Avian Bedlam

Toward a Biosemiosis of Troubled Parrots

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Abstract 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.

Keywords parrots, biosemiosis, multispecies, madness, interspecies communication

Disarmed of the fantasy of climbing into heads, one's own or others', to get the full story from inside, we can make some multispecies semiotic progress.
—Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet*

The parrot sanctuary, located in an industrial area of a Midwestern city, is a "wild" place—wild not in the sense of purified of human influence (a purification that has become increasingly difficult to imagine) but rather in the sense suggested by Eben Kirksey of an emergent "out-of-control dynamics" of "intimate entanglements" among multiple species.[1] Even before the doorbell sounds in the interior, the cockatoos scream

1. Kirksey, *Emergent Ecologies*, 5.

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in greeting or warning. Inside, parrots patrol the hallways, strut in and out of rooms, climb on perches, chew colorful mobiles (or the woodwork), vocalize, oversee their food preparation, or sit quietly in pairs preening one another on the tops of open cages. Meanwhile, depending on the time of day, human caretakers scrub down cages, dispense medications, chop vegetables, fill food bowls, play with birds, scratch their heads, mist them with plant sprayers, coax them from their cages, and return them to their cages. Sanctuary policy specifies that each bird be let out of their cage or flight (usually referred to by caretakers as the bird's home) for at least four hours a day. For some birds that means free access to the main floor of the sanctuary, including the kitchen where their food is prepared and the hallways connecting the various rooms. For others, especially smaller birds, it means freedom to fly around the room where their flights are located. For a few birds, known for harassing others, it means time spent in the "playroom" alone or with a human or avian friend. During daylight hours, the eighty-some parrots at the sanctuary produce a cacophony of squawks, twitters, screams, and chatter, sprinkled with human-language phrases.

But if there is an atmospheric wildness at the sanctuary, there is a psychic wildness as well. About a week into my fieldwork, Kathy, sanctuary volunteer and vet tech, commented that most of the birds are pretty "messed up."[2] I soon learned that it is the larger parrots at the sanctuary—the macaws, cockatoos, and amazons—who are most likely to be troubled, because they are more likely to have been raised, and to have lived much of their lives, without other conspecifics or even other parrots. Their personal histories are deeply marked by relationships with humans, who were often absent and inadvertently neglectful, who were sometimes overtly abusive physically or verbally, and who, in any case, ultimately abandoned them. The smaller parrots—lovebirds, conures, and cockatiels—have lived most of their lives in avian flocks or at least in pairs, where they were less dependent on humans for social life. As a consequence, they are much less apt to show signs of psychic trouble. I also soon realized the appropriateness of the ambiguous term "messed up," since the psychic troubles of the parrots range from mild edginess to self-endangerment, with many shades of affect in between.[3] (Among the medicines served up in chunks of banana bread are psychotropics—notably, chlomipramine, fluoxetine, or amytriptiline—prescribed for about a dozen parrots at any given time.)

How are these psychic shades communicated? What forms of biosemiosis are involved in interpreting and responding to this other-than-human psychic trouble?

2. This article is based on sixteen days of observations, conversation, training, toy making, cage cleaning, and interspecies socializing over a three-month period in 2014. Conversations with caretakers were held on the fly during multispecies interactions and have been mined for generative anecdotes, with the understanding that describing emotions "means telling a story" (Lestel, "Epistemological Interlude," 155).

3. My avoidance of diagnostic terms is not based on discounting psychic continuity between humans and other animals but on recognizing that diagnostic categories are historically and culturally contingent. In general, mental illness categories might be said to simply nominalize what unfolds when creaturely well-being and social life correlatively go awry.

Theorizations of psychic disturbance in humans have long privileged verbal communications. The mad, as Michel Foucault taught long ago, are incited to bear witness to their deviance in speech.[4] Psychotherapy often seeks to turn inchoate feelings into coherent narrative. How then is interspecies communication implicated in understanding and addressing psychic troubles in these other-than-human creatures? Following an engaged etho-ethnography similar to that proposed by Dominique Lestel, I focus in this article on the co-inventedness of parrot psychic life as it is creatively conveyed by parrots and speculatively interpreted and nurtured by sympathetic human caretakers (and an ethnographer).[5] Here, inquiry involves tapping the embodied, affective, and practical knowledge of parrot psyches that emerges through caretakers' immersion in an interspecies community. While this knowledge is partially informed by ethological and veterinary sciences, it is not constrained by them. I explore the possibilities of a biosemiotic reading of parrots' psychic troubles and caretakers' responses, considering in sequence the semiosis of vocalizations, body language, and sociality (or antisociality). While the aim of the article is largely to generate provocative questions, in the end I suggest a provisional approach for grappling semiotically with the psychic troubles of parrots and conceivably other creatures as well.

If I were to use parrot semiosis in a kind of meaningful mimicry, as certain parrots use human language, this article might take the form of a sequence of cries, squawks, pacing, swaying from foot to foot, nibbling at my fingernails, pulling out my hair, glaring, chewing up the cited books and scattering them on the floor, making gouges in my skin, spinning, hiding under my desk, biting myself, biting bystanders, saying "Hi" to myself over and over, and occasionally coming out with remarks such as "I hate this stupid bird." It is intriguing to imagine such a presentation, but even aside from the problem of translation to the printed page, I lack the guts (a word that interestingly in American English signals a specifically animal courage). Still, it might be useful to imagine that other presentation hanging in the wings, and occasionally visualize it, as a kind of monstrous creature leaning over our shoulders, screaming, whistling little tunes, scattering its script of footprints between the lines, and otherwise saying things I do not know how to say.

I Hate This Bird

When I began fieldwork at the sanctuary, I naively thought that parrots might refer to their feelings in human speech. As it turns out, the parrots do not make statements such as "feel sad," "feel angry," or "feel afraid." That is not to say that they do not have the "capacity" to use such language. No one has attempted to induce in them the "emotional intelligence" that involves matching their affect to a fixed typology of possible emotions, as is currently done with some human preschoolers. As some ethologists

4. Foucault, *History of Sexuality*.

5. Chrulew, "Philosophical Ethology," 31.

and philosophers of science have suggested, questions of animal capacity are better redirected toward questions of animal potential.[6] In any case, in many human communities also, people rarely utter direct statements of feeling and are more apt to show affect in other ways. Similarly, sanctuary parrots do *act* in apparently sad, angry, or fearful ways. Some of those actions are vocalizations, and some of those vocalizations are verbal. In the parrot sanctuary, verbal language is one form of vocalization, which is one form of body language, which in turn is one form of biological sign, though the relation among these is not necessarily a nested hierarchy.

One of the first questions I asked the sanctuary director, Holly, and one of the long-term volunteers, Janelle, was how useful parrots' human language was for understanding how they are feeling.[7] Janelle replied that human language was a "distraction." Both agreed that reading birds' body language is far more important for understanding how they feel than listening to their human speech. Nonetheless, Holly mentioned that some parrots' human-language phrases are what she, after groping for the right word, called "repressed talk." She went on to relate that the night before, Harpo, a Moluccan cockatoo who is very bonded with her, repeated, "I hate this bird, I hate this bird, I hate this bird" in the middle of an otherwise garbled stream of speech.[8]

Harpo has been in the sanctuary for a few years but had never before uttered this phrase, at least not in human hearing. This was clearly a phrase that he heard from a human companion in his presanctuary life. Like many Moluccan cockatoos, he was passed from home to home as owners realized they could neither handle the decibel level of his vocalizations nor satisfy his need for company (a form of recurrent displacement that repeats a loss of flock that was usually a flaky flock in the first place).[9] When I asked whether his repetition of this phrase might tell us something about his current feelings, Janelle interjected, "It tells you something about his *history*." Holly cautiously added that it might also indicate something about his current feelings. Janelle speculated that Harpo can allow these phrases to surface now because he feels safer. Later Holly told me that she thought that Harpo had internalized his owner's sentiment, and that in repeating it, he was voicing his self-hatred. (She was aware that other volunteers might disagree with her.) Harpo is only one of several birds in the sanctuary who have been known to repeat verbal abuse once directed at them. Birds that have been verbally abused, Holly said, utter similar phrases: "I hate you. Shut up. Bad bird. Stupid fucking bird." They appear to be, in an Althusserian and Butlerian sense, captured by an interpellation, a form of hate speech that becomes a point of reference in their subjectivity.[10] Holly (who has been working at the sanctuary for more than ten

6. Despret, "Becomings of Subjectivity."

7. All of the caretakers, including the sanctuary director, are volunteers.

8. At the suggestion of the director, humans have been given pseudonyms and parrots have not.

9. See Tweti, *Of Parrots and People*, on the situations of captive parrots.

10. Butler, *Excitable Speech*.

years) said that such statements are inflected by intonations and bodily postures indicating anger and agitation. "It's a visceral reaction," she added. The amazons Cookie and Rascal, who were rescued from what was described to me as a "drug house," are famous around the sanctuary for uttering an almost constant stream of Spanish curses intermingled with exclamations about drugs and warnings that the cops are coming, also in Spanish. Like Harpo's self-abuse, these phrases seem to both signify a past event and convey an affective charge.

Here it may be useful to offer a brief aside about psittacine mimicry and vocal discourse. Ethological research suggests that parrots in the forest primarily mimic other conspecifics (which Holly confirmed).[11] In a detailed spectrographic study of the vocalizations of orange-fronted conures in Costa Rica, Thorsten Balsby and colleagues concluded that the parrots addressed other birds by imitating their contact calls, which are sometimes referred to as signature calls insofar as they are typically distinctive to a particular bird.[12] The conures' ability to imitate a call immediately upon hearing it allowed them to address parrots they did not already know well, which the researchers noted is an important skill in the high-turnover fission-fusion flocks that characterize the social life of these birds. The researchers also found that vocal imitation could be either affiliative or antagonistic, depending on the social situation. Vocal imitation is also essential for young parrots to learn their flock's vocal repertoires, which often include situation-specific calls in addition to contact calls.[13]

Among captive parrots, research suggests that use of human-language phrases is similarly specific to social circumstance. One study of an African gray found that the parrot's vocalizations, whether fragments of human speech, whistles, or imitations of hawk cries, dog barks, and ringing telephones, were strongly shaped by the social situation. When her significant human other was in the room, the parrot uttered English phrases more often, primarily phrases that referenced possible interactions with her caretaker, such as requests for food, objects, or play. The psychologists conducting the study concluded that it is possible for parrots raised with a conversational human to "use a variety of speech and nonword sounds in a deliberate, contextually relevant fashion."[14] As Vinciane Despret commented in relation to Irene Pepperberg's research with Alex and other African grays, "Parrots have a pragmatic rather than a referential conception of language. They cannot speak if they don't feel they are speaking to someone."[15]

Given such research, it is not out of line to presume that when Harpo uttered "I hate this bird, I hate this bird, I hate this bird" to Holly for the first time in their

11. There are exceptions, however. Recordings of two African grays in Zaire revealed that approximately a quarter of their motifs mimicked nine other bird species, and one mimicked a bat (Burger, *Parrot Who Owns Me*).

12. Balsby, Momberg, and Dabelsteen, "Vocal Imitation."

13. Alvarez, Fernandez-Juricic, and Martella, "Vocalizations"; de Araujo, Marcondes-Machado, and Vielliard, "Vocal Repertoire."

14. Colbert-White, Covington, and Fragaszy, "Social Context."

15. Despret, "Becomings of Subjectivity," 125.

three-year acquaintance, it was not a random babbling. Such a phrase, as Holly and Janelle interpret it, refers to a past instance of abuse within a current situation of friendship and relative safety. However, it refers to the past not so much in a constative, informative way as in an intensely emotive, performative way. It rides a wave of feeling that references a past situation within a present interaction with Harpo's closest companion, whether as a spontaneous eruption of one time into another or as an instinctive or intuitive test of the phrase's continuing affective force in a more secure environment.[16]

This affective intensity is exactly what philosophers have led us to expect from nonhuman animals or from humans at their most animalistic. Akira Mizuta Lippit, for instance, drew attention to Jean-François Lyotard's discussion of "affect-phrases," of which animals (and human infants) are the quintessential utterers. For Lyotard, an affect phrase is a nonphonemic utterance that communicates only "that it is there."[17] It does not stand in for an affect apart from itself but rather manifests that affect as "tone or inflection."[18] It has no "addressor" and no "addressee." Such phrases evoke the philosophical distinction often drawn between speech and cry. The cry, Jacques Derrida observed, is "that which has always been excluded, pushing it into the area of animality or of madness."[19] Derrida's analysis, as Lippit noted, "exposes the proximity of all speech to the inarticulate cries of animals."[20] Yet rather than simply foreclosing further discussion, this insight might be an opening to consider what forms such proximity might take in the parrot sanctuary. A statement such as "I hate this bird," in the mouth of the human who made it so memorable, was likely a sort of hybrid of speech and cry. For Harpo, on the other hand, it would presumably be more cry than speech. Or would it? After all, there are other ways for Harpo to vocalize anger, aggression, fear, or lack of confidence. In uttering this fragment of human speech, he articulates a surge of feeling that specifically echoes a past situation of hostility, within a discursive situation involving his closest human friend and in a way that will be starkly meaningful to that friend. If there is no addressor or addressee in such a statement, it is only in the sense that there is no definitive addressor or addressee in any statement, insofar as subjects tend to dissolve, on closer scrutiny, into events. Lippit went on to write that "Lyotard's animal implies a separate mode of being" that opens up "the world of the unconscious." Along those lines, one might be tempted to name Harpo's outburst as catharsis, abreaction, or the kind of repetitive reenactment associated with posttraumatic stress. But rather than impose a psychoanalytic or traumatological narrative that is contingent on

16. Here I follow understandings of instinct as plastic and creative rather than fixed and determined (Massumi, "Supernormal Animal"; Colebrook, "Only an Animal Can Save Us"). By posing an undecidability between instinct and intuition, I suggest that the test could be explorative without being either fully deliberate or fully automatic.

17. Lyotard, quoted in Nouvet, "Inarticulate Affect," 238.

18. Ibid., 237.

19. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 166.

20. Lippit, *Electric Animal*, 32.

human social and medical history, I would simply reiterate that the utterance performatively engages both Harpo's present social world and his past.

Life Stories

In making this claim, I might seem to be anthropomorphically imposing on Harpo a human construction of temporality. Recent scholarship calls for a reevaluation of anthropomorphism along various lines, suggesting that it is adaptive for hunters, indispensable for animal trainers, a misnomer for the recognition of cognitive or affective continuities between humans and other creatures, a necessary heuristic in designing research on animal cognition, and endemic in the practices of those very sociobiologists or behaviorists for whom it is anathema, insofar as they implicitly posit animals as rational calculators.[21] The reevaluation of anthropomorphism most relevant for my purposes here was posed by Eileen Crist, who noted that when employed by "impeccable observers of animals," anthropomorphism has the potential to represent animal life "with the internal cohesion that real worlds possess."[22] Not only does the "mechanomorphic" language that Crist identified as the behaviorist alternative to anthropomorphism allow the term *behavior* to crowd out terms such as *intention* or *action*,[23] but also this language, as Thom van Dooren has elaborated, precludes the possibility of "storied experiences" with "meaningful organization for the animal itself."[24] Speaking of penguins with a strong attachment to a specific stretch of Australian beach, he noted that penguins also "represent the world" to themselves and live in "storied landscapes."[25] His articulation here borrows partly from Eduardo Kohn's observation that what humans share with other "living selves—whether bacterial, floral, fungal, or animal—is the fact that how we represent the world around us is in some way constitutive of our being."[26] Both of these discussions resonate in turn with Jakob von Uexküll's early twentieth-century exploration of *umwelt* as an animal's perceptual apprehension of a world.[27]

Van Dooren's emphasis on story, however, specifically draws attention to temporality. The implications of this temporality might lead us to reflect that von Uexküll's tick, so beloved of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, is embarked on a life journey that unfolds over time.[28] That is, the various engagements of the tick with its world—for example, being attracted by the sun's warmth to the tip of a branch, smelling the

21. Bekoff, *Emotional Lives of Animals*, 125; Hearne, *Adam's Task*, 12–14; Griffin, *Animal Minds*, 28; Burghardt, "Cognitive Ethology and Critical Anthropomorphism"; Despret, *What Would Animals Say?* 14, 94.

22. Crist, *Images of Animals*, 7.

23. Cf. Huxley, Foreword to *King Solomon's Ring*, xi.

24. van Dooren, *Flight Ways*, 69–70.

25. Ibid., 72.

26. Kohn, *How Forests Think*, 6.

27. von Uexküll, *Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans*.

28. Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus*, 255.

butyric acid in a mammal's sweat, letting go of the branch, burrowing toward the skin, drinking the blood—are not simply a sequential set of discrete readings of signs but a narrative. Thinking of Tim Ingold's work on lines, we might say that the tick's existence traces a path, one that involves choices, interpretations, and interactions.[29] Von Uexküll himself grappled with the temporal senses that might be implicated in various animal *umwelten*, identifying what he called moments, the smallest indivisible temporal units of sensation for the species in question. So for instance, based on our apprehension of cinematic images, von Uexküll argued that a human moment consists of one eighteenth of a second, whereas certain fishy moments consist of one fiftieth of a second.[30] Temporal pace is further complicated by what I will call temporal rhythm, as particular occurrences elasticize experiences of time, elongating or shrinking them, allowing time to become syncopated or pulled into various shapes by the relative significance of events. In its eventlessness, for instance, von Uexküll noted that the time a tick spends in stasis at the tip of a branch, which can last for years, likely registers as little more than a moment.[31] It is this syncopative potential of phenomenal time, I suggest, that comes into play when birds (like other vertebrates) dream or when, for sanctuary parrots, a past moment bursts into the present with oneiric force.

A sense of time has not always been granted to other-than-human animals by biosemioticians, however. Temporal awareness along with syntax are often associated with symbols (in the sense used by Charles Peirce), which are defined by their arbitrary, conventional, and nonanalogical relation to their referents. Icons and indexes, by contrast, are analogical signs that, in the case of icon, resemble their referents—like onomatopoeia or camouflage—or, in the case of index, are correlated with their referents in time and space, like an alarm call. Analogical signs are akin to Lyotard's affect phrases in that they are considered to be, as Jesper Hoffmeyer noted, "much more strongly anchored" in emotion.[32] Body language, gesture, and nonverbal vocalization, while abundant in both human and nonhuman animal life,[33] are thought by some theorists to be more iconic or indexical than symbolic when employed by nonhumans.[34] While Thomas Sebeok recognized symbol use in certain nonhumans, he also suggested that syntactical signs, including conjunctions like "and" and "but," are "absent in animal

29. Ingold, *Lines*.

30. von Uexküll, *Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans*, 71.

31. Ibid., 54.

32. Hoffmeyer, *Biosemiotics*, 88.

33. Sebeok gave the name *zoosemiosis* to these sign processes. See, e.g., Sebeok, *Global Semiotics*; cf. Martinelli, *Critical Companion*.

34. Peirce, *Essential Peirce*, 6–9. This is the view advanced by Deacon (*Symbolic Species*), Kohn (*How Forests Think*), and, to some extent, Hoffmeyer (*Biosemiotics*). Hoffmeyer noted, however, that this semiotic break between humans and other-than-humans departs from a Peircian understanding of symbol (297), and several biosemioticians recognize symbol use in certain nonhumans, including birds (e.g., Maran, Martinelli, and Turovski, "Introduction," 336; Sebeok, "Zoosemiotics at the Intersection," 82; Griffin, "Is Man Language?," 344; Martinelli, *Critical Companion*, 72–75).

and vegetative sign systems."[35] Kalevi Kull wrote that symbols are necessary to "create the phenomenon of representational time; that is to create histories and biographies out of what would otherwise be only present indexical signs."[36] Similarly, Hoffmeyer observed that an index would need to be "reliably and repeatedly correlated with its object in space and time" in order for an association between sign and referent to be sustained.[37] He offered the example of a lab rat who will quickly stop pushing the button when it no longer receives the reward. But how, then, could a phrase such as "I hate this bird" be considered an indexical sign when it emerges so long after its correlated event? Such temporally charged phrases problematize any categorical distinction between zoo-indexical and homo-symbolic.[38] After conceding that chimps might sometimes be *trained* to use symbols, Hoffmeyer added that "in their natural state" they are "*premaladapted* to this kind of communication."[39] Yet such an argument requires once again shoring up the border between natural and cultural in a way that is scarcely accurate for the biosphere, let alone the parrot sanctuary.

To follow parrot story lines further, Holly has noticed that as birds make friends and develop more self-confidence, they spew terms of abuse less frequently and eventually stop altogether. She also knew of one human who was training her parrot to replace abuse phrases with more benign phrases. Such training might seem to undermine the idea that these phrases are meaningful. On the other hand, such training could be simultaneously unraveling both phrase and affect (or affect phrase) through a caring collaboration between human and bird, where the relationship itself is as crucial to the transformation as the positive reinforcement.

Semantics

I have more than once been told by primatology students that chimpanzee vocalizations are governed by the limbic system and are purely emotional, whereas gestural dialects—whether learned in forests, laboratories, or sanctuaries—are more akin to language and are governed by the cerebral system. This kind of neural geography seems to

35. Sebeok, *Global Semiotics*, 54. The claim about syntax seems related to another claim that in (human) symbolic signification, the relation of signs to objects is subordinate to the relation of signs to other signs (Kohn, *How Forests Think*, 53; Hoffmeyer, *Biosemiotics*, 288). As Derrida noted, however, any sign, "animal or human," necessarily gains meaning both from what it signifies and from its association with and difference from other signs (Derrida, "And Say the Animal Responded?," 124).

36. Kull, "Zoosemiotics Is the Study of Animal Forms of Knowing," 54–55; cf. Hediger, *Clever Hans Phenomenon*, 14–16.

37. Hoffmeyer, *Biosemiotics*, 287.

38. Cf. Wolfe, "In the Shadow of Wittgenstein's Lion." It is worth noting that, for Peirce, symbols include iconic and indexical elements. The operation of a symbol, for instance, involves a mental image (icon) of the referent (Peirce, *Essential Peirce*, 17). It might therefore be a matter, as one reviewer suggested, less of determining whether a sign is an index, icon, or symbol than of evaluating the relative salience of these signifying modalities in a given instance.

39. Hoffmeyer, *Biosemiotics*, 283.

physically instantiate the distance between language and cry, not to mention Hoffmeyer's linkage of analogical signs to affect. Ingold has asked, however, how a neurocartography that demarcates emotional and cerebral signification can explain phrases that are uttered spontaneously without deliberate intent, such as curse words or expletives. He noted that neurophysiologist Ronald Myers suggested that such expressions are not language at all. Such a claim, Ingold argued, treats language as "a realm of propositional statements" free of emotional overtones.[40] Yet every utterance, he pointed out, occurs in a situation and is necessarily infused with some affective intonation, even if only indifference or feigned neutrality. To reinforce this point, we might consider the alarm calls of some birds, prairie dogs, monkeys, and others, who specify precisely which predator is on the scene.[41] In other words, what humans would identify as a category distinction is coded into the alarm.[42] Or we might consider the songs of songbirds whose arcopallium (the avian structures homologous to the mammalian amygdala) responds to the song of other birds in ways that resemble the ways that human amygdalae respond to beautiful music or a frightening movie.[43] Such songs arguably convey information and evoke feeling in one stroke. Similarly, the repeated abuse phrases of sanctuary parrots might be thought of as expletives that simultaneously voice a feeling and articulate a memory.

Ingold convincingly argued that utterances derive their meaning not from attachment to concepts but from improvisational engagements with the world.[44] This understanding of vocalization helps to elucidate why the most common human-language phrase repeated by any given parrot in the sanctuary is the term of address that has been most directed to that bird. So Harpo elicits my attention with "Hi Harpo," the Goffin cockatoo Murphy with "Hi Murph," and the triton cockatoo Bobby with "Hi Bobby." They utter these phrases not only as a greeting when they see human friends but also as a bid for interaction. "Hi Harpo" is not an address term "Hi" attached to the name of a bird. Rather, the phrase operates as a term of address that is specific to Harpo in relation to any human with whom he chooses to interact.

If we imagine "Hi Harpo" as taking the place of a contact call in a more bird-oriented context, certain problems arise. Would it be a human contact call that he imitates and that all humans illogically share but only in relation to him?[45] Does Harpo

40. Ingold, *Perception of the Environment*, 411.

41. Shanor and Kanwal, *Bats Sing, Mice Giggle*.

42. Hoffmeyer argued that the separate vervet monkey alarm calls for snakes, eagles, and leopards made famous by Cheney and Seyfarth are no more semantic than crying, groaning, or smiling (Hoffmeyer, *Biosemiotics*, 270; cf. Lorenz, *King Solomon's Ring*, 75). Alternatively, I suggest that these calls represent a bleed of semanticity into analogue and of thought into emotion.

43. Banhoo, "Birds Found to Have Emotional Reactions to Songs."

44. Ingold, *Perception of the Environment*, 409.

45. Lorenz recounted that one of his raven companions directed their excursions together by calling his own name, Roah, "in a human intonation." He used this call only with Lorenz, who concluded that "the old raven must have possessed a sort of insight that 'Roah' was my call-note" (*King Solomon's Ring*, 86–87). Yet surely this

subtly vary this term of address depending on which individual human he is addressing and in ways that are undetectable to human ears? Or would he not have bothered to develop such variations if the humans he knew did not seem to hear or respond to them? Or, more plausibly, is "Hi Harpo" his *own* contact call, which he modified from what he perceived to be the contact calls of his surrogate human parents on whom he first imprinted?[46] Research on the vocalizations of certain forest-dwelling parrots suggests that parent birds "offer a basic call template," which baby birds slightly alter to develop their own unique contact calls.[47] But once again, human surrogate-parent calls would be highly anomalous as contact calls since they are used only to address the surrogate's adopted offspring. Ultimately, it seems that all these questions are still too caught up in a Saussurian search for the signified. If such terms of address substitute for the contact calls of forest-dwelling birds, then they suggest that contact calls themselves might more aptly be understood as discursive markers of a situation involving particular birds rather than as nominative labels for particular birds. That is, they might be signs of a processual separation and proposed reunion between flockmates rather than proper names of the birds themselves, identifying situations and potential interactions rather than personae.

Borrowing from Brian Massumi but without abandoning van Dooren's concern for animal biographies, the calls might be aptly thought of as "movements of expression" constituting "subjectivity without a subject" in a story line in which the protagonist is "always surpassed in the next pulse of life."[48] After mentioning that parrots seldom mimic other species in the wild, Holly noted, "The reason they [the human-bonded birds] copy us is because we're their flock. . . . They learn sounds from the wild parrots here . . . but the reason they want to learn how to talk is because they want to fit in with us. They want to be part of their flock."[49] Address phrases such as "Hi Harpo" are not substitutes for contact calls, I suggest, but rather *improvisations* on contact calls that reflect the unique configurations of relationship within a particular multispecies community.

In a final twist on vocalizations, after spending a few weeks at the sanctuary I began to notice the blurring of semantic and nonsemantic vocalizations in human speech as well. Volunteers' conversation with parrots was sprinkled with expressive nonverbal syllables. Louisa would say "wheeeee" when swinging the Moluccan cockatoo Cowboy by his feet, and Holly would say "*wey, wey, wey*" when bouncing a cockatoo up

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observant raven knew that "Roah" was a call addressed only to the raven himself and so could hardly be equivalent to Lorenz's call-note. It is more plausible that Roah, riffing off Lorenz, was using the sign improvisationally in the sense of "follow me."

46. For discussions of imprinting in birds, see Lorenz (ibid.) and van Dooren, *Flight Ways*.

47. Morrell, "Why Do Parrots Talk?" 400.

48. Massumi, *What Animals Teach Us about Politics*, 96.

49. See Wright, Rodriguez, and Fleischer, "Vocal Dialects," on forest-dwelling parrots who migrate into new flocks and learn their dialects.

and down on her arm. Such phrases were also interspersed in conversations with other humans. Holly, for instance, would sometimes insert noises, like *enh* or *errr* in the midst of her speech. Over time, I was able to grasp the affective and situational meanings of some of these sounds, none of which, I venture, has a one-word equivalent in English. Her recourse to them did not reflect any lack of facility in finding the appropriate word (she was extremely articulate) but rather a lack of capacity for English to succinctly, accurately, and vividly convey her thought and feeling. *Err*, for instance, seemed to voice a frustration at being compelled to accept something she would rather reject. She uttered this quasi-growl in moments of difficult interaction with birds, or once when she spoke of being forced to admit, against her rational judgment, that an animal communicator had actually given her useful information about a sanctuary parrot. On that occasion, she said, "I go, 'It's not scientific.' And then something else will come out when we have her speak to some bird, and I'm like, *errr, errr*!" In my field notes I wrote that she pronounced this sound in an intonation of tearing her hair out. The messages embedded in such vocalizations are imprecise and situationally shaped, but it may be that very productive polyvalence that makes them so vital to complex affective communication, whether human or avian. While I am not adept at interpreting parrot vocalizations, Holly or other staff members would often translate for me the sense of certain squawks or squeals. Parrots' verbal calls as well as certain of the human volunteers' nonverbal noises might be considered aspects of what Despret has called an "anthropo-zoo-genetic" process that constructs both animal and human within their relationship, a mutual domestication that involves "attunement" among "affected and affecting bodies."[50] If parrots at the sanctuary experiment with communication through human speech, humans reciprocate by experimenting with communication through nonsemantic sounds. I myself became involved in this attunement, insofar as I learned to be more attentive to nonverbal vocalizations, both avian and human. If I could not comprehend them much of the time, I could nonetheless realize that there was something to comprehend. That said, at the sanctuary it is as often a matter of cacophony as attunement. Miranda, another Moluccan, rarely utters human words. "He doesn't really talk," Holly said. "He'll say 'Hi Miranda' or 'Hi pretty girl.' But not a ton. And if Miranda's talking it's generally not a good thing. Like, *avoid* a talking Miranda."[51] In other words, for Miranda human speech can indicate a brewing aggression.

Reading Gestures

One question that has perplexed scientists who have endeavored to teach animals to speak is how to know whether the animals feel what they say they feel. Alex, the

50. Despret, "Body We Care For," 125.

51. Since cockatoos are not sexually dimorphic, identifying their biological gender requires a somewhat invasive veterinary exam. Consequently, many parrots have names that invoke a gender not corroborated by biology. In Miranda's case, once his biological gender was identified, sanctuary personnel tried to change his name to Randy. They eventually gave up the attempt, since he continued to prefer Miranda and to refer to himself as "pretty girl."

African gray who was taught human language by Irene Pepperberg, spontaneously began to say "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," when he had done something he knew would anger her (such as chewing up one of her grant applications at a time when these were still composed on typewriters).[52] But did he actually feel remorse, she wondered, or had he simply learned from her that this phrase was effective in defusing a potentially tense and conflictual situation? Following Ingold, I suggest that this formulation of the question sets up a superfluous separation between inner experience and outer presentation, a certain possibly Protestant-derived semiotic ideology in Webb Keane's terms.[53] With that understanding, we might posit remorse as an affective dimension of placation rather than a prior interior motive. It is also possible that Pepperberg's question derives from an experimental attention to verbal language that throws other forms of semiosis into the shadows.

For there is more to parrot communication than vocalizations. Parrot sounds are almost always interpreted at the sanctuary in coordination with accompanying gestures and actions. Sanctuary parrots lift their crests to convey excitement or alarm. They dip their heads to request a neck scratch. Cowboy shakes his head vigorously while saying "no, no, no" when he does not want to do something he is asked to do. They contract their pupils when they are angry and draw their feathers up close to their bills when content. When experienced sanctuary volunteers interpret the affective thrust of avian speech or actions, they employ a perceptual gestalt whereby they interpret intonation, volume, body language, posture, facial expression, and situation all at once. Parrots surely interpret a similar (though probably more nuanced) bodily syntax in each other and in their human companions, further challenging the idea that syntax is absent from other-than-human semiosis. Once when I was sitting with Holly in the lobby, she played with Harpo on her lap while Cowboy looked on from an overhead perch. Cowboy, she knew from previous experience, was likely to be jealous of the attention that she was giving Harpo. "He's glaring at me," Holly said. "Is that a glare?" I asked. I had not learned to read the expressions in parrots' eyes. "It's a borderline glare," she replied.

Cowboy is a self-mutilator who wears a vest to protect him from gouging his own breast. He has earned the epithet Cowboy the cockatool-maker because of the great care with which he will fashion and sharpen a splinter of wood to poke through his vest in order to reach his skin. But when the weather was warm enough, and one of his closest human friends, Louisa, put him in a harness and took him for a walk, Cowboy sat up alert on her shoulder, chattering incessantly. Never once did he worry his skin with his beak. As the wind ruffled his feathers, he was more animated than I had ever seen him. By the way he raised his head into the air and swiveled it, seeming to take in the freeway overpass, the taco truck with its milling customers, and the slanted sunlight, I surmised that he was enjoying the feeling of the wind lifting his feathers in the

52. Pepperberg, *Alex and Me*, 95.

53. Keane, *Christian Moderns*.

way that I enjoy the feeling of the wind lifting my hair. While this is what some would consider a classic anthropomorphic presumption, we apprehend the feelings of other humans only by similar projections. We often presume that we have special access to the subjectivity of other humans through verbal language. Yet by what reasoning does verbal language offer more reliable messages about another's experience than gestures, pheromones, intonations, facial expressions, or nonverbal vocalizations? Despite its subtleties, verbal language is one of the least reliable forms of communication for reading feeling, intention, or desire. Hoffmeyer has commented that bodily signs accompanying conversation are responsible for "as much if not more of its meaning-making efficacy" than words.[54]

Furthermore, humans do not even access our own experience in any immediate sense. As Claire Colebrook has commented, Thomas Nagel's contention that we can never know what it is like to be a bat should lead to the recognition that humans cannot know what it is like to be human either, insofar as "one does not know what it is like to be oneself until one reads oneself as if one were an alien animal."[55] What if I *could* ask Cowboy how it feels to be in the open air? Would his answer (however communicated) tell me something more than I intuit by simply watching him, listening to him prattling away, he who is generally silent inside the sanctuary building, rarely even bothering to say "Hello Cowboy" by way of greeting or to announce his presence? As Ingold has insightfully commented, the question about the existence of animal minds reinforces a mind-body dualism.[56] He noted that in Ojibwe thought, as described in Irving Halloway's ethnography, speech is not an outer expression of inner thoughts but rather a way in which a being manifests its presence in the world. That is, speech is not so much a way of conveying information as a way of being alive. In that view, claps of thunder and the chirping of birds are not so different from speech.[57]

And Say the Animal Responded by Biting

When we read the signs of human psychic disturbance, we rely as much on involuntary as on voluntary communication. Dorian Sagan noted that some actions (like riding a bike, for a primate) can retreat from conscious effort to subliminal mastery, and other actions, like breathing, occur unconsciously for some creatures but are open to conscious intervention for others, such as whales and dolphins.[58] But to invoke again a more Freudian sense of unconsciousness, what about actions such as compulsive hand washing? These are not identical to involuntary reflexes, but neither are they entirely

54. Hoffmeyer, *Biosemiotics*, 305.

55. Colebrook, "Only an Animal Can Save Us," unpublished manuscript, www.academia.edu/19843390/Only_an_Animal_Can_Save_Us, 9 (accessed December 30, 2016); Nagel, "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" Derrida has often made versions of this argument (e.g., *On Touching*, 179–91).

56. Ingold, *Perception of the Environment*, 51.

57. Ibid., 104.

58. Sagan, "Introduction: Umwelt after Uexküll," 19; cf. Dawkins, *Through Our Eyes Only?*, 171; and Hoffmeyer, *Biosemiotics*, 170.

voluntary. It is such forms of action that tend to be read as psychological symptoms. So, for instance, Miranda spins and shrieks. He was probably originally taught to do this as a trick, but it has now become, Holly told me, a stereotypic behavior. Corry, a bare-eyed cockatoo, paces and clicks obsessively. Many birds chew on their feet or rub their bills on the bars of their cage, both considered signs of neurosis. The Moluccan Philippe sways from foot to foot. Several birds are known for unpredictable outbursts of aggression. Harpo used to live in an aviary flock in a Texas sanctuary that practiced a policy of minimal contact between birds and humans. After he killed several birds and inflicted wounds requiring stitches on several humans, it was determined that he needed "more human interaction," and he was brought to the midwestern sanctuary. He is less aggressive now but still treated with caution by most volunteers. Bobby and Louie, another Moluccan, destroy their feathers. While feather-destruction is not understood as self-mutilation per se, it is found only in captive birds. It could signify boredom, anxiety, irritation, or an affect for which humans have no name. Biologically, feather destruction is often regarded as a "redirection" of grooming behavior.[59] Transposing the biological to the biographical, feather destruction might be understood as a (tragic) innovation in self-care.

Malachi, a Moluccan who was an even more diligent self-mutilator than Cowboy, died just a month before I began my fieldwork, as a result of his own self-injury. Holly and Janelle told me his story one afternoon while Louie hopped around us, occasionally pecking at our shoes, and Harpo climbed the bars of an empty cage nearby. Malachi's previous owner had left him at the Humane Society. For his first several years at the sanctuary, he refused to leave his cage. He would sit on a perch inside and bark like a dog or swear at himself. Eventually, however, he was referred to as a "flock leader" because of his ability to get along so well with the other birds. Even so, he never stopped self-mutilating and finally began biting his elbow, a place impossible to effectively bandage. "He got into the joint capsule," Holly said, "and once he did that—." Janelle interjected, "He knew. He knew that if he got to the joint he was going to have to be euthanized." "You think it was suicidal?" I asked. "Yeah," Janelle replied, "I think he did it on purpose," and then turning to Holly she asked, "Don't you think he did it on purpose?" Holly started to speak, then paused. "I wish he would have waited a little longer," Janelle said. "I wanted to take him outside one more time." "We had collars," Holly continued. "But if he stretched down just far enough . . . he could dig a little bit. It was a Saturday that he did all of this work. And there was nothing—. That night we had to euthanize him." Both she and Janelle teared up then, and I did not question them further. It seemed there was no clear consensus as to whether Malachi's death was a suicide, but Holly did not argue with Janelle's assessment. Does it matter whether Malachi was impelled by a desire for an imagined death or by an uncontrollable urge toward bodily self-harm? Lisa Stevenson noted that to treat suicide as a mental health disorder is to be caught in a peculiar paradox, insofar as "'disease' is marked here primarily by the intention to carry out a particular *action* rather than by an organic imbalance or

59. Van Zeeland et al., "Feather Damaging Behavior in Parrots."

deviation from a norm."[60] Suicide is simultaneously a symptom, an action, and a communication. Derrida suggested that the suffering of animals (or of humans) should be imagined not as a capacity but rather as a certain "not being able."[61] But in the face of symptoms of suffering that are also actions, this formulation seems strangely inadequate. The sanctuary parrots' distress is active, often hyperactive, even inventive: Miranda spinning, Bobby plucking his feathers, Cowboy crafting a splinter to wound himself, Malachi working his beak assiduously into his joint.

One day I was sitting on a bench in the sanctuary hallway talking with Holly. Bobby was perched on my left forearm, carefully placing popsicle sticks that I handed him on his back, then taking them off again and throwing them on the floor. Harpo was marching back and forth along the bench on my right side, hopping on and off my thigh, occasionally whistling with me in a duet. It was nesting season, and some of his gestures bordered on flirtatious, as when he knocked his beak against my arm or leg. I had just asked Holly whether I should be worried about playing with both Bobby and Harpo at the same time when a car drove by with a booming bass line. She replied, "No, it's a kind of uneasy truce, like 'I don't really like birds. You don't really like birds—.'" Just then Harpo lunged at my face, lightly scratching it, and Bobby fluttered off my arm to the floor. Harpo ran rapidly back and forth along the bench and on the next pass bit me hard in the ribs. After taking Harpo back to his cage and attending to my wound, Holly and I discussed what had happened. Holly thought that he was upset by the pulsing subwoofer of the passing car. That is, he read the noise as explosive rather than musical, missing what Gregory Bateson would have called the metacommunicative framing.[62] Bateson theorized that creaturely interactions rest on the recognition of such framings. That is, a dog distinguishes a playful nip from an aggressive bite by reading surrounding signals such as the snap or the bow, which work like the sign "not" to convey that "this is not a (real) bite." Bateson suggested that certain psychopathologies such as schizophrenia could be understood as a failure to register the framings that would demarcate fantasy from reality. His argument moved directly from the playful canine to the disturbed human, but the omitted possibility of a disturbed dog (or parrot) is the absent presence in his analysis. Is it not possible, moreover, that in addition to missing some metacommunications, a creature might also magnify or misinterpret others?

My jumpiness about simultaneously playing with two birds, both of whom have a reputation for being unpredictable, might have composed a metasign that complicated my apparent friendliness—a kind of "but" that was legible to Harpo through my bodily syntax. As many have pointed out, the true cleverness of Hans the horse (who initially persuaded so many humans of his mathematical prowess) was that he could so accurately read the inadvertent bodily signs of his human attendants.[63] With all the focus

60. Stevenson, *Life beside Itself*, 79.

61. Derrida, *Animal That Therefore I Am*, 27–28.

62. Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, 177–93.

63. Despret, "The Body We Care For," 115; Hediger, *Clever Hans Phenomenon*, 7, 15.

on human language, no research seems to have been done about psittacine potential to read human body language. In any case, Harpo's bite, like Malachi's suicide, slides between symptom, action, and communication. It can be read as a sign of fear and raging hormones[64] or a message of "get away," which is illocutionary in interrupting an interaction that had probably become borderline uncomfortable for both of us.

Speaking of symptoms that are communications or vice versa, for a while I wondered if even a parrot's repetition of his or her own name might be a form of compulsivity in which a bird is caught in a perpetual state of address—desperately seeking recognition, as if human reciprocity were always in some way insufficient. But volunteers perceive these greetings as ways of reiterating and sustaining connection or a hyphenated parrot-in-connection, a version of Deleuze and Guattari's "animal-stalks-at-five-o'clock," which might be articulated as animal-calls-human-flockmember-by-repeating-human-given-name.[65] Moreover, since these are the primary human-language phrases currently addressed to these parrots, the parrots might reasonably surmise that these phrases exhaust human verbal repertoire when it comes to talking to birds.

Bird-Identified Birds

For let us not forget that we are in a city and not a forest. Given the long-term memories of parrots, not to mention the booming bass lines and transspecies bites, I suspect that the few wild-caught parrots in the sanctuary have not forgotten either. The wild-caught birds, I was told, retain more of their parrot vocalizations. "They're not usually as keen on learning human phrases," Holly said. "Usually they know they're birds. They are more birds' birds generally. . . . They have more of a bird mentality."[66] Captive-bred birds are typically taken from their parents long before they would have been weaned in the forest. "Even if they're not in an incubator," Holly said,

> [the breeders] pull the chicks after they hatch and hand raise them, because they think it makes a nicer, human-bonded bird. It actually creates the opposite, a bird who has no idea what they are or how to interact. . . . That was the parents' job to teach them what's appropriate and what's not appropriate. I can't teach a young bird when it's okay to peck another bird. They have to learn from other birds. So it really creates a disaster.

Cowboy, I was told, "doesn't fit into anything," and Harpo has "no clue what to do with other birds."

64. The hormone surges of male parrots in the sanctuary manifest in competitive courtship, random aggression, and unfocused "nest building" (i.e., the shredding of wood and cardboard).

65. Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus*, 290; Buchanan, *Onto-Ethologies*, 183.

66. A study conducted at the sanctuary among umbrella cockatoos offered an elaborate typology of disturbed bird psyches, including cockatoo-normative, cockatoo-intact, cockatoo-fragile, cockatoo-disorganized, and human-intact, correlating each of these with developmental history—e.g., wild, wild-bred but captured prior to socialization, captive-bred stable, captive-bred unstable (Bradshaw, Yenkosky, and McCarthy, "Avian Affective Dysregulation").

One of the most important means of easing psychic troubles at the sanctuary is the cultivation of social relationships. Flocks are critical to parrot vitality. In general, birds value what volunteers call "ambient company." Sometimes, the volunteers said, ambient company is all a parrot wants, and more direct engagement with birds or humans is intrusive or upsetting. A desire for ambient company describes the way that Philippe likes to hang out on Karly's cage (another Moluccan), even though they never preen one another, and the way that birds who appeared to dislike Malachi when he was alive still mourned him when he died.[67] Matei Candea proposed that in theorizing intra- or interspecies relations it is crucial to consider not only "interaction" but "interpatience," forms of relationship marked by a distant tolerance that avoids face-to-face encounter.[68] Interpatience is an important form of relationship and zoopolitesse within the sanctuary.[69]

That said, the social chemistry of the sanctuary flock changes with every rotation of volunteers, since the interactions among particular birds are affected by the relationships between and among particular birds and particular humans. Moreover, psychic well-being through social relationships means a very different thing for birds who are human-bonded than for birds who are not. As Holly put it, relationships with other birds might represent only 5 percent of recovery from an abusive past for a human-identified bird, while relationships with other birds are probably responsible for 90 percent of the recovery for bird-identified birds.

Given this comment, one might expect that the easing of distress for human-identified birds, whom one might be tempted to diagnose with some form of dissociative disorder,[70] is not necessarily about teaching them that they are birds. Yet the sanctuary volunteers do make efforts in that direction. Philippe's greeting, addressed by humans to him and by him to humans, is not "Hi Philippe" but rather "Hi Bird." It was not until I had been working at the sanctuary for several weeks that I discovered that they had started calling him Bird as a way of reminding him that he *is* (or at least can become) a bird.[71] Karly, who was once beaten, probably with a baseball bat, until he became blind in one eye, never leaves the vicinity of his cage and often screams loudly for minutes on end. One day when his screams were especially deafening, I was surprised to hear Louisa comment, "Sometimes we rue the day we taught Karly to scream."

67. Sanctuary parrots manifest their mourning by going silent, losing their appetite, refusing to play, and withdrawing to their cages.

68. Candea, "I Fell in Love with Carlos the Meerkat," 249.

69. On zoopolitesse, see Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 92; and Langford, "Wilder Powers," 235.

70. Bradshaw, Yenkosky, and McCarthy ("Avian Affective Dysregulation") observed that avian "affect dysregulation" can express variously as anxiety and phobia disorders, attachment and adjustment disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, and mood disorders (all of which the authors correlated with diagnostic codes from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* [DSM-IV]). In this model, dissociation would be one form of mood disorder.

71. Implicit here is the volunteers' openness to the possibility that Philippe grasps the meaning of *bird*.

"You taught him to scream?" I asked. "He was too scared to scream," Holly explained. "He rarely would make a peep. He was beaten for making noise. So we encouraged him, any time we heard him make noise, we were like 'Yay, Karly, yay.' Now we're like 'Why did we do that to ourselves?'" But her question is both rhetorical and a joke. They did it to help Karly be more of a Moluccan, with the understanding that what that means is to nudge him along a continuum of becoming from anomalous creature toward cockatoo.

Although the sanctuary has a policy of not clipping any birds' wings, in order to make flight theoretically possible, many of the larger captive-raised birds have never learned to fly. Selected volunteers work to teach them to fly, even if only for a few feet. "It's part of trying to teach them that they're birds," Holly told me.

> It helps them become more stable mentally. So we'll try as much as we can to teach everybody some basics of flying. It's hard because you have to be able to hold their feet . . . you have to be able to toss them without having them think that something horrible is happening to them. There are some that literally we are still working on that trust base with: Miranda. Gomer is actually just learning how to fly. He can go down the hallway now. Birds fly to get away from things, birds fly to get places. If they've never felt that they've had a way to escape something or get where they want to go, it generally turns into a lack of confidence, increased aggression, adds to them not really recognizing that they're a bird, helplessness, increased reliance on humans. So even if they can just realize it enough to know, "I can get from here to there without smashing my face into the ground, or . . . every time I take off isn't this horrible experience that hurts me," it really improves them overall. It actually can decrease feather-destructive behavior. It decreases aggression. There's really a marked change in them once they learn even just a short flight.

Insofar as psychic trouble involves bodily postures and movements, physically encouraging new bodily habits directly intervenes in that trouble.

One bird, who I will give the pseudonym Jody at Holly's request that he not be identified, killed another bird, Unchi, during what Holly referred to as a "psychotic break." Unchi was a wild-caught bird who often harassed human-bonded birds like Jody. It was during one such incident of harassment (which might have been prevented if the caretakers had been more attentive) that Unchi was killed. Afterward, Jody descended into what Holly called a depression that lasted eight months. That is, he grew silent, lost his appetite, became socially withdrawn, and refused to play. He seemed to be haunted by Unchi's death, but perhaps he was also haunted by Unchi's life: the possibility of being a bird who could distinguish, through metacommunications, between harassment and a fight to the death, a bird who confronted Jody with the impossible possibility of being a "birds' bird" himself.[72]

72. Some readers might object, as did one reviewer, that portraying Jody as haunted is excessively anthropomorphic. I suggest, however, that it is no more anthropomorphic than the idea that he is grieving. These are two differently nuanced notions for conveying how past events weigh on present psychic life. If

Van Dooren has noted that conservationists engaged in captive breeding of near-extinct Hawaiian crows are guided in part by notions of authenticity, even as they acknowledge that the crows they will eventually release are "emergent forms of crowness."[73] In the parrot sanctuary, by contrast, there is less reason to be concerned with species or avian authenticity. Sanctuary parrots frequently form friendships and pair-bonds across species lines with the full support of their caretakers. Their psyches are free to roam beyond perceived parameters of species normativity as long as no one is harmed. When volunteers teach them to fly or invite them to become more bird-like, it is for the sake of their own well-being. To the extent that the question of authenticity is salient, it seems more salient for wild-caught birds like Unchi who recognize and sometimes antagonize the human-identified birds in their midst. Reframing the Wittgensteinian problem of whether humans could understand a speaking lion, Despret has asked instead, "Would a lion that speaks still be recognized as a lion by its conspecifics? What matters, from the point of view of a lion, to make it say to another lion 'you are still one of us'?"[74] We cannot know exactly what mattered for Unchi, but it is as if he shared a Deleuzian distaste for Oedipal animal-human relationality—even if Jody and other human-bonded birds might more aptly be said to vacillate among becoming-Oedipal, becoming-animal, and becoming-anomalous, monstrous, or queer. In any case, the tale of Jody and Unchi is a reminder that psychic trouble carries a connotation of deviance as well as distress. In that light, Unchi's death raises one last question: when wild-caught birds single out and stalk human-identified birds, might they themselves be engaged in reading the signs of craziness from an avian angle?

Whatever answer one might attempt, the social and psychic wildness of the sanctuary involves improvised communications not easily classified by biosemiotic theory. Perhaps the parrots' psychic troubles (and some human psychic troubles as well) are better understood as vitally inventive, if often tragic, responses to restriction of their social possibilities.[75] That is, their troubled actions might be a kind of inversion or nervous extension of the improvisations involved in play. "In play," Massumi observed (echoing Bateson), "the animal elevates itself to the metacommunicational level, where it gains the capacity to mobilize the possible. Its powers of abstraction rise a notch."[76] I speculate that the "wild" psychic troubles in the parrot sanctuary arise not only, as Bateson might have it, from missing a metacommunicative frame, as in Harpo's reaction to the

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grieving appears less anthropomorphic, it may be because it can be placed in a scientific (specifically psychological) register subject to scientific evidence, whereas haunting belongs to an uncanny or poetic register, subject only to phantasmal evidence. Restricting nonhuman affect to scientific rather than uncanny registers seems yet another way to presume the relative poverty of nonhuman worlds. While we may not know birds' phantoms, it is not outlandish to speculate that they exist. See Langford, "Toward a Hauntology of the Other-than-Human."

73. van Dooren, "Authentic Crows," 38.

74. Despret, "Becomings of Subjectivity in Animal Worlds," 126.

75. Cf. Wemelsfelder, "Animal Boredom," on porcine responses to life in captivity.

76. Massumi, *What Animals Teach Us about Politics*, 22; Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, 178.

passing car's subwoofer, but from mistaking or reimagining the frame through biosemiotic processes that, like play, involve powers of abstraction and innovation. The personal histories of these captive parrots have eroded or obviated expected framings for parrot lifeways. Vocalization has been disconnected from the frame of a supportive flock. Preening has been unmoored from the frame of self-care associated with flight. Biting has been detached from the frame of play with trusted friends. As I intimated earlier, biting might be viewed as a reimagining of play as aggression, feather plucking as a reimagining of self-care as self-destruction, and abusive speech or self-isolation as a reimagining of sociality as antisociality. Such troubles can sometimes be eased through interspecies interaction that is as inventive as the psychic disturbances themselves, inviting parrots to reimagine their lives once again.

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