



# Toward an Ethological Poetics

## The Transgression of Genre and the Poetry of the Albert's Lyrebird

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**Abstract** In an attempt to respond to the West's general obliviousness to nonhuman semiosis, this article proposes a method for appreciating nonhuman poetics. By combining the critical tools of poetics and literary theory with insights from ethology and biosemiotics, Stuart Cooke outlines a method of criticism for nonhuman creative compositions. Drawing on the work of Gerald Bruns, Elizabeth Grosz, and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Cooke begins by theorizing a poetics that attends to the ecology of forces that produce, and are produced by, a work rather than the intentions of a single artist. Cooke proposes that an ethological poetics emphasizes the expressive capacity of materials across a range of written, musical, visual, and performative structures. By studying these expressive forces, Cooke argues, we can extend our appreciation of art and poetics into multispecies domains. The challenge is not to focus on the "meaning" or intention of nonhuman artworks but to study their disruptive, and exciting, forces. The third part of the essay is a case study of an Australian songbird, the Albert's lyrebird, whose remarkable performance Cooke reads in terms of an ethological poetics. Producing an operatic complex of song, instrumentation, dance, and stage design, the male lyrebird's composition is thoroughly entangled with the flora and fauna of his *umwelt*. Resistant to categorization by any generic label, Cooke argues that the lyrebird's composition is best approached in the terms of transgressive, avant-garde performative and sound poetics—although it escapes such terms, thinking about the bird's composition in this way compels us into a relation with its territory.

**Keywords** ethological poetics, nonhuman art, Albert's lyrebird, ecopoetics, zoopoetics

"All genres are destroyed at last . . ."

—Michael Farrell, "A Lyrebird"

### A Poetics Prior to Form

In this essay I outline a path toward an ethological poetics, or the study of nonhuman creative forms. An ethological poetics, I argue, shifts focus from the (human) subject

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who creates and/or perceives the work of art and decides, on this basis, whether or not it is art, to the object itself, and its capacity to generate sensation. As in much ethological study, the observation of such sensation, the notation of its affective powers, is also central to an ethological poetics. However, where a more properly scientific ethology would seek the regularities, predictabilities, and consistencies in an animal's behavior, an ethological poetics is interested in the impact, or the capacity to catalyze relation, of the animal's expression. "Art addresses not matter's regular features as science does, but its expressive qualities, its 'aesthetic' resources," writes Elizabeth Grosz.<sup>1</sup> Art, as we will see, frames the earth in order to harness and release these resources; once released, the energies are freed of the species-specific categories that a scientific grid might otherwise impose on them. Thus, the territory of an artwork is not cleanly separated from others, but is a field full of affective, multispecies relations. Accordingly, an ethological poetics recognizes similarities of form across different scales and modes of existence. To human ears, bird and whale songs might appear to belong to completely different categories of expression, for example, but when their recordings are slowed down and sped up respectively, similar patterns of organization will often emerge.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, however, much of human analytical practice is predicated on the discovery of difference, and on the ignoring of similarities, between individual units (be they poems, songs, or organisms).<sup>3</sup> In response, an ethological poetics emphasizes synonymy and acknowledges that affect can cross species lines. As I argue in the third section of this essay, there is no better example of such synonymy than in the poetics of the Albert's lyrebird.

Poetics is a multispecies affair. To talk of art in this context is not to talk about a single end point—be it a painting, a poem, or a recording—but rather to imagine a complex system in which, depending on the circumstances, different constellations might form at different times. The *forces* in such systems, therefore, rather than the categorical status of a material object, are key to this poetics, or the processes by which the art is made. In turn, the focus of analysis becomes the work's *affective capacity*, or the study of those observable forces that the work releases. Such analysis parallels that of observational disciplines like anthropology. For Gerald Bruns, perhaps the most eminent anthropologist of poetics, even the most apparently unintelligible or nonsemantic poetry (such as sound poetry) will not remain so if approached "with the kind of openness and responsibility that anthropologists bring to the strangeness of alien cultures."<sup>4</sup> "Alien cultures," however, need not only be human: anthropological poetics can also be ethological poetics.

If ethology involves the study of affects, or "the composition of relations or capacities between different things,"<sup>5</sup> then a door into the worlds of nonhuman poetics

1. Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art*, 61.

2. Rothenberg, *Thousand Mile Song*, 16.

3. Sherry, *Oops!*, 40.

4. Bruns, *Material of Poetry*, 11.

5. Buchanan, *Onto-ethologies*, 160.

can open. We can now turn, via Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, to the Australian bowerbird:

Every morning a bird of the Australian rainforests cuts leaves, makes them fall to the ground, and turns them over so that the paler, internal side contrasts with the earth. In this way it constructs a stage for itself like a ready-made; and directly above, on a creeper or a branch, while fluffing out the feathers beneath its beak to reveal their yellow roots, it sings a complex song made up from its own notes and, at intervals, those of other birds that it imitates: it is a complete artist. . . . Postures and colours are always being introduced into refrains: bowing low, straightening up, dancing in a circle and lines of colours.<sup>6</sup>

Deleuze and Guattari's bowerbird is "a complete artist," whose works produce various sensations—of song, color, posture, design—that together "sketch out a total work of art."<sup>7</sup> The bowerbird's composition can only be understood reductively if we insist on assigning it a generic category. Instead, such art is best theorized in terms of a poetics prior to form, or a process in which the artist "constructs a stage" with whatever materials are at hand or are of interest. As Vinciane Despret writes:

We are therefore dealing with a scene, a staging [*mise en scène*], and a truly multi-modal artistic composition: a sophisticated architecture, an aesthetic balance, a creation of illusions designed to produce effects, and a choreography that concludes the work—in short . . . a *poetry of movement*.<sup>8</sup>

For the purposes of this discussion, I will follow Grosz in referring to creative practices as methods of "enframing," where the resultant, framed form is a "territory." Here, the "frame" of a territory marks the ground on or within which the art work occurs. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari, Grosz writes that the frame delineates a portion "of the chaos that is the earth" to create a territory.<sup>9</sup> "With no frame or boundary there can be no territory," therefore, "and without territory there may be objects or things but not qualities that can become expressive, that can intensify [into art]."<sup>10</sup> The territory is the "language" of the artwork, being composed of various materials with which the work expresses its sensations; the territory "is an external synthesis, a bricolage," writes Grosz, "of geographical elements, environmental characteristics, material features, shifted and reorganised fragments from a number of milieus."<sup>11</sup> In order to define itself from the region in which it is composed, a territory "breaks away" from its milieu(s)

6. Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, 184.

7. Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, 184.

8. Despret, *What Would Animals Say If We Asked the Right Questions?*, 117 (emphasis in original).

9. Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art*, 11.

10. Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art*, 11.

11. Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art*, 47.

with a flourish of excessive expression.<sup>12</sup> Crucially, as we see with the bowerbird, there is no universal technique for the production of territory, or territorialization: “Each form of life, and each cultural form, undertakes its own modes of organization, its own connections of body and earth.”<sup>13</sup> Just as important, artist and territory are bound in symbiotic cycles of instauration, in which, as Despret points out: “The artist is not the cause of the work and . . . the work alone is not its own cause.” Within these cycles, the artist has a particular responsibility, “the responsibility of one who hosts, who collects, who prepares, who explores the form of the work.”<sup>14</sup> The artist’s responsibility is to attend to the materials of the frame.

As there are innumerable materials and methods for territorial production, so it is also the case that “every territory encompasses or cuts across the territories of other species.”<sup>15</sup> Deleuze and Guattari articulate these territorial linkages as instances of counterpoint, or relationships between two or more independent things. The male bowerbird’s complex music, for example, has its own, internal relationships of harmonic counterpoint, which can also be found in the music of other birds (indeed, the bowerbird uses elements of their songs in his own compositions). Furthermore,

the spider’s web contains “a very subtle portrait of the fly,” which serves as its own counterpoint. On the death of the mollusk, the shell that serves as its house becomes the counterpoint of the hermit crab that turns it into its own habitat . . . The tick is organically constructed in such a way that it finds its counterpoint in any mammal whatever that passes below its branch, as oak leaves arranged in the form of tiles find their counterpoint in the raindrops that stream over them.

What the above examples illustrate for Deleuze and Guattari is “not a teleological conception” of nature but rather “a melodic one in which we no longer know what is art and what nature.”<sup>16</sup> Nature, like art, is an ongoing combination and recombination of compounds, of de-/re-/territorialization, of “finite melodic compounds and the great infinite plane of composition, the small and large refrain.”<sup>17</sup> In simpler terms, while the aesthetic territories of different species can no doubt be extremely different, it is also the case that the affective power of one creature’s particular mode of enframing can be experienced by many other forms of life, so much so that enframing might be fundamental to ecological function. David Rothenberg’s summation, from a different theoretical position but nevertheless in a similarly ethological context, is useful here:

12. Buchanan, *Onto-ethologies*, 178.

13. Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art*, 16.

14. Despret, *What Would Animals Say If We Asked the Right Questions?*, 121.

15. Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, 185.

16. Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, 185.

17. Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, 186.

Each living species is unique, but we are still all bound by the same cycles. Birth, experience, love, mating, travel, death. Each one of these phases can be expressed! Raw emotion leads to bird song and also to human art of all kinds. Something needs to be released, and what comes out is often wonderful.<sup>18</sup>

However, despite my discussion of dissolved genre distinctions, I will keep referring to the concept of poetry in this essay. In conceptualizing “art” in its broadest possible sense, I prefer to speak of “poetry,” particularly in the case of the Albert’s lyrebird that follows, because, first, the term is slightly less abstract than “art” and, second, it implies a wider range of semantic and nonsemantic qualities than Western notions of painting or music do;<sup>19</sup> poetry is “protosemantic,” to use a term of Bruns’s. Indeed, Bruns’s extended definition of poetry is especially helpful. First, he argues that “poetry is made of words but not of what we use words to produce.” Poems may indeed have meanings, propositions, narratives, and emotional resonance, but the poetry itself is in excess of these functional features. Poetry, then, is territory, or a synthesis of forces that causes it to break away from its milieu. Second, poetry “is not necessarily made of words but is rooted in . . . sounds produced by the human voice” (for the purposes of this essay we can remove the word *human* to allow for all kinds of voices). Accordingly, poetry includes the domain of performance or body art, “where the body becomes the machine or vestibule of gratuitous expenditures of energy.” Finally, “poetry does not occupy a realm of its own,” but depends on a cultural and ontological “intimacy” with beings and things; it is by evoking these relations that poetry accrues its power. That power—that territorial affect—ensures that the poem “is as objective, and thus as resistant to interpretation, as any event of nature.”<sup>20</sup> That the poem might not be readily transparent or intelligible is a crucial concept in theorizing a wholly unfamiliar poetics. The poem is an event; therefore, the main question to ask is not “‘What is it?’ or ‘What does it mean?’” but ‘How does it occur?’”<sup>21</sup>

Consequently, in much contemporary poetry, particularly in those more performative and theatrical variations, distinctions between sound poetry and acoustical art, for example, or between concrete poetry and conceptual or abstract art, are hard to determine. Poetry “ceases to be a genre distinction” and instead denotes a reformulation of forces, of what we thought was possible: the poem is “an event that shuts down, or even breaks down, the cognitive mechanisms or defences by which we process or filter

18. Rothenberg, *Why Birds Sing*, 140.

19. See chap. 1 in Ingold, *Lines*. As opposed to the semantically rich vocal music of ancient Greece or the Middle Ages, in the modern era, Ingold argues, Western music in its purest form came to be regarded “as song *without* words, ideally instrumental rather than vocal” (8).

20. Bruns, *Material of Poetry*, 7–9.

21. Bruns, *Material of Poetry*, 29. Bruns’s explication of a philosophical poetics accords closely with Deleuze and Guattari’s nomadological metaphysics: “We know nothing about a body until we know what it can do.” Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus*, 284.

our experiences.”<sup>22</sup> Here, what we might have thought of as central to poetry—the cognitive reception of semantic meaning—recedes to the background. Instead, we are defining a cluster of expressive tensions between elements in a field; we veer toward a sense of what the material of poetry *does*, rather than worrying only about what it might [not] mean, enabling “matter to become expressive . . . to resonate and become more than itself.”<sup>23</sup> But the disruption of a reader’s cognition is not a simple dissolution into chaos. Rather, the poem, like any artwork, regulates and organizes its materials in unpredictable or uncontrollable ways; art is only “the creation of forms through which these materials come to intensify and generate sensation”<sup>24</sup>—forms are produced, in other words, but they need not be ours or for us. Crucially, sensations are more than semantic; indeed, they are more than human. What Bruns calls the poem’s “objectivity” is dependent on the intensity of these sensations; as Deleuze and Guattari write, sensations

are *beings* whose validity lies in themselves and exceeds any lived. They could be said to exist in the absence of man because man, as he is caught in stone, on the canvas, or by words, is himself a compound of percepts and affects. The work of art is a being of sensation and nothing else: it exists in itself.<sup>25</sup>

The abundance of examples of art in the natural world—those myriad forms of song, performance, and inscription in avian, mammalian, and insect species—are examples of energetic excess, of sensation breaking free of a milieu and forming an affective territory. For Grosz, such territories produce surprise, encouraging engagement not in “a homeostatic relation of stabilization” but rather a “fundamentally dynamic, awkward, mal-adaptation that enables the production of the frivolous, the unnecessary, the pleasing.” It is in such a way that life elaborates on itself, by intensifying sensation into new, not necessarily *necessary*, forms.<sup>26</sup> Art is an extension of nature’s “architectural imperative to organize the space of the earth”:

This roots art not in the creativity of mankind but rather in a superfluosity of nature, in the capacity of the earth to render the sensory superabundant, in the bird’s courtship song and dance, or in the field of lilies swaying in the breeze under a blue sky.<sup>27</sup>

Indeed, form can emerge not only within human and nonhuman worlds, but also across these worlds, as Eduardo Kohn illustrates in a variety of “complex multispecies

22. Bruns, *Material of Poetry*, 36.

23. Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art*, 4.

24. Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art*, 4.

25. Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, 164.

26. Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art*, 6–7.

27. Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art*, 10.

associations” in the Amazon.<sup>28</sup> Invariably, an awareness of multispecies poetics prioritizes the iconicity of such forms over their meaning. An iconic reading will focus on the shapes, gestures, and possible movements of a language.<sup>29</sup> In contrast, by looking “through words rather than at them,” alphabetic systems function as if language were invisible;<sup>30</sup> the appalling consequence of such systems, of course, is that any language, human or otherwise, that cannot be seen “through” is rendered both invisible and silent.

To recover gestural qualities in human language, alphabetic systems of reading are read “through” so that words themselves can be looked “at.” Drawing on Francis Ponge, Bruns remarks:

Words are not the ideal objects they are said to be in logic, linguistics, and philosophy of language; they are *things* made of sounds, letters, and diacritical marks but also of bits and pieces of other words . . . that are embedded historically in heterogeneous contexts of usage.<sup>31</sup> (my emphasis)

As boundaries between words are confused by this pastiche of historical exchange, any “meanings” we ascribe to them are also shared and complicated. So, “meanings are weights that time attaches to a word, which is irreducible to a concept or any sort of mental entity.”<sup>32</sup> What is foremost in poetry, therefore, instead of clear meanings, is the *material* of language, that complex assemblage of entangled gestures and inscriptions. To highlight this material, Bruns draws on postulates from the North American objectivist tradition, where the poem is figured as a thing in itself rather than a vehicle for something (such as a “meaning”) that follows “behind.” Consequently, the “character” of the poet is no longer central to our analysis, because the poem is an object, in that it “takes its place side by side with the things that it employs for its material,” rather than being primarily a mirror of the poet’s self or experience. The poet is like a sculptor, then: his or her poetics is of materialization, of sculpture; words are the poet’s materials. Words do not provide an “ocularcentric” transparency through which things can be examined, but are themselves things: “Nature does not describe things or refer to them; it provides for their existence—and poems are among their number.”<sup>33</sup> If we invoke a vast, multispecies field on which all manner of territories can be created, we approach something akin to Bruns’s “anarchic” poetics, where “anything goes” within limits imposed by historical conditions, which themselves are “undergoing continuous

28. Kohn, *How Forests Think*, 186.

29. Moe, *Zoopoetics*, 7. For Aaron M. Moe, iconic readings can reveal the crucial roles that animals play in human poetics.

30. Moe, *Zoopoetics*, 7–8.

31. Bruns, *Material of Poetry*, 83.

32. Bruns, *Material of Poetry*, 83.

33. Bruns, *Material of Poetry*, 88–9.

and unpredictable extension.”<sup>34</sup> For Bruns (as for Grosz, and Deleuze and Guattari), poetic composition is limited only by the capacity of the earth to release and re-form sensation at any given moment. As critics and scholars, our task is to follow the lines that lead to the composition’s emergence.

### Asemic Proposals

I have outlined a conception of poetry that is purposefully evasive, in which poetry involves a consumption of itself, or a dissolution of one mode of expression into new and unpredictable forms. Indeed, for Bruns, poems occupy Maurice Blanchot’s dimension of nonidentity, or they are interesting for what they are *not*:

Poetry is not a species of speaking; it is writing (*l’écriture*) “outside of language”—that is, writing that interrupts or detours the discursive processes of nomination, predication, assertion, narration, expression, consecutive reasoning, systematic construction, and so on.<sup>35</sup>

In its belligerent derailing of the normative functions of the very material it occupies, the poem is a willingness to go anywhere, to be anything, while also a refusal to *be* (as an ontologically static category). I am interested in how poetry therefore articulates the earth’s imperceptible forces, which are beyond life’s control but which also “animate and extend life beyond itself”;<sup>36</sup> here, poetry is the ongoing conceptualization and reconceptualization of such forces. “If poetry has a purpose,” writes Bruns, “it is to keep history . . . from coming to an end.”<sup>37</sup> Indeed, Bruns suggests that we ourselves could become poems by practicing these same processes of reinvention; in the third section I will show how the Albert’s lyrebird has mastered such reinvention.

In part, my conception of an ethological poetics is inspired by the work of poet and scholar Angela Rawlings on “asemic writing,” or “literary composition comprised of illegible script.” In an expansive online multimedia work entitled *Gibber*, produced after traveling along the Queensland coast, Rawlings proposes the possibility of an asemic criticism of writing authored by creatures such as sand bubbler crabs, kites, flowers, and various, apparently lifeless objects. Rawlings doesn’t claim to understand the writing, but relies instead on “a notion” that communicative processes are occurring, and on her attentiveness to the formal qualities of the texts. Her criteria emphasize synonymy between scales and modes of existence:

Certainly, there were forms, lines in repetition. Something imposed on top of another (instead of ink on paper, here we have barnacles on rocks, fungi on bark, paths forged through sand). Distinct forms linked with other forms.

34. Bruns, *Material of Poetry*, 104.

35. Bruns, *Material of Poetry*, 106.

36. Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art*, 23.

37. Bruns, *Material of Poetry*, 113.



Rawlings's interest in the interpretation of nonhuman forms isn't to do with what she terms the "ethically spurious" assumption that such forms are "passive." Rather, she is interested in how the environment *actively* composes texts, which humans might read not in order "to comprehend what is composed," but to relish a state of incomprehension. Of course, comprehension might occur, but it is secondary to the main aim: our engagement with expressive, more-than-human life. Thus, asemic reading invites "a poethical repositioning," in which anthropocentric readings are complemented and even eroded by an acknowledgement that "biotic and abiotic entities are capable agents for communication." Rawlings's driving questions—Must writing be understood as a human activity? What qualifies as a writing instrument or surface?—lead her to postulate a virtual world in which signifiers explode the human languages that use them. In this "dream," she writes, landscapes are populated and inscribed with asemic writing, and all manner of bodies, "be they human, water, weather, other," are capable of ongoing composition. As the rest of *Gibber* demonstrates, however, this dream touches everywhere upon the real.<sup>38</sup>

Even in its most conservative envisioning, the written poem is already a confluence of a variety of different artistic traditions. In its formal, rhythmic orders we can hear vestiges of song; in its typography is a long history of inscription and design; in the semantic potential of the poem, the way in which it assigns value and describes qualities, there is also the ancient, Orphic practice of establishing regional relations through language. When we remove the human hand from its production, however, the variety of forces that might have otherwise clustered in the musical, typographical, and environmental features of a written poem might flow off in all kinds of other directions. In human terms, the poem's closest cousin would be the song, but Charles Darwin himself recognized how arbitrary the mouth is as a source for language, since it is only one of the locations on a body capable of generating language.<sup>39</sup> As Tim Ingold points out, central to all forms of writing is not the visual representation of verbal enunciation but rather the relation between these inscriptions and the *gestures* that produced them. Writing is, in other words, "the enduring trace of a dextrous manual movement."<sup>40</sup> The ancestry of writing is in movement and, more specifically, in the precision of certain gestures.

Where poetic form is a mimetic representation, iconicity turns from the meanings of words to focus on "a word's shape, gestures and therefore [its] implied movement."<sup>41</sup> Aaron Moe's zoopoetics project, following George A. Kennedy's powerful contention that humans and other animals "share a 'deep' universal rhetoric" of body language,<sup>42</sup>

38. See Rawlings, "Asemic Writing."

39. Moe, *Zoopoetics*, 17.

40. Ingold, *Lines*, 27–28.

41. Moe, *Zoopoetics*, 7.

42. George A. Kennedy, cited in Moe, *Zoopoetics*, 8.

argues that the speech of different species emerged from what Kennedy calls a common “genus”; inherent to all animal expression is “the energy of gestures, inflections, bodily movement and gesticulations.”<sup>43</sup> Emergent in Moe’s *Zoopoetics*, therefore, are the processes by which forces can accumulate and find expression in the bodies of many different creatures; the iconic representation is a label for, or a crystallization of, such forces, or a form of expression that reveals the “universal rhetoric” from which it is composed. “All art begins with the animal,” writes Grosz, where the animal is a conjunction of body, force, and territory;<sup>44</sup> quite literally, then, Moe’s zoopoetics allows us to attend to animals as “makers”:

They make texts. They gesture. They vocalize. The sounds and vocalizations emerge from a rhetorical body, a poetic body, or rather a body that is able to *make*.<sup>45</sup>

Emphasizing the role of gesticulation allows Moe to envision continuities in poetics across species lines. Gestures are central to human speech and to its writing, too; thus, “human makings differ from animal makings in degree and not in kind.”<sup>46</sup> Gestures are evidence of a territorial creation—a *poiesis*—shared by many animals. However, ethological poetics departs from zoopoetics in its emphasis on nonhuman fields: where Moe’s analyses concern the influence of nonhumans on human poems, the focus of an ethological poetics is on nonhumans themselves.

In acknowledging their capacity to make and create, the implication is that animals have the agency to do so. Rather than pursue a problematic enquiry into the cognition and intention of another animal, an ethological poetics accepts that agency “is relational, variable, and always inscribed within a context.”<sup>47</sup> Following Jane Bennett, a distributed agency “does not posit a subject as the root cause of an effect. There are instead a swarm of vitalities at play.”<sup>48</sup> Accordingly, as much as the artist (and/or the recipient) might determine the form and value of an artwork, Despret argues that it is also the case that “the agency contained within the very material of the work . . . controls the artist” by captivating him or her, and determining the set of possibilities according to which the work might develop.<sup>49</sup> Thanks to such swarming vitality, a “postsubjective” agency *implies* creativity, or “a capacity to make something new appear to occur.”<sup>50</sup> In short, no work of art is the act of a single being.<sup>51</sup> The relationship of such theory to Jakob von Uexküll (via Deleuze and Guattari) cannot be ignored. Uexküll characterized

43. Moe, *Zoopoetics*, 8.

44. Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art*, 35.

45. Moe, *Zoopoetics*, 11.

46. Moe, *Zoopoetics*, 17.

47. Despret, *What Would Animals Say If We Asked the Right Questions?*, 119.

48. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 31–32.

49. Despret, *What Would Animals Say If We Asked the Right Questions?*, 119.

50. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 31.

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

nature not as an assortment of atomistic subjectivities but “as a harmony composed of different melodic and symphonic parts.” The emphasis of an ethological poetics, in other words, is not on the delimitation of a subject within a rigid sphere, but on “how organisms express themselves outwardly in the form of interlacing and contrapuntal relationships.”<sup>52</sup> Life is concomitant with harmonic, musical expression: understood harmonically, “meanings” are those links between things that determine their ecological relation; the expression of an organism is a creative attempt to establish relation, or meaning itself.

As Rawlings’s *Gibber* and the reference to Uexküll have already suggested, an ethological poetics follows in the footsteps of biosemiotics, a guiding principle of which “is that living things are not purely mechanical processes, but messages to be read and interpreted.” As if the realization of Rawlings’s “dream,” this is tantamount to a virtually infinite expansion of the fields available for semiotic analysis. Consequently, writes Brett Buchanan, “animal language can be studied as a sign system containing meaningful messages transmitted between organisms; likewise, DNA can be read, and is read, as message-bearing signs transmitted (via RNA) to protein.”<sup>53</sup> Although the meanings of such messaging may certainly be important, an objection to the reading of these languages might be that our anthropocentric analyses would obscure or distort these meanings. Inherent in such a concern, however, is an assumption that expression is important only because of its capacity to produce intelligible semantic content. This is rarely the case, even in the realm of human language, which relies on parallel systems of nonliteral gestures, the meanings of which seldom survive translation into words.<sup>54</sup> Even in terms of the most expressive examples of human language, in poetry, Bruns’s comment from earlier reminds us that poems may indeed have meanings and propositions, but poetry itself is in excess of these functional features. Extending the argument to the very basis of biology, life seems to be replete with DNA that has no “meaning,” as far as we can tell, for the functioning of the organism in which it resides.<sup>55</sup> In life, as in poetry, expression always exceeds our comprehension. Rather than the interpretation of meaning, an ethological poetics is principally concerned with the observation of varieties of expression.

To see ethological poetics as a “metaphorical extension” of human poetics, however, is to assume that human poetics “is the non-metaphorical yardstick” by which all other instances of poetics must be measured. Drawing on Christopher Watkin’s reading of Michel Serres, positioning human poetics instead “as a metonym of a much broader phenomenon” is to decenter it, “as nature wrests from us our claim to an exclusivity of language use.” It may indeed be the case that we can only read and talk of other species’ poetics in the terms of our own language(s), “but in that we are no different from any

52. Buchanan, *Onto-ethologies*, 25–26.

53. Buchanan, *Onto-ethologies*, 30–31.

54. Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 239. Donna Haraway is drawing on Gregory Bateson here.

55. Richard Dawkins, quoted in Morton, *Ecological Thought*, 66–67.

other information processor.”<sup>56</sup> After all, what we might reductively think of as an animal signal does not necessarily carry just one meaning, and need not have a single addressee. Recent biosemiotics research indicates that most organisms constantly modify their signals in order to interact with many members both of their own and other species.<sup>57</sup> The production, interpretation, and translation of languages are global, ecological phenomena. If ecosystems are endowed with such a plenitude of meanings, then, in the words of Serenella Iovino:

every material formation, from bodies to their contexts of living, is “telling,” and therefore can be the object of a critical investigation aimed at discovering its stories, its material and discursive interplays, its place in a world filled with expressive [poetic] forces.<sup>58</sup>

Language need not be understood solely or even primarily in terms of its anthropocentric semantic value; in turn, the apparent absence of semantic content in nonhuman expression need not be reason for its exclusion from studies of poetics. “We may widen the realm of art,” writes Rothenberg, “just as we expand ethics to include the environment.”<sup>59</sup> In the study of bird song, for example, Rothenberg shows that semantics tell us little:

When it comes to birds, “there is no equivalent distinction between language-like [clusters of sound in meaningful structures] and speech-like [the production of sound itself] properties. One word, ‘song,’ represents both production of learned sounds and their sequencing.” *Information is not the most salient quality encoded in bird song.* There is form and purpose in birds’ sounds, but no message to be extracted from the sound that makes any sense without the sound’s original shape.

[ . . . ] “The song many birds sing is more akin to music than language because . . . the syllables change gradually from one form to another. They are not usually as distinct as the sounds of language.”<sup>60</sup>

Rothenberg’s conceptualization of bird poetics approaches the affect-centered discourse of Deleuzian ethology, where the precise nature of what a poem is or *means* “matters less than the need to go there.” The objective, therefore, is “to stretch language beyond its ability to explain, into its chance to *evoke*.”<sup>61</sup> More-than-human affect exceeds categories of semantic meaning.<sup>62</sup>

56. Watkin, “Michel Serres’ Great Story,” 175–76.

57. Sharov, Maran, and Tønnessen, “Organisms Reshape Sign Relations,” 3.

58. Iovino, “Living Diffractions of Matter and Text,” 70.

59. Rothenberg, *Why Birds Sing*, 11.

60. Erich Jarvis, quoted in Rothenberg, *Why Birds Sing*, 157–58 (my emphasis).

61. Rothenberg, *Why Birds Sing*, 54 (my emphasis).

62. In prioritizing expression over meaning, I certainly don’t wish to imply that other animals are incapable of producing meaningful expression. Rather, I am arguing that lots of creatures, humans included, create art that isn’t necessarily meaningful or that can be reduced neatly to a set of semantic values.

To understand this ethological poetics as distinct from the now-common term *ecological poetics* requires foregrounding the *specific relations* between organisms that are inherent to any ecology, as opposed to more generalized accounts of local or global ecological systems. To flesh out this distinction further I want to turn to Isabelle Stengers and Deborah Bird Rose, whose work on “cosmopolitics” provides an important ethical template for a poetics that doesn’t seek, as Rose says, quoting Stengers, “a unity beyond differences”:

The place of cosmopolitics is to define “peace as an ecological production of actual togetherness, where ‘ecological’ means that the aim is not toward a unity beyond differences. . . .” That experimental togetherness is, or has the potential to be, a form of symbiosis: “a relation between two heterogeneous ways of being, both needing the other because without the other none of them would be able to achieve its own pathways and goals.”<sup>63</sup>

Cosmopolitics aligns with emerging biological research showing that mutualism, rather than cut-throat competition, “is utterly fundamental to life on earth.”<sup>64</sup> As a cosmopolitics might emphasize the importance of symbiotic relations for the flourishing of diverse ways of being, a cosmopoetics would consider the entire biosphere as a collection of creative and expressive agencies, where an “artwork” necessarily relies on site-specific, collaborative contributions. Art is no longer just what humans do *in response* to the environment, then, but instead is myriad forms of expression from a variety of creatures and processes. Any “transcultural” conception of poetics should span not only human cultures, therefore, but also whole ecosystems.<sup>65</sup>

### **The Albert’s Lyrebird: A Case Study**

Drawing on the impetus of Deleuze and Guattari, the final section of this article performs a kind of nomadic deviation from the regime of written poetry toward the unwritten, sound-filled poetry of the Albert’s lyrebird. Before I introduce this remarkable bird, however, I need to pause to address the nature of my deviation toward it. First, I don’t wish to colonize the bird’s *umwelt* by speculating about what it might think of *human poetics*: lyrebirds might interpret humans in all kinds of ways, but their interpretations are not the focus of this discussion. At the same time, I am not going to simply disengage from the lyrebird’s poetics because of a belief that lyrebirds are somehow unreachable, as if they were Others whose world was irretrievably separated from my own (rather than birds living in the forest a short drive from my home). Such radical alterity arises in part because of an ontology that focuses on individuated organisms

63. Stengers quoted in Rose, “Cosmopolitics,” 102.

64. Rose, “Cosmopolitics,” 109.

65. See Cooke, “Fire Was in the Reptile’s Mouth.”

and their differentiation from others. As Buchanan points out, however, Deleuzian ethology urges us toward a different line of enquiry:

We are led to look away from animals themselves toward what they are capable of affectively. . . . Our focus is trained toward what escapes the nodal terms [for organisms] in order to map their becomings [in assemblages]. This is the task of a new ethology. . . . Rather than looking at an animal's behavior, which would presuppose some ordering within an environmental space, we are instead asked to map the affects that make *this* body on the plane of nature.<sup>66</sup>

By examining the affects of lyrebird poetics, as opposed to asking questions about *why* the bird produces such compositions, we are attending to the very vectors that crystallize in startling, beautiful, and sometimes precarious ways during the bird's performance. It becomes apparent that a territory as rich and affective as a lyrebird's, while "irreducible, unsettled, and unsettling," nevertheless produces what Bruns calls a sensory "saturation," where the poetry "leaves us with too much rather than too little to comprehend." My concern is that we should resist the temptation to save ourselves from unsettlement, to preserve species barriers "by turning away and tuning out."<sup>67</sup> The challenge, instead, is to attend to these unusual, unhuman forms and to contextualize their entirely different bodies and entirely different territories, which are observable precisely because of our capacity to be sensitive to their production of affects.

When we remove not only printed words but any semblance of them, we remove from poetry "the spectre of a semanticism."<sup>68</sup> Without the helpful apparatus of semantic closure, ethological poetics focuses instead on readings of affect. This has corporeal as well as textual implications: in his analysis of Deleuze, Buchanan points out that "an organism proposes a solution only at a level where one has stopped counting affects, where the body has been taken as a formal and fully organized self-consistency."<sup>69</sup> In the case of the Albert's lyrebird we will see just how difficult it is to meaningfully discern its enclosed "self-consistency"; to defer to the easy "solution" of its organism is a "reification [that] has concealed the affective relations that continually compose [its] life." In order to fully engage in affective, ethological poetics, "we must proceed by unravelling the reified solution posed by the organism" and, in turn, by the poem.<sup>70</sup> The entangled composition of each must be revealed: both how the body is "made" by the forces of an organism (from where we would pass to the "body without organs"), and how the poem is "made" by the forces of poetry. The reading of such poetic forces could be akin to the reading of avant-garde sound poetics: for Bruns, these readings are

66. Buchanan, *Onto-ethologies*, 185–86.

67. Bruns, *Material of Poetry*, 37–38.

68. Bruns, *Material of Poetry*, 11.

69. Buchanan, *Onto-ethologies*, 161.

70. Buchanan, *Onto-ethologies*, 161.

“insufficiently analytical” because they cannot rely on the close examination of a written text but approach the work instead “as a species of conceptual art and then as a kind of performance or even body art.”<sup>71</sup>

The Albert’s lyrebird (*Menura alberti*) is a pheasant-sized bird endemic to subtropical rainforest on the border between New South Wales and Queensland.<sup>72</sup> Males of the species spend much of their time rehearsing and, in winter, performing a song cycle that can last for more than an hour. As musical compositions, these song cycles are incredibly complex, incorporating, according to Konstantin Halafoff, “practically all the elements of the theory of composition.”<sup>73</sup> They contain innumerable features that can’t be described in adequate detail here, but briefly these include a “diatonic character,” a “definite key,” the “construction of the song around main and subordinate themes, the use of recapitulation and bridge passages,” a “rich metric texture and variations of tempo and volume,” and “the use of counterpoint.”<sup>74</sup> “Not less extraordinary,” writes Halafoff, “is the skill shown by the lyrebird in the metric texture of its song where the episodes of different time signatures and different tempos are geared together.” The time signatures 2/4, 3/4, and 4/4, time signatures, as well as arhythmic passages, are all common, but the bird knits them together so seamlessly that it takes “a strenuous [human] mental effort” to discern them.<sup>75</sup> Lyrebirds are also exceptional mimics, and can imitate perfectly not only the calls of other local bird species, but also beak tapping and snapping, wing beats and feather rustling and, when in proximity to them, human-produced sounds such as chainsaws, two-way radios, and cars. A large part of their compositions consists of arrangements of mimicry interspersed with melodies of their own, and crackling and “gronking sounds” (loud, short notes). Amazingly, lyrebirds will often improvise variations of these arrangements, too, which for Sydney Curtis indicates “a faculty for aesthetic appreciation.”<sup>76</sup> For Halafoff, the lyrebird’s improvisatory skills grant him a place among not only postmodern composers of “pastiche” but also the most canonical composers of human music:

[Unlike the lyrebird,] few known musicians have been capable of successful improvisations. That again points to the extraordinary fineness of the bird’s inner ear and to its superb musical gift.

That the greater part of the musical material of the lyrebird’s song consists of borrowed items does not detract from the bird’s title as a composer. Many famous musicians—Bach, Ravel, Debussy, Stravinsky, to name just a few—used borrowed melodies, sometimes to the extent of literal quotations.<sup>77</sup>

71. Bruns, *Material of Poetry*, 46.

72. The rarer of the two species of lyrebirds, the Albert’s does not have the elegant, lyre-shaped tail feathers of the superb lyrebird and is found in a much more restricted range.

73. Halafoff, “Musical Analysis of the Lyrebird’s Song,” 171.

74. Halafoff, “Musical Analysis of the Lyrebird’s Song,” 176.

75. Halafoff, “Musical Analysis of the Lyrebird’s Song,” 174.

76. Curtis and Taylor, “Olivier Messiaen and the Albert’s Lyrebird,” 56.

77. Halafoff, “Musical Analysis of the Lyrebird’s Song,” 176.

The identification of sound form is crucial to understanding the poetics of Albert's lyrebird's poetics not only because their principle affective production is musical but because their music is composed of sound forms referenced from across the spectrum of their territory. Thus, "reading" the Albert's lyrebird poetics takes us toward the unsettling terrain of avant-garde sound poetics, where the nature of poetry, and of language itself, is in a process of continual reformation. "A just and rational order of things," writes Bruns, "a fully integrated and harmonious world, would be completely silent. Such a world would tolerate little more than contemplation as a form of life."<sup>78</sup> Sound, the lyrebird's principle affective mode, contains the most disruptive potential: his cacophonous displays are extraordinary examples of sound exceeding any visual demarcation, of a non-logocentric system filling an environment with unruly affect. In vision, writes Bruns, "form is wedded to content in such a way as to appease it, [but] in sound the perceptible quality overflows so that form can no longer contain its content." Sound erodes the border of the self-contained subject, it invades the self, "driving the subject out of itself, whereas sight keeps things at a distance and in perspective."<sup>79</sup> The way in which sound literally "overflows" its container so that, in the performance of his sound poem, the lyrebird's body is exceeded, and the way in which this excess articulates a webbed community of many different bodies, is best illustrated by looking at the lyrebird's territorial and display compositions.

Early in the morning, when it is still too dark for him to be safe on the ground, the male lyrebird will call from his roost. These early morning songs rarely contain mimicry; rather, "he simply delivers intermittent territorial songs to demonstrate his continued occupation."<sup>80</sup> Territorial songs can be highly improvised, unlike the display song, which he performs on the ground later in the day. Aimed at attracting females, the display song is composed almost entirely of mimicry and is tightly structured: "All the sounds are given in a fixed order to form a song 40 to 50 seconds long, which is cycled over and over without a break." The quest for a partner, for intimate relation, is therefore a wholly unselfish affair, or a process in which the self *must* be at the least decentered, if not momentarily extinguished, in mimetic cycles. His love song is a "voice-picture of the local scene,"<sup>81</sup> therefore, not of his *self*. In sourcing the display song from anywhere but himself, the bird "transforms the *I* of cognition and representation into the *me* whose existence is exposed and vulnerable," who is open-ended, yet to be completed: "Sound bleeds [his]self."<sup>82</sup> Indeed, the dissolution of the lyrebird into the forest is even illustrated visually: on typical display platforms (which are discussed in more detail below), he is concealed by a screen of surrounding vegetation, which itself might not be visible in the rainforest's dim light.<sup>83</sup> To summarize, the bird wakes at dawn and

78. Bruns, *Material of Poetry*, 45.

79. Bruns, *Material of Poetry*, 45.

80. Curtis and Taylor, "Olivier Messiaen and the Albert's Lyrebird," 56.

81. Curtis and Taylor, "Olivier Messiaen and the Albert's Lyrebird," 59.

82. Bruns, *Material of Poetry*, 45.

83. Curtis, "Albert Lyrebird in Display," 83



uses his voice to advertise his corporeality and to demarcate his territory. This is followed, however, by a performance in which he becomes the vocalization of his territory: he opens himself, is saturated with the sounds of his locale; he becomes the territory and, in doing so, becomes purely open to it. This is a striking example of the irruption of territorial excess, where territorial forces dictate the form of articulation: “All the males in any particular locality use the same stereotyped suite of mimicked sounds.”<sup>84</sup> A rhythm passes between milieus; a melodic landscape connects different stratified bodies.<sup>85</sup>

To properly account for Indigenous poetics from many different countries, our understanding of poetry needs to be broadened to include what Jerome Rothenberg calls an “intermedia situation,” or other forms of expression such as music, dance, and painting.<sup>86</sup> Similarly, an intermedia situation is central to the Albert’s lyrebird’s poetics. On a musicological level, the thematic and sonic structures of the bird’s music are orchestral, coming from a wide variety of sampled and original sounds.<sup>87</sup> However, there is an extra, remarkable dimension to this array: the Albert’s lyrebird is one of the few bird species to use a musical instrument.<sup>88</sup> The performance will typically occur on a platform that consists of several thin vines and fallen branches that lie interwoven across the ground; some of the vines will be a few centimeters above the ground so that they can be depressed into it.<sup>89</sup> These platforms are hard to see because they are usually concealed by a screen of vegetation, but thanks to the work of ornithologists like Curtis we know that in certain sections of his performance the bird will grasp the vines with his feet and use them as rhythm sticks. In a rocking, muscular kind of movement that could only be described as dancing, he will shift the vines in perfect synchrony with the rhythm of the song.<sup>90</sup> Clapping the vines together, he can produce a variety of different sounds depending on how hard or soft they are.

But the vines also act as something akin to puppet strings in the way they orchestrate the movement of an entire section of the forest:

The movement is transmitted from one vine to another and along them to the surrounding screening vegetation. One metre away in one direction a small branch of a shrub will move up and down; perhaps a metre or so above it some leaves will shake; three metres away in another direction a large leaf will start to oscillate, and so on. It is surprising

84. Curtis and Taylor, “Olivier Messiaen and the Albert’s Lyrebird,” 57.

85. Paraphrasing Buchanan, *Onto-ethologies*, 177.

86. Rothenberg, *Pre-Faces and Other Writings*, 73–75.

87. Halafoff, “Musical Analysis of the Lyrebird’s Song,” 172.

88. Curtis and Taylor, “Olivier Messiaen and the Albert’s Lyrebird,” 58. Another Australian bird, the palm cockatoo, drums a large branch against a dead bough or tree during performance. See Taylor, *Is Birdsong Music?*, 213.

89. Curtis, “The Albert Lyrebird in Display,” 83.

90. Robinson and Curtis, “Vocal Displays of the Lyrebirds (Menuridae),” 272.

how much movement over a wide area results from the simple act of rhythmically depressing and releasing the vines.<sup>91</sup>

So the Albert's lyrebird's performance is not only orchestral but, in its complicated assortment of visual and sonic forms, it is *operatic*. Here we have an artwork that draws on, and acts as a nexus for, an entire material-semiotic field. It is also a sophisticated response to the dense undergrowth of a subtropical rainforest, where one's bodily gestures on their own are ineffective forms of expression and communication: the bird supplements his elaborate choreography by manipulating the vines of his platform, thereby translating his bodily expression into a much grander visual display.<sup>92</sup> The lyrebird's body alone provides little "solution"; to return to Deleuzian ethological discourse, the enclosed nature of the organism is problematized by how the bird's affects are sourced from a complex array of others; in addition, the bird's body is only one source of affect in the context of the manipulation of other media on his stage.

Curtis provides a rich description of the Albert's Lyrebird's cosmo-aesthetics, or of the way that, as part of his poetics, various other forest life-worlds are called on. This is a performative iteration of Deleuze and Guattari's famous example of the orchid and wasp: no genetic filiation between lyrebird and branch, or lyrebird and any of the other myriad species he imitates, is necessary; the composition brings together different organisms into a singular becoming. These are symbiotic relations, or "blocks" of becomings that produce lines of flight across the territories and milieus of different species; between the lyrebird and his partners, between the orchid and the wasp, a rhizome is formed. Such rhizomatic assemblages are hybrid, often amorphous, rather than specific or generic entities.<sup>93</sup> Here, we can't simply describe the bird's extended song cycles as territorial displays or mating rituals, as if the intentions behind such extraordinarily elaborate expressions were obvious. By the same token, the female lyrebird, who is often left out of these discussions, can't be represented as a mindless drone who is blindly attracted to the performance and arrives somewhere near its conclusion to wait for the male to impregnate her. Rather, the female is a learned critic—she hears thousands and thousands of hours of music in her lifetime—and is brilliantly discerning; she selects only the finest poet for mating, for producing more lines of flight. Furthermore, though it's not often acknowledged, she can practice her own complex compositions.<sup>94</sup> Thus, within this amorphous assemblage, the male bird is the hard-working bard who spends his life trying to perfect his performance, but he's only a success if he can form relations with others—with a lover, most obviously, but, prior to this, with the myriad sounds

91. Curtis, "Albert Lyrebird in Display," 83.

92. Robinson and Curtis, "Vocal Displays of the Lyrebirds (Menuridae)," 274.

93. See Buchanan, *Onto-ethologies*, 179.

94. Rothenberg, *Why Birds Sing*, 223–34.

and materials in the forest that he needs for his artwork. Albert's lyrebirds are the supreme cosmo-artists, therefore, which might be why, according to a local Yugambeh-Bundjalung story, they gave all other creatures their voices.<sup>95</sup>

We will recall Bruns's three-part definition of poetry from the start of this essay. First, poetry operates in excess of the semantic or propositional functions of the words it uses. The operation in excess, common to the territories of all art, is taken to its limit in the case of the Albert's lyrebird. What begins the day, his personal territorial song, is later spliced with the territorializations of myriad other creatures and all manner of other sounds. Then, this display song erupts into a glorious, operatic flourish in which almost all corporeal demarcation is dissolved in a shimmering field of forest. Second, for Bruns, poetry is rooted in sounds produced by the voice. For the lyrebird, a syrinx, as opposed to the human larynx, allows the bird to sing multiple parts at a rate that humans need to record and slow down to properly hear. Nevertheless, for human and for lyrebird, poetry's confluence with sound and gesture leads into practices more closely associated with body or performance art. Finally, Bruns argues that poetry depends on an intimacy with other things. The bird's proximity to other species' songs and sounds determines the nature of the samples it will use in its own compositions. As with any bricolage, these are compositions of hybrid material arrays; the bird's poetics is always connected to—and relies on—multiple components in the wider environment. This situation produces markedly polysemous work, in which the relationships between phrasal units can be many-sided, allowing them to jostle and intermingle in ever-different ways: not only is the lyrebird capable of rapid improvisations, where new materials can be inserted into older structures, or entirely new structures can immediately replace older ones, but the presence of his "audience"—whether a nearby female or other males who are calling from other territories—can lead him to drastically, and instantaneously, alter the form of his regular work. Like the vast majority of non-Western poetics, the Albert's lyrebird's is a bricolage structure of a type that I have elsewhere called, following Pierre Joris, a "nomadic" poetics.<sup>96</sup>

### Conclusion

On the one hand, we have assumptions about poetics that are inherited from Western modernists, that poetry is text-based, silent (or notionally performative), notionally musical, and even ironic, noncommitted and free of connections to praxis. The result could be the alarming profusion of what Jacques Roubaud calls "IFV," or "International Free Verse," which seems to be predominant almost globally. "The absolute rule about what can be said in a poem written in IFV is *accessibility*," Roubaud writes, which is a clear sign of its affiliation with the regime of semantic reading. "Not only must the poem in IFV

95. Rothenberg, *Why Birds Sing*, 223.

96. See Cooke, *Speaking the Earth's Languages*, chap. 8.

contain no difficulties of comprehension or of linguistic construction, it must also avoid anything particularly striking, unless it's lexical (and in a tone acceptable in a travel agency)."<sup>97</sup> On the other hand, poetics can be far more expansive, spanning many different species, not to mention media. While situated in Western traditions of poetics, the modern tradition of sound poetry provides a link between these two "hands"; indeed, for Bruns it could take the form of a powerful argument that, first, "sound entails a critique or displacement of the cognitive subject exercising rational control," and that, second, "this in turn makes possible an openness and responsiveness, an acceptance of sound as such, with no more in-sounds versus out-sounds." The implication of such an argument would be

something like an ethical or prophetic attitude toward sound as voice, with even ordinary sounds somehow aspiring to the condition of the voice. . . . Noise and dissonance are no longer to suffer the logic of exclusion. Tuning out is a form of dying . . . sound is a sign of life, or of things happening, whereas silence is of the grave.<sup>98</sup>

If "sound is a sign of life," then the ethical imperative is to listen. The fantasy of coming to a clear understanding must be discarded in favor of the recognition of variously perceptible and imperceptible forces and their alignment in moving forms.

Of course, the Albert's lyrebird's performance can't be contained by the category of sound poetry, and much less by that of song; beyond concerns of categorization, the important point is that the bird's composition compels us to extend the bounds of art; our subsequent openness alerts us to his territory, and to the other territories from which he draws, on which he impinges. This is the objective of an ethological poetics, as it follows, and then departs from, more ecologically inflected understandings of the term: not premade containers into which things can be placed, ecologies are actually created and shaped by the organisms within them,<sup>99</sup> and these organisms make all kinds of signals that we can't immediately see, hear, or understand; an ethological poetics directs thought toward these populations, and to the nature of their artistic contributions to the cosmopolis. Accordingly, ethological poetics responds to, and is thankful for, the ethical reconstitution proposed by posthumanist scholars like Karen Barad and Donna Haraway, where ethics is no longer about the correct response to a radically exterior Other, but about how we respond to and care for "the lively relationalities of becoming of which we are a part."<sup>100</sup> Nothing less than the semiosis of the more-than-human world is at stake, of which too many remain "dangerously oblivious."<sup>101</sup>

97. Roubaud, "Prelude: Poetry and Orality," 23.

98. Bruns, *Material of Poetry*, 49.

99. Morton, *Ecological Thought*, 51.

100. Karen Barad, quoted in Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 289.

101. Val Plumwood, quoted in Rigby, "Animal Calls," 117.

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