sup> While Luhmann is addressing the evolutionary sequence of language, writing, printing (which "fascinate and preoccupy the mind and thereby secure its participation" in communication)<sup>2</sup>, I'd like to draw the notion sideways, to include the fascination of experiential objects generated by other life forms, especially the uncanny fascination of objects like bird song or whale music, which seem extraordinary to us because they sound so much like human language. We can call such vocalizations 'objects' because of the development of our recording and transmission technologies, whose evolution should not be considered separately from (though of course not conflated with) that of 'natural' sounds. The object 'whale song' is a co-evolved kind of performance, much in the way that bird song and lyric poetry, it could be argued, are now irreversibly entangled, in evolutionary terms. The postulate involved in this detournement of systems thinking is that something communicates between species – even if, or especially because, we don't know what it is. Communications do not occur in isolation or a vacuum, but resonate through matter and reverberate in spaces, as a pulse, a dawn chorus, a refrain that we might observe in terms of acoustic ecology or in terms of the special forms our fascination takes as poetic language. Participating in such language, as an ecopoetics, entails a systems-based rather than values-based understanding of environment – one that does not posit 'the environment' as background to human activity. Rather, distinctions between self and environment are internal to human, and indeed to all, forms of life. What we call 'the

environment' emerges constructively, to the extent that we sound and are sounded by the pulsing of these myriad life forms. This essay is an effort to sound the animal, in resonance and dissonance, and to explore what it might mean, to borrow a phrase from poet Maggie O'Sullivan, to "call the pulsing home"<sup>3</sup>.

Resonance takes up a special understanding of communication in systems theoretical terms, as the "constant process of reduction and opening of connective possibilities" in the contact between autopoietic systems.<sup>4</sup> Only resonance can mediate the irreducible distinction between message and information that is a requirement for participation in communication. We address ourselves to another, Luhmann seems to say, by making this distinction. (We might say that self and other are emergent properties of these distinctions.) How do we address ourselves to animals? Some poetic language seems comfortable with this kind of address. Humanist language, on the other hand, by definition excludes animals' access to language and narrowly limits the possibility of animal messages, consigning them to the realm of information. I am interested in the disturbance that poetry brings to such language. Resonance, as a way for communication to happen without consciousness, is a theoretical opening for communication between species, precisely in the ways the mind acts to disturb, stimulate, and irritate communication: there is no resonance without dissonance.

Such communication is of ecocritical interest insofar as it challenges epistemological and ontological frames, frames ecocriticism should query: nature, environment, animal, and the concept of species itself. This query draws me to posthumanism – not transhumanist posthumanism but the sort that, on the contrary, affirms embodiment, rejecting the use of language to draw a line between humans and animals (as if we were not animals or of the same fabric made). This strand within posthumanism asks, what is an animal? Finally, I am drawn to ecopoetics, a practice-led form of ecocriticism that challenges the extent to which criticism seems willing to exclude its own methods from the implications of its research. If texts have agency, at the very least as communicating bodies, then we can no longer unselfconsciously treat them as objects or exhibits: How do we develop relations in our reading practices?

Ecopoetics questions the panoptic competence of criticism, or adapts it, for a more constructivist practice. By "constructivist" I mean acknowledging the presence of the observer in the system that comprises

text, reader and world. Ecopoetics takes the root senses of ecology (*oikos* + *logos*, or household accounting), and poetry (*poiein*, or making) at face value, to engage poetics in the unfinished work of 'household Earth'.<sup>5</sup> (Gary Snyder's hopeful phrase, "etiquette of the wild", judges the human species to be the adolescent at the evolutionary household table, still learning basic manners<sup>6</sup>). Ecopoetics also questions the primacy of (human) language and literature for ecocriticism – hence the framing of this essay in terms of communication. It is a disciplinary frame that tests the segregation of disciplines, the primacy of theoretical over generative, critical over creative modes of inquiry, and the insulation of critical inquiry from advocacy and activism. Ecopoetics, finally, questions the restriction of materiality in ecocritical discussions of poetics, which tend to subordinate excessive signifying, characteristic of texts sometimes called 'postmodern', to signified master narratives ('Anthropocene' being only the latest). Ecopoetics is post-representational, post-correlationist – challenging some of the ways in which poetics thematizes materiality by emphasizing the analogical dimensions of poems or through a topical focus on reference, narrative, or voice. Instead, poetics might seek to describe how a work is partly the experience of its own entropy, as it undergoes the disorder of embodiment. Ecopoetics furthermore embeds innovation in the ethno-poetics of cross-cultural encounter, where nature is always already human, necessitating the kinds of self-awareness (experiencing observations of one's own ethnicity) only possible through dialogical engagement and moments of translation, even and especially when encountering 'nature'. The essay centers on two moments, two encounters with animal vocalizations, which fascinate us because they seem to echo our own vocalizing habits, and which, when grasped outside the scale of human listening, might be understood as acoustic homologies: bird song and whale song.

In 1879 Helen Hunt Jackson closed a letter to her friend Emily Dickinson with the suggestion: "What should you think of trying your hand on the oriole? He will be along presently." Poet Dickinson obliged, noting in her response, "To the Oriole you suggested I add a Humming Bird and hope they are not untrue". Three years later Dickinson wrote, in a letter to her friend Mabel Loomis Todd, "I cannot make an Indian Pipe but please accept a Humming Bird"<sup>7</sup>. The idea of 'trying one's hand on' or 'making' a bird in poetry certainly fits 19<sup>th</sup> century conventions of collecting and depicting natural objects, and plays on various meanings

of correspondence (encoded in, for instance, the "language of flowers"<sup>8</sup>), but Dickinson's poem, which recombines descriptions of the hummingbird from T. W. Higginson's and J. J. Audubon's natural history prose with phrases from Shakespeare's "The Tempest" is anything but conventional:

A Route of Evanescence  
 With a revolving Wheel –  
 A Resonance of Emerald –  
 A Rush of Cochineal –  
 And every Blossom on the Bush  
 Adjusts it's tumbled Head –  
 The mail from Tunis, probably,  
 An easy Morning's Ride –<sup>9</sup>

In the Western lyric tradition, most likely imported from Persia, sound patterns do not merely reinforce meaning in poetry – twelfth-century Occitan troubadours deliberately kept sound separate from meaning by rhyming only the ends of their words. French poet Jacques Roubaud speculates that the troubadours modeled rhyme, "sound full of meaning that is not a word and seeks its mate", on bird song.<sup>10</sup> In her blossom-heads, Dickinson invites us to imagine the words of the poem itself, "tumbled" by the hummingbird, whose distance-zapping transit through the poet's hearing organizes phonetic structures into clusters of periodic assonance and consonance, a "resonance" drawing language away from its conventional literary meanings.

Focusing on the non-semantic layers of sound in "A Route of Evanescence" allows us to consider intensifications such as: Route, rev, Res/ scence, nance/ Evan, evolv, ever/ Wheel, neal, mail/ ald, Head, Ride/ Rush, bush, Adjusts/ tum, Tun/ every, easy. These clusters revolve around a lone sound at the center of the poem, "Coch", whose semantic pun lies exposed, in which perhaps we hear the turning axle of the mailman's coach. Dickinson's "Humming Bird" operates a kind of writing machine, an imagination of relinquishment, as Prospero yields organizational agency to Ariel's phenomena, arranging human memory and association in uncanny patterns, making a mockery of human scale ("The Mail from Tunis . . . An easy Morning's Ride"). Yet, vivid though its "Emerald" and "Cochineal" be, description is bound to follow "A Route of Evanescence":

like the bush, the poem is left to "adjust" its "tumbled Head", only registering contact with another lifeform on its own, intertextual terms. A bird that does not really sing (to our ears) is made to sing in human words.

In this "adjustment", a message appears to resolve from the poem's information, illusory as the zoetrope's "revolving Wheel", as connective possibilities are only opened through the constant reduction of its meaning to words. It is our fascination with the "revolving Wheel" that allows the poem to do its work, connecting Dickinson with her correspondents, connecting readers of Dickinson and Shakespeare, connecting humans to hummingbirds. At the same time, there is really no message: as we adjust our "tumbled Heads", we cannot doubt that a poem has gone through us, but what is communicated, the new connective possibilities, by definition remain inaccessible to our consciousness. We each make our own adjustments, opening up possibilities for some other observer. What communicates is "A Resonance of Emerald".

The title of Maggie O'Sullivan's volume *In the House of the Shaman* cues us to magical expectations, as we come to the poem "Starlings". If we know some natural-cultural history, we also might expect a Shakespearean resonance, since the virtuosic starling, Mozart's darling, became a pest once introduced to America by an enthusiast who, the story goes, set out to release all of Shakespeare's birds into Central Park. Like starlings, perhaps, what we encounter challenges our attention, with a different kind of fascination, sounds invading our sense-making capacities that exceed or fall short of meaning:

Lived Daily  
 or Both  
 Daily  
 the Living  
 structuring  
 Bone-Seed,  
 Pelage,  
 Aqueous,  
 YONDERLY —  
 lazybed of need —  
 CLOUD-SANG  
 Topsy Bobbles, Dowdy  
 wander.Halt upon

grinned jeers, gin's note  
 someone's in the leading  
     of small & the pitch meander ears  
 tune me gold  
 Dulthie pods,  
     Lipper  
         "Ochre harled"  
 ELECTRIC  
 CONTORTIONS —<sup>11</sup>

As sound, starlings "pitch meander ears// tune me gold/ Dulthie pods". As sight, they are "Ochre harled". Charles Bernstein has noted how O'Sullivan's poems "lend themselves to recitation, while resisting thematization".<sup>12</sup> To carry out the instructions fixed on the page is a transformative way of discovering one's objective nature: as breath, tongue and lips, performing "Dulthie pod", undergo "Kinship with Animals" (the title of the section of the book from which this poem is taken). Indeed, it is impossible to recite the poem and not in some sense become its matter, to get the "Topsy Bobbles" as one sings "gin's note", in what O'Sullivan calls "a Mattering of Materials"<sup>13</sup>. Part of the physical here is the page (this is the first of two-and a half pages), in its "intervals between"<sup>14</sup> often an active part of the composition rather than neutral support, not to speak of the changes of font. Words here seem more attracted to one another than to our will to make sense of them, like the starlings they mimic in the poem's final lines, "scrapey syncopated/ iridescent// magnets".<sup>15</sup>

Louis Zukofsky called poetry, "An integral / Lower limit speech / Upper limit music"<sup>16</sup>. For Zukofsky, the essence of poetry is more like hearing something in a language one doesn't know than like not hearing something (overhearing or interpreting it) in a language one does know. Poetic language, it could be argued, organizes acoustic signals before coding them as meaning. Theorist Reuven Tsur's "cognitive poetics" articulates a "nonspeech" mode, drawn from neuroscience and psychoacoustics, that contributes to the expressiveness (and affectivity) of poetic sound patterns: "we hear it as if we heard music sounds or natural noises. We attend away from overtone structure to tone color."<sup>17</sup> As poet Steve McCaffery puts it, "even a single voice resonates as a simultaneity of corporeal, acoustic events"<sup>18</sup>.

Tropes of sound in ecopoetics mind the gap between acoustics and phonetics: in the evocation of her mother's disability in her autobiographical poem "Paeon to Place", the mimesis of Lorine Niedecker's "sora/ rail's sweet / / spoon-tapped waterglass-/ descending scale-/ tear-drop-tittle", referencing a resemblance that birders instantly recognize, descends into a thicket of alliteration, ending with hyphenated and enjambed, nursery rhymed "nonsense":

I mourn her not hearing canvasbacks  
 their blast-off rise  
     from the water  
         Not hearing sora  
 rails's sweet  
  
 spoon-tapped waterglass-  
 descending scale-  
     tear-drop-tittle  
         Did she giggle  
 as a girl?<sup>19</sup>

On the one hand, Niedecker's sounds activate the nonspeech mode of poetry, attending to acoustic signals prior to their organization as "words". Hearing seems to offer a bridge, however enjambed, between human and nonhuman. On the other hand, the meaning of "tear-drop-tittle" remains irreducibly human, an isolated sense the deafness of Niedecker's mother might be proxy for, whose "not hearing canvasbacks/ their blast-off rise" the poet mourns. Phonetics at once imagines communication and constellates a consciousness incapable of communication, organized only in relation to itself.

Within critical attention to the sound of poetry there has been an effort to uncouple sound from poetic 'voice' (the dominant, self-present, culturally authoritative 'voice' of the 'creative writing' industry, where poets are trained to 'find their voices'). For Charles Bernstein, the aesthetic significance of the acoustic inscription of the poet's voice lies in the fact that it "returns voice from sometimes idealized projections of self in the style of a poem to its social materiality, to voicing and voices"<sup>20</sup>. As Steve McCaffery says, and demonstrates,

Voice is a polis of mouth, lips, teeth, tongue, tonsils, palette, breath, rhythm, timbre, and sound. Less a component than a production of a materiopneumatic assemblage [...] a simultaneity of corporeal, acoustic events.<sup>21</sup>

Deconstructing, or otherwise constructing, voice opens poetry up to the more-than-human soundscape. "Performance", Bernstein continues,

always exceeds script, just as text always outperforms audibility. The relation of script to performance, or performance to script, is necessarily discrepant, hovering around an original center in a complex of versions that is inherently unstable.<sup>22</sup>

I am interested in finding ways to talk about the sound of poetry as a critique of humanist prosody, attentive to ways in which the sounds of poetry are both closed off and radically open, subject to the impulses and vicissitudes of the sonic environment and yet uncannily apart.

Flashback: January 1979. Or was it later? Exploring the back-issues of *National Geographic Magazine*? Early vinyl memories are stuck on a repeat of the afternoon I first pulled *Never Mind the Bollocks, Here's the Sex Pistols* from its pink sleeve and took advantage of my grandmother's vacuuming to play it on her old turntable console. I couldn't tell you if that was 1977 (the year of the album's release) or 1980 or later. It seems strange to me now that I can't just 'google' those autobiographical details. Somewhere in the morass of pre-digital memory (early teens for me) I certainly pulled page 24A-B from the January 1979 issue of *National Geographic Magazine*, the *Songs of the Humpback Whale* 33 1/3 Flexi-Disc ('soundsheet') produced by Eva-Tone<sup>23</sup>, laid it on our family Thorens turntable, with perhaps a quarter set on the label to keep it in place, and put the needle in the wobbly groove: whale song.

One can, as a matter of fact, google the artifact. 10.5 million of them were printed with that issue of *National Geographic* – the largest single pressing of any record in history.<sup>24</sup> *Songs of the Humpback Whale* was originally released in 1970 by the Wildlife Conservation Society at the Bronx Zoo, from recordings made by Roger Payne, Frank Watlington (a Navy hydrophonics operator, who had caught the sounds almost twenty years earlier while conducting sonar surveillance in Bermuda) and others, selling 45,000 copies in less than a year, and becoming the best-selling

nature recording of all time, a multiplatinum album that has sold more than thirty million copies.<sup>25</sup> Listening to the Flexi-Disc now, via YouTube, its vinyl surface noise mingling with the oceanic background noise of the recording itself, I am as struck by the calm and precise enunciation of the narrator, whale biologist and activist Roger Payne, as I am by the blowing of these Ornette Coleman humpback whales:

The recording you will now hear was carried onboard a Voyager spacecraft into outer space. The reason for including such a strange message, one of many greetings from earth, is that there is a remote chance sometime within the next 1.2 billion years, the expected lifetime of the spacecraft, that some other spacefaring civilization may find this bottle tossed into the cosmic ocean, and decode its message from Earth. That idea stops my heart. The songs of whales, so long confined within the vaults of the sea, have in span of just twenty years, burst through its surface, flowed over the land, conquered the hearts of their age-old enemy, man, and are now bound on a 1.2 billion-year journey that will spread them throughout the galaxy.<sup>26</sup>

Embedded in this statement, besides many other odd notions, such as the longshot hope that an alien civilization might be able to "decode" what we earth dwellers could not, is a belief in the transubstantiation of sound recording: as itself embodying the "songs of whales", which have been somehow decanted from the seas, and bottled in this high tech vessel to be "tossed into the cosmic ocean". The phrase "strange message" contains the contradiction of 'animal communication': vocalizations (and other information) whose meaning remains a mystery to us yet nevertheless is perceived to carry a 'message'. The agency of these nonhumans also remains ambiguous, as active verbs like "burst", "flowed", "conquered" are neutralized by the substance, the Golden Record (or vinyl phonosheet) into which they are pressed, "bound" on a galactic journey. Finally, the time scale of 1.2 billion years – a period of time within which chances are high that life on Earth as we know it will have vanished – seems out of scale with the presumed "message" of this phonosheet, which is, in popular terms, to 'save the whales'.

It would be hard to deny that *Songs of the Humpback Whale* did as much to put 'ambient music' on the commercial map as did Wendy Carlos, Brian Eno, Miles Davis, Pink Floyd, Jean Michel Jarre, Tangerine Dream,

etc. It certainly impacted the map of my own listening development as much as the work of those other artists. (R. Murray Schafer notes how "the exaggerated echo and feedback effects of modern electronic and popular music re-create for us the echoing vaults, the dark depths of ocean"<sup>27</sup>). It would also be hard to deny that Payne's whale song album, which was just one part of a campaign Payne and his allies waged to get the International Whaling Commission to place a moratorium on commercial whaling in 1982, contributed more than any other intellectual or aesthetic production to the protection of the whales.

Yet according to the ecocritique of Timothy Morton and associated 'posthumanist' thinkers, whale music, and ambient art in general, render a fantasy of immersion in and interconnection with "the one thing that maintains an aesthetic distance between us and them, us and it, us and 'over there'".<sup>28</sup> In the case of ecology, this thing is "Nature", which any "dark ecology" – cleaving to "the dark, depressive quality of life in the shadow of ecological catastrophe" – must let go of, especially if human and nonhuman actors are to advance together in sounding future possibilities of coexistence.<sup>29</sup> Ambience does not just feed the phantasmagoria of 'nature', it also lures listeners into an ethical breach: if we do not want to resonate with ethically objectionable power structures, if we want to extend social relations to whales (for instance), then we might want to resist the special objects that fascinate and preoccupy our minds in order to secure our participation.

In its refusal to produce an idea of nature as a way of being [à la Adorno's 'halting the mastery over nature through which nature continues its mastery'], dark ecology is one of the aspects of this 'halting', generating not the relaxing ambient sounds of ecomimesis, but the screeching of the emergency brake.<sup>30</sup>

To consume the renderings of ambient whale music, according to Morton's critique, is to linger in the tabernacle of the beautiful soul, ignoring the killing and machinery of the extraction industry. In his anatomy of the processing of a sperm whale on a midcentury American whaler, in the novel *Moby Dick*, Herman Melville dramatizes the rendering process (of whale blubber into oil) in the "try-works" of the whaling vessel and marvels at the conversion from the industrial gore of extraction, where "the entire ship seems great Leviathan himself", to the

slick cleanliness of commerce, where "you would all but swear you trod some silent merchant vessel".<sup>31</sup> We are to be troubled by the double sense of "rendering" – an extraction of immediacy from the media of ambient poetics but also of a resource from living creatures. "Instead of whistling in the dark, pretending that we're part of Gaia", Morton asks, "why not stay with the darkness?"<sup>32</sup>

I would like to stay with the darkness *and* with the whistling (and groaning) of these whale songs, especially with the groans that are so far down, in a zone where only the lowest and slowest sounds travel, that our unaided human ears can't even hear them. Real deep darkness. My teenage self listening to the vinyl phonosheet of *Songs of the Humpback Whale* could hardly have imagined nearly forty years later clicking a button on a screen in Europe to link to live streaming audio of a humpback whale singing into a robotic "wave glider" hydrophone in the Pacific Ocean.<sup>33</sup> As I listen to this transmission, I cannot avoid the fantasy that the whale 'knows' it is singing at a microphone, to humans listening around the planet. I post the link on Facebook and other humans tune in, each adjusting our own consciousness to this new fascination, as the communication spreads. Alvin Lucier seemed to ask, in his piece "Quasimodo, The Great Lover", what the body of such communication might be.<sup>34</sup> I can hear the reverberation of the spaces into which the whale is singing, but does that sound die in my space? How do I pay it (play it) forward? If I irritate and disturb the channels of communication with my fascination, it may resonate more than when I transmit whatever I perceive to be the "message" of the whale. Such disturbance could take the form of activism to protect whales, to draw attention to the threatened state of our oceans. There is resonance when the singing whale benefits from our fascination. We have been drawn into an alliance, whether we like it or not, that demands some very close listening. Not just to whales, of course, but to all manner of species, to buildings and stones and rivers, even, perhaps, to clouds of data. Of course I'd also like to leave some room for science fiction narratives about whales who use humans to broadcast their SOS into deep space.

In Ronald Johnson's *ARK*, a long poem that Johnson claimed would need "no reference except itself" and "be read by spaceships on the way to Alpha Centauri"<sup>35</sup>, Johnson notes it is "by ear" that we stand up: "*Here, also, is couched our sense of the vertical!*". We gain our direction in a labyrinth of sound: in "Beam 20, Labyrinthus", "It rises and falls through

the repercussions of songs of birds".<sup>36</sup> "The mind begins early to select from the buzz and humdrum", Johnson writes in "Beam 7", "till most men end hearing nothing, when the earth speaks, but their own voices".<sup>37</sup> Johnson's field guide poetry<sup>38</sup>, as in "ARK 37, Spire called Prospero's Songs to Ariel (constructed in the form of a quilt from Roger Tory Peterson's *A Field Guide to Western Birds*)", extends objectivist 'homophonic' explorations from a mimetic fascination with sound to a reverberational and percussive engagement, admitting into the soundscape the maker's role as an emitter and reflector of sound:

*hear hear hear hear*  
*see-see-see*  
 "upcurled" uttered like a mallet driving a stake  
 a tick of white, pale buff  
 constantly changing speed and direction  
*immutabilis*  
 with an air-splitting stitch at the "focus"  
 "dead-leaf" pattern  
 in falling diminuendo blending into a broad terminal band of  
 "code"<sup>39</sup>

Johnson has written about this poem and its companion piece ("ARK 38"):

I guess I wanted one coast to reverberate the other coast. I took the *Peterson's Field Guide to Eastern Birds* and just snipped it up and made a quilt out of it. Not all bird song, but bird songs are in it. And then I did a real piece of music where I took a record of the Western birds—the first one was called "Prospero's Songs to Ariel" . . . and this one was called "Ariel's Songs to Prospero", as if going from the east coast to the west coast. I used records and stitched together a music with a sound technician.<sup>40</sup>

A useful context for "ARK 38" might be musique concrète – the "concrete experiment in music", which, as its inventor Pierre Schaeffer defined it, "consists of building sonorous objects, not with the play of numbers and seconds of the metronome, but with pieces of time torn from the cosmos"<sup>41</sup>. Such "sonorous objects" might include the metallic whirr of

the wood thrush as much as the fluting melody of the hermit thrush, or the cacophonous range of a Harry Partch composition – to whom one of the sections of "ARK 38" makes homage. This pairing of invisible Spire ("ARK 38") and silent Spire ("ARK 37") – "hear hear hear hear / see-see-see" – inviting their mutual reverberation and intertwining, their dissonance and resonance, emphasizes ARK's place in the world, somewhere between sound and vision, as material, embodied architecture.

Composer Pauline Oliveiros notes how "[t]he natural and urban environments are full of pulses and patterns. Try to record", she suggests, "the most interesting pulses or patterns that you can find in your daily environment"<sup>42</sup>. I am not merely a passive receiver of sounds, nor am I the only listener: my participation in the soundscape, even the mere fact of my 'listening', is bound to impact other listeners, and to affect their sounding, i.e. what I hear. We might call this feedback of organic transducers within a sonic environment resonance, and the parallel feedback loop of vocalizations reverberation. Except that would be too neat, as well as ignore the vast dimension of non-vocalized sounds. But the play of resonance and reverberation – or, in Johnson's terms, repercussion – might be an adequate way to conceptualize the relationship of poetry to soundscape.

If language is "no longer seen (as it is in philosophical humanism) as a well-nigh magical property that ontologically separates *Homo sapiens* from every other living creature", states philosopher Cary Wolfe, then we are bound to pay attention to "larger processes of social interaction and communication among animals including but not limited to *Homo sapiens*"<sup>43</sup>. Wolfe's key move here, taking his cue from the natural sciences and social sciences, is the separating out of language from communication: just because animals don't speak and write doesn't mean they don't communicate, and just because humans have language, doesn't mean 'we', the subjects in language, communicate – we are precisely not where our communications are. Biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, and the later work of sociologist Niklas Luhmann, conceptualize such processes around the notion of autopoiesis and

the seemingly paradoxical fact that systems are both open *and* closed; to exist and reproduce themselves, they must maintain their boundaries and integrity through a process of self-referential closure; and it is only on the

basis of this closure that they can then engage in 'structural coupling' with their environment.<sup>44</sup>

An example of operational closure/ structural openness might be the homology between whale and bird song, which can be seen and heard to follow similar reiterative patterns ('rhythm and rhyme') when speeded up and/or slowed down. Despite the radically different operation and scale of their organisms, structural coupling seems to occur around patterns of sound. (A track on David Rothenberg's *Whale Music* CD includes a catbird song slowed down to sound like a humpback whale<sup>45</sup>; Payne's *Songs of the Humpback Whale* flexidisc includes a segment of humpback whale song speeded up to sound like a catbird<sup>46</sup>.) Or it may be that a song system – Australian aboriginals might say a 'songline', Deleuze and Guattari a "refrain"<sup>47</sup> – transects these organic autopoietic systems. The prosthetic (or "schizophonic", to borrow a term from R. Murray Schafer<sup>48</sup>) binding, manipulation, and even graphing of acoustic time, afforded by our listening technics, by which we register signals and events beyond the scope of the human ear, both reinforces the incongruent boundedness of our hearing, the hearing of catbirds, and the hearing of whales, *and* makes us aware of the noise of our self-production. A (second-order) systems approach to communication deconstructs the signal/ noise binary, allowing us to 'read' noise as communication, including (importantly) the noise of interdisciplinary communication. It becomes more critical than ever to 'listen' to noise, from a standpoint where disruptive, counter-hegemonic, compositional practices of "disquiet" (à la Jacques Attali<sup>49</sup> or poet Lisa Robertson<sup>50</sup>, as she has it in a recent essay by that title) are not at odds with the conservationist and preservationist care of a biopolitics and its focus on the integrity of signaling systems.

The case against nature poetry is compelling: the "relaxing ambient sounds of ecomimesis" might reasonably be indicted – not only for silencing "the screeching of the emergency brake" we so need to hear but for actively participating in the rendering process itself.<sup>51</sup> (Timothy Morton's critique of ecomimesis asks us to consider whether the consumption of "whale music" perpetuates the very rendering process its production is meant to decry.) Ecopoetics today, such critique runs, might better turn aside from the prosody of nature, and, as in Ariana Reines's *The Cow*, "get to the other side of the animal"<sup>52</sup>, scanning language from

*Carcass Disposal: A Comprehensive Review* for valences that distort the language of interpersonal (and by extension, human-animal) relations.

#### STICK LIQUID OR STICK WATER: THE VISCOUS LIQUID LEFT IN THE RENDERING TANK AFTER COOKING PROCESS

Because remembering could be loose like interpersonal relations, I am only a citizen. Nothing is required of me. Certain things. Maybe speaking. This doesn't have to be speaking. Under speaking. Low. Down. Under speaking.<sup>53</sup>

If ecopoetics listens to animal sounds, this poetry seems to say, it is for the noise of human relations, not for signals from another world. And yet the poet invokes the "under speaking" of a communication that is not language. John Clare's verse may begin with the song of the nightingale, but it ends in the madhouse. If the delight of Les Murray's "Lyre Bird" lies in its vertiginous mimicry of the "Tailed mimic aeon-sent to intrigue the next recorder", its instruction remains, how "I alter nothing. Real to real only I sing":

Liar made of leaf-litter . . .  
Tailed mimic aeon-sent to intrigue the next recorder,  
I mew catbird, I saw crosscut, I howl she-dingo, I kink  
forest hush distinct with bellbirds, warble magpie garble, link  
cattlebell with kettle-boil; I rank ducks' cranky presidium  
or simulate a triller like a rill mirrored lyrical to a rim.  
I ring dim. I alter nothing. Real to real only I sing [...]<sup>54</sup>

Luhmann's shorthand for the paradoxical structure of consciousness is that "humans can't communicate"<sup>55</sup>, which seems to assume that consciousness is a human attribute. If we remove this premise (and simply affirm that consciousness doesn't communicate) or if we expand our definition of "human" (as in animist cultures, where to be human is to have a point of view, regardless of physical attributes<sup>56</sup>) the structure of the observation holds. Lyrebird is catbird, saw, dingo, forest hush, bellbird, magpie, cattlebell, kettle-boil, duck, triller; we can participate in lyrebird's fascination with these sounds, to the point where lyrebird tells more than our carefully constructed 'nature' narratives about the forest –



as in David Attenborough's famous lyrebird episode, where the lyrebird brings camera shutter and chainsaw sounds back into the frame.<sup>57</sup> Nevertheless, the information does not resolve a message. Consciousness can't communicate, only adjust itself, but it is through that very adjustment and increasing points of contact in the environment that communication happens, as a kind of *resonance* – one that it takes a posthumanist ear to detect.<sup>58</sup> "To know the humpback song", writes David Rothenberg, "is to feel its resonance and its power, and to fathom a reason for its shape and its form"<sup>59</sup>. Jane Bennett, in her pursuit of a theory of vital materiality uses "resonance" to describe how various actants assemble: "In nonlinear assemblages, 'effects' resonate with and against their 'causes,' such that the impact of any added element [...] cannot be grasped at a glance".<sup>60</sup>

The posthumanist ear, I argue, takes in *both* the Sex Pistols and Brian Eno, both the screeching of the emergency brake and *The Song of the Humpback Whale*, both Ariana Reines's conceptual unmasking of the gendered landscape of slaughterhouses and Les Murray's expressive mimicry of the mimic "Lyre Bird". The posthumanist ear turns to poetry for its sonic techniques, for how its prosody amplifies the ways in which human language renders the nonhuman world. Poets emphasize our uncanny relationship to language, as always at least partially exterior to consciousness and culture, a prosthetic by which ideas and affect get around. Poetry, despite its role in anchoring a humanist narrative about culture, is well positioned to sound the "ahuman" qualities of this language.<sup>61</sup> What communicates through language, but not only through language, in an ecological sense can only be, as Luhmann suggests, a communication of ignorance.<sup>62</sup> Of course the relationships that subtend these communications are unequal (between disciplines, groups of humans, humans and other animals), and traversed by power structures that both channel and limit resonance. Any significant change in these relationships threatens the communication – or, conversely, something more violent than resonance may be necessary to effect change. It may be that invoking 'resonance' or 'ignorance' (like the supposedly self-regulating homeostases of 'Gaia') is just another appeal to magic; even worse, such an appeal may 'greenwash' our ears, encouraging acquiescence with the business as usual models of 'sustainable development'. We also need the howls of refusal that eco-consciousness

brings to these communications, the disturbances that shake apart entrenched habits of sounding: we need both 'fracktivism' and activism.

When we withdraw (from) our fascination with the vibrant matter of a more than human world, however, when we bind our ears to the enchantment of sound, bird, insect or whale song, when we turn away from the brightly patterned worlds of sexual selection, because we fear our fascination can make us communicating vessels for compromising power structures, we limit possibility. The withdrawal of media from communication, and reduction of information to message or critique, also leaves entrenched power structures in place. Life continues, fending for itself. Here I have focused largely on how sound, and especially the acousmatic object of recorded sound, what Hildegard Westerkamp calls the "naked" ear of the microphone<sup>63</sup>, connects us to, at the same time that it disconnects us from the environment, offering a texture for what poet Nathaniel Mackey calls forms of "discrepant engagement".<sup>64</sup> In the "sand-anointed wind [that] spoke of / survival", a landscape of "blown/ rush, thrown voice, legbone/ flute", Nathaniel Mackey's poem "Sound and Semblance" sounds "a new mood suddenly, blue/ but uptempo./ parsed, bitten into".<sup>65</sup> This "new mood" invokes the dissonances and gapped rhythms of free jazz, accenting "fissure, fracture, incongruity, the rickety, imperfect fit between word and world". Mackey's poetry amplifies this "creaking of the word . . . the noise upon which the word is based". In its power to disturb, stimulate, and irritate, noise sounds the gap between message and information, consciousness and communication, provoking adjustments in the contact between systems, coaxing new orders of "identity and signification"<sup>66</sup>.

With Bruno Latour's critique of "Nature" and his call for a multi-disciplinary sounding of the "tangled objects"<sup>67</sup> of (small s) science, as with Cary's Wolfe's emphases on "the estranging prostheticity and exteriority of communication" in the context of disciplinary specificity<sup>68</sup>, I hear a case for listening to animal vocalizations as poetry (or 'songs') and for listening to poetry as acoustic ecology, for poetics as a site for interdisciplinary if not cross-species resonance. I would sound the acousmatic object, modeled so concisely by the sound recordist's microphone, for a prosody emerging from the necessity of the other.<sup>69</sup> Listening can be understood as a stance of participatory receptiveness, as much as an aural faculty (we can 'listen' with our eyes or 'sound' with science). Listening also means not subordinating poetry as a mode of

thought – signaled through creative-critical formulations explored here, such as Mackey's "discrepant engagement", Dickinson's "resonance", Johnson's "repercussion", O'Sullivan's "mattering of matter" – to a 'prior' critical formulation.

Jacques Derrida urges us to deconstruct the singular "animal" – that criminal "confounding of all non-human beings under the common and general category of the animal"<sup>70</sup>. As a protest, Derrida's *Ecce animot* lodges the humanist's cogito acoustically, between animals ("animaux") and word ("mot").<sup>71</sup> Or, as Giorgio Agamben writes,

if the caesura between the human and the animal passes first of all within man, then it is the very question of man—and of 'humanism'—that must be posed in a new way. . . . What is man, if he is always the place—and, at the same time, the result—of ceaseless divisions and caesurae?<sup>72</sup>

These are the divisions, the discrepant engagements, the segments and caesurae that poetry animals, in different ways, ceaselessly scan. "Loue is blynd alday and may nat see", wrote Chaucer<sup>73</sup>; how easily fascination turns to love, singers croon. Indeed, in the very blindness (and deafness) of our fascination with the material events of life, we multiply points of contact. It is in our disconnections that we connect – to participate in a dawn chorus or refrain, to resonate with other disciplines, to amplify noise in the system, as we face the challenge human success presents all life on earth – to act in critically and materially meaningful ways for other life forms, to finally "call the pulsing home":

*when your animal is brought back*  
*you*  
*too*  
*water & ice & leaves & snow become*  
*you*  
*too*  
*Day Door Sky & Sing*  
*you*  
*too*  
*scald & crow down ink*  
*you*  
*too*

*stiffen swoop on ridge*  
*you*  
*too*  
*topple turn hills many more turns*  
*you*  
*too*  
*the Beasts to the rain not the Birds do another*  
*you*  
*too*  
*call the Pulsing home.*<sup>74</sup>

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Luhmann (1994:375).
- <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 376.
- <sup>3</sup> O'Sullivan (1993:17)
- <sup>4</sup> Luhmann (1994:375)
- <sup>5</sup> *Earth House Hold* is the title of Gary Snyder's 1969 collection of "Technical Notes & Queries" (New York: New Directions).
- <sup>6</sup> Snyder (1990:22).
- <sup>7</sup> Dickinson (1955:1011-1012).
- <sup>8</sup> Farr (2005:39-70).
- <sup>9</sup> Dickinson (1955:1010).
- <sup>10</sup> Roubaud (1994) [1986]:274). The translation is my own.
- <sup>11</sup> O'Sullivan (1993:41).
- <sup>12</sup> Bernstein (2011).
- <sup>13</sup> O'Sullivan (2003:65).
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.
- <sup>15</sup> O'Sullivan (1993:43).
- <sup>16</sup> Zukofsky (1978:138).
- <sup>17</sup> Tsur (1992:18).
- <sup>18</sup> McCaffery (1998:160).
- <sup>19</sup> Niedecker (2002:263).
- <sup>20</sup> Bernstein (2009:144).
- <sup>21</sup> McCaffery (1998:160). See also McCaffery's performance of "Carnival" at the Instal 09 festival in Glasgow:

- <[https://youtu.be/Z5sB\\_YvvSS4?list=PL711942F2263A094D](https://youtu.be/Z5sB_YvvSS4?list=PL711942F2263A094D)> (Accessed 24 May 2017.)
- <sup>22</sup> Bernstein (2009:148).
- <sup>23</sup> Payne (1979).
- <sup>24</sup> Rothenberg (2008:9).
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 17-23. Payne. *Songs of the Humpback Whale*. Album. CRM Records, 1970.
- <sup>26</sup> <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0WOjJlYnHgM>> (Accessed 24 May 2017.)
- <sup>27</sup> Murray Schafer (1977:118).
- <sup>28</sup> Morton (2007:204).
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.
- <sup>31</sup> Melville (1930 [1851]:615).
- <sup>32</sup> Morton (2007:187).
- <sup>33</sup> See Jupiter Research Foundation's Wave Glider-Hydrophone Project. Web. 24 May 2017 <<http://jupiterfoundation.org/projects.shtml>>.
- <sup>34</sup> Lucier (1970). "Quasimodo, The Great Lover." With Matt Rogalsky, Laura Cameron et al. *Transnational Ecologies 1: Sounds Travel Project*. Institute of Geography, University of Edinburgh, 10 May 2007. <<https://mattrogalsky.bandcamp.com/track/quasimodo-the-great-lover-alvin-lucier>> (Accessed 24 May 2017.) See also Kahn (2013:167-169).
- <sup>35</sup> Johnson (1985-1986:2).
- <sup>36</sup> Johnson (2013 [1996]:51).
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.
- <sup>38</sup> Skinner (2008:397-420).
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 106-107.
- <sup>40</sup> O'Leary (1996:50).
- <sup>41</sup> Herbert (1972:85).
- <sup>42</sup> Oliveiros (2005:27).
- <sup>43</sup> Wolfe (2010:120).
- <sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.
- <sup>45</sup> Rothenberg (2008:248-249). Rothenberg (2008) "The Far Field." *Whale Music*.
- <sup>46</sup> Payne (1979).
- <sup>47</sup> Deleuze and Guattari (1987 [1980]:310-350).
- <sup>48</sup> Schafer (1977: 90-91).
- <sup>49</sup> Attali (1985).
- <sup>50</sup> Robertson (2012:55-70)
- <sup>51</sup> Morton (2007:196).
- <sup>52</sup> Reines (2006:63).
- <sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.
- <sup>54</sup> Les Murray (1993:21).

- <sup>55</sup> Luhmann (1994:371).
- <sup>56</sup> Viveiros de Castro (1998:447).
- <sup>57</sup> Attenborough (2007). "Bird Sounds From The Lyre Bird." *BBC Wildlife*. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VjE0Kdfos4Y>> Accessed 24 May 2017.
- <sup>58</sup> Luhmann (1995) [1984]:37).
- <sup>59</sup> Rothenberg (2008:132).
- <sup>60</sup> Bennet (2010:42).
- <sup>61</sup> Wolfe (2010:119).
- <sup>62</sup> Luhmann (1998 [1992]).
- <sup>63</sup> Westerkamp (2001:148).
- <sup>64</sup> Mackey (1993:19-21).
- <sup>65</sup> Mackey (2006:55-56).
- <sup>66</sup> Mackey (1993:19).
- <sup>67</sup> Latour (2004:22).
- <sup>68</sup> Wolfe (2010:119).
- <sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.
- <sup>70</sup> Derrida (2008:48).
- <sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.
- <sup>72</sup> Agamben (2004:16).
- <sup>73</sup> Chaucer. "The Merchant's Tale." line 385.
- <sup>74</sup> O'Sullivan (1993:17).

#### *Works Cited*

- Agamben, Giorgio (2004). *The Open, Man and Animal*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Attali, Jacques (1985). *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Bennett, Jane (2010). *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Bernstein, Charles (2009). "Hearing Voices." *The Sound of Poetry, the Poetry of Sound*. Eds. Marjorie Perloff and Craig Dworkin. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press
- (2011) "Colliderings: O'Sullivan's Medleyed Verse." *The Salt Companion to Maggie O'Sullivan*. Ed. Ken Edwards. Cambridge: Salt Publishing
- Buell, Lawrence (1995). *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

- Castro, Eduardo Viveiros de (1998). "Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism." *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*. 4.3, 469-488.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari (1987) [1980]. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press.
- Derrida, Jacques (2008). *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. Trans. David Wills. New York : Fordham University Press.
- Descola, Philippe (2005). *Par-delà nature et culture*. Paris: Ed. Gallimard.
- Dickinson, Emily (1955). *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Ed. Thomas H. Johnson. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Farr, Judith (2005). *The Gardens of Emily Dickinson*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Feld, Steven (1982). *Sound and Sentiment: Birds, Weeping, Poetics, and Song in Kaluli Expression*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Johnson, Ronald (1985-86). "The Planting of the Rod of Aaron." *Northern Lights Studies in Creativity* 2, 2.
- (2013) [1996]. *ARK*. Chicago, Flood Editions.
- Kahn, Douglas (2013). *Earth Sound Earth Signal: Energies and Earth Magnitude in the Arts*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Latour, Bruno (2004). *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*. Trans. Catherine Porter. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Luhmann, Niklas (1994). "How Can the Mind Participate in Communication?" *Materialities of Communication*. Ed. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and K. Ludwig Pfeiffer. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- (1995 [1984]). *Social Systems*. Trans. John Bednarz, Jr. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- (1998 [1992]) *Observations on Modernity*. Trans. William Whobrey. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Mackey, Nathaniel (1993). *Discrepant Engagement: Dissonance, Cross-Culturality, and Experimental Writing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- (2006) *Splay Anthem*. NY: New Directions.
- McCaffery, Steve (1998). "Voice in Extremis." *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word*. Ed. Charles Bernstein. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Melville, Herman (1930). *Moby Dick*. New York: Modern Library.
- Morton, Timothy (2007). *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Murray, Les (1993). *Translations from the Natural World*. Manchester, UK: Carcanet.
- Niedecker, Lorine (2002). *Lorine Niedecker: Collected Works*, ed. Jenny Penberthy. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- O'Leary, Peter (1996). "An Interview with Ronald Johnson." *Chicago Review* 42.2, 32-53.
- Oliveiros, Pauline (2005). *Deep Listening: A Composer's Sound Practice*. New York: iUniverse, Inc.
- O'Sullivan, Maggie (1993). *In the House of the Shaman*. London: Reality Street Editions.
- (2003) *Palace of Reptiles*. Willowdale, ON: The Gig.
- Payne, Roger. (1979). "Humpbacks: Their Mysterious Songs." *National Geographic* 155.1 Jan., 18-25.
- Perloff, Marjorie, and Craig Dworkin (2009). *The Sound of Poetry, the Poetry of Sound*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Reines, Ariana (2006). *The Cow*. Albany, NY: Fence Books.
- Robertson, Lisa (2012). *Nilling*. Toronto: BookThug.
- Rothenberg, David (1997) "Music from Nature: The Terra Nova CD." *Terra Nova* 2.3, 121-137.
- (2008). *Thousand Mile Song: Whale Music in a Sea of Sound*. New York: Basic Books.
- Roubaud, Jacques (1994 [1986]). *La Fleur Inverse: L'Art des Troubadours*. Paris: p
- Russcol, Herbert (1972). *The Liberation of Sound: An Introduction to Electronic Music*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall.
- Schafer, R. Murray (1977). *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*. Rochester, VT: Destiny Books.
- Skinner, Jonathan (2008). "Upper Limit Tu-Whit: Ronald Johnson's Field Guide Poetries." *Ronald Johnson: Life and Works*. Ed. Joel Bettridge and Eric Murphy Selinger. Orono, ME: The National Poetry Foundation.
- Snyder, Gary (1969). *Earth House Hold*. New York: New Directions.
- (1990). *The Practice of the Wild*. New York: North Point Press.
- Tsur, Reuven (1992). *What Makes Sound Patterns Expressive?: The Poetic Mode of Speech Perception*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo (1998). "Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism." *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*. 4.3, 469-488.
- Westerkamp, Hildegard (2001). "Speaking from Inside the Soundscape." *The Book of Music and Nature*. Ed. David Rothenberg and Marta Ulvaeus.
- Wolfe, Cary (2010). *What is Posthumanism?* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Zukofsky, Louis (1978). "A." Berkeley: University of California Press.