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"Avian Bedlam: Toward a Biosemiosis of Troubled Parrots"

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At an urban parrot sanctuary in the Midwestern USA, humans care for eighty-some parrots from more than a dozen species. Many of these parrots have personal histories that include various forms of neglect, abuse, and abandonment. The article explores the forms of interspecies communication through which human caretakers interpret and respond to the psychic lives of these parrots—psychic lives that are marked by troubles ranging from social withdrawal to self-destructive behavior. These interspecies communications include body language, gesture, nonverbal vocalizations, and human-language phrases. While biosemiotic theory offers a provocative starting point for understanding these communications, sanctuary interactions destabilize certain semiotic distinctions, drawing attention to ambiguities between semantic and nonsemantic vocalization, vocalization and body language, informative speech and expletive, and communication and symptom. Building on ideas about metacommunication in animal play, I suggest that both psychic trouble and interactions to ease that trouble might be considered forms of biosemiotic creativity. By loosening and opening up the distinctions frequently drawn between human and other-than-human semiosis, it is possible to develop subtler accounts of the semiotic improvisations that emerge in uniquely configured multispecies communities such as the sanctuary. (Text from author's abstract)

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