

# TOWARD ZOOPOETICS: RETHINKING WHITMAN'S "ORIGINAL ENERGY"

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*I see in them [moose, cat, chickadee, prairie-dog . . .] and myself the same old law.  
—Leaves of Grass (1855)*

THE UNDERLYING ASSUMPTION deeply engrained within a culture that uses alphabetic systems is that letters do not relate to the material earth. They are immaterial, existing in the mind, and they are therefore disembodied. The theorist Brian Rotman exposes this assumption well in his 2008 *Becoming Beside Ourselves*. "Letters," for him, are "in no way iconic." Moreover, they have "no relation to that of the body," and even the sounds we speak—the "minimal hearable fragments"—are "absent any trace of the sense-making apparatus of the body producing them."<sup>1</sup> Rotman's project explores how digital technologies, ubiquitously available to people, change this bias. Increasingly, we look *at* the materiality of images, graphs, web-based texts, and words rather than through them, to echo Richard Lanham's phraseology.<sup>2</sup> Rotman, though—and here is my departure point—overlooks the fact that letters *can be* iconic. They *can* gesture in written form, and when the letters compel someone to utter a sound, those "minimal hearable fragments" are not *devoid of* but rather *replete with* traces of the "sense-making apparatus of the body producing them." This is why in "A Song of the Rolling Earth" Walt Whitman can say "in the best poems re-appears the body"—and not just the human body.<sup>3</sup>

At first glance, alphabetic systems do not seem to resonate with, to use David Abram's phrase, the "animate world": the "life [that] swells within and unfolds around us." Abram seeks "a new way of speaking . . . that enacts our interbeing with the earth rather than blinding us to it. . . . a style of speech that opens our sense to the sensuous in all its multiform strangeness." An even greater challenge is for *written* language to emphasize our "interbeing" with the animate world. For Abram, ideogrammatic systems more readily exhibit the animate, sensuous earth than alphabetic systems, for they often "borrow their shapes . . . from elements in the surrounding landscape."<sup>4</sup> However, in *Spell of the Sensuous*, Abram reminds us that the origin of alphabetic systems also involves a "pictographic inheritance." The Hebrew word for what

became the English *M* is the same Hebrew word for *Water*—and we still see the ripple effect along the top of the lowercase *m*. Likewise, the Hebrew word for what became the English *Q* is the same Hebrew word for *Monkey*, and the Hebrew word for what became *A* is the same Hebrew word for *Ox*.<sup>5</sup> Turning the *A* upside-down exposes the ox's two horns, and I cannot help but see the tail swinging to and fro in a *Q*—especially in italicized Garamond.

The fact that *A*'s and *Q*'s once explicitly mimed oxen and monkeys points towards several questions. Do nonhuman animals still shape the form of writings within alphabetic systems? If so, where? Are they isolated cases?—widespread?

The dynamic where nonhuman animals shape the form of human writing pervades poetry and poetics in the long twentieth century, beginning prominently with the century's forerunner, Walt Whitman. I contend that many poets, including Whitman, discovered innovative breakthroughs in form through paying attention to the gestures and vocalizations of nonhuman animals. To substantiate these claims would take more space than this essay, but what follows is a gesture towards that direction.

In this essay I focus primarily on a subset within Abram's "animate world": just the animals. That is to say, I am more interested in the *A* and the *Q* than the *m*. Zoopoetics—a theory I introduce—recognizes that nonhuman animals (*zoion*) are makers (*poiesis*), and they have agency in that making.<sup>6</sup> The etymology also suggests that when a poet undergoes the making process of *poiesis* in harmony with the gestures and vocalizations of nonhuman animals, a multispecies event occurs. It is a co-making. A joint venture. The two-fold foci of zoopoetics—that nonhuman animals are makers and that this making has shaped the form of human poems—illuminates how animals *animate* even the "non-iconic" alphabetic systems of language, and therefore bring the sensuous world to the surface of the written page.

To give an architecture to zoopoetics in order to place it within the field of literary studies, I focus first on a theoretical context needed to rethink Whitman's "original energy." I place Abram's insights in conversation with George Kennedy's "A Hoot in the Dark," Julia Kristeva's *Revolution in Poetic Language*, and Paul Shepard's *Thinking Animals: Animals and the Development of Human Intelligence*. I draw on and extend their work in order to bring zoopoetics to clear focus. As the theoretical context unfolds, I hint at the intersections with Whitman. These intersections come to fruition in the final section of the essay where I explore the "original energy" of Whitman's zoopoetics, particularly in "A Noiseless Patient Spider." The exploration enables us to reassess the significance of "original energy." Rather than being a monospecies event limited to human bodies, Whitman's poetics

depends upon the bodily energy of locusts, spiders, eagles, and many more nonhuman makers. For Whitman, animal bodies reappear in some of his best poems, thereby animating the poetic micro-universe within alphabetic discourse.

### *Rhetorical Energy*

From a 2010 vantage point, Diane Davis (who explores nonhuman rhetorics) claims that George Kennedy's "A Hoot in the Dark: The Evolution of General Rhetoric" is a "seminal essay" that ought to have been "pathbreaking."<sup>7</sup> It was not, initially. Debra Hawhee shared the initial (non)reception of Kennedy's work at a conference presentation she attended in 1993, a year after the publication of "A Hoot." Ironically, the crowd generated enough rhetorical energy to communicate their unease, hesitation, and doubt of animal rhetoric: "There were whispers, sidelong glances, and muttering, all of which bespoke a slight panic about [Kennedy's]—and the field's direction." Hawhee (and Davis would agree) now sees Kennedy's work as "timelier than ever" due to the rise in animal studies, ethology, and material/bodily rhetorics.<sup>8</sup> Kennedy's driving thesis that "we [all animals] share a 'deep' universal rhetoric" is, indeed, much more palatable when we now have Donna Haraway's theory of the "material-semiotic exchange" that occurs across species, particularly, for her, between humans and companion species. Haraway and her dog Cayenne sustain a dynamic rhetoric when they undergo agility sports, which becomes a "knot of species coshaping one another in layers of reciprocating complexity." Through interspecies play, both human and dog experience an "ontological and semiotic invention."<sup>9</sup> Haraway, though, does not cite Kennedy's "A Hoot." But when she speaks of a "material-semiotic exchange," she indirectly locates her ideas within what Kennedy envisioned.

I return to Kennedy's "A Hoot" over some of this more recent work for two reasons. First, Kennedy locates his theory within evolution in a very useful way, for "rhetorical energy" emerges from the fifth canon of rhetoric: delivery. In an evolutionary framework, "delivery," he argues, "is prior" to the "traditional parts of rhetoric" that include invention, arrangement, style, and memory. Delivery, or rather, the "epideictic rhetoric" of showing forth through a bodily poetics occurs not just among human animals, but many other species as well. Kennedy places this insight within a taxonomic trope. He looks for some "starting point from which [rhetoric] . . . culturally evolved," and he begins "to define a 'genus' of which the various historical meanings of rhetoric are 'species.'"<sup>10</sup> The material and bodily energy of animals, including humans, involves the fifth canon of rhetoric (delivery), and it becomes the common *genus* shared across species lines, making intra- and in-

terspecies “material-semiotic exchanges” an everyday experience.<sup>11</sup> As I will argue, Kennedy’s theory of a multispecies “rhetorical energy” is consanguineous with Whitman’s “original energy.”

Second, Kennedy opens space to shift the focus from animal rhetorics to animal poetics, for he hesitates in his argument at a crucial point. I imagine that if the audience at his presentation heard him arguing for *animal agency* in conjunction with animal rhetorics, many may have walked out. Kennedy sees “no doubt that animals communicate among their own species and with other species,” but he balks to go further: “what is in doubt is the extent of their intentionality and consciousness of sending and receiving messages.”<sup>12</sup> Animal rhetoric is therefore relatively safe in comparison to zoopoetics, which assumes agency through its emphasis on *making*. Today, enough work exists within ethology and animal studies for humanists to become posthumanists. Many animals exhibit a conscious intention behind their material-semiotics as argued in works including Kevin Laland and Bennett Galef’s *The Question of Animal Culture* (2009), Sarah McFarland and Ryan Hediger’s *Animals and Agency: An Interdisciplinary Exploration* (2009), Chris Philo and Chris Wilbert’s *Animal Spaces, Beastly Spaces: New Geographies of Human-Animal Relations* (2000), and Haraway’s aforementioned *When Species Meet* (2008). From orca who teach their young how to collectively generate a wave to wash a seal off an ice floe to the rhetoric at work within bee hives, nonhuman animals demonstrate different degrees of agency. Concerning bees, we must not forget that Aristotle spent several pages articulating the “great complexity” within a hive, marveling at what could now be called intraspecies, material-semiotic exchanges.<sup>13</sup>

To extend Kennedy’s work, then, means exploring what happens when we suspend doubt concerning the agency of nonhuman animals.<sup>14</sup> We must flip the coin. On one side, we have rhetoric. On the other, we have poetics. As poetics comes from the Greek *poiesis* meaning *to make*, it already foregrounds a verb-ful agency, something that the term *rhetoric* leaves implicit. Nonhuman animals navigate innumerable rhetorical situations every day, reading the audience of another animal and crafting a text of gestures/vocalizations for that audience. When an animal crafts a gesture with a purpose for an audience, she or he becomes a maker. If Kennedy argues for a “universal rhetoric” shared by all animals, I suggest a “universal poetics” based upon material gestures. This universal poetics encapsulates the first focus of zoopoetics: animals, including humans, have agency in a bodily *poiesis* that empowers the given animal to navigate rhetorical situations. Recognizing a universal bodily *poiesis* becomes a crucial step towards rethinking Whitman’s “original energy.”

To shift toward the second facet of zoopoetics—that nonhuman animals contribute to the making of poetry—requires a look at Julia Kristeva’s understanding of the revolution in twentieth-century poetry

and poetics. Doing so extends Abram's insight, for we readily see how the animate world infuses not only ideogrammatic systems, but alphabetic systems as well.

### *Poetic Animality*

Literary studies seem to have moved beyond Kristeva's work, but her *Revolution of Poetic Language* provides a tremendous amount of explanatory power concerning what happened to poetry in the twentieth century—something that began with Whitman. Like Kennedy, her theory rests on the premise that “*preverbal gestures*” always already “precede the positing of the static terms/symbols of [alphabetic] language.” The energy of the preverbal gesture enacts a “deluge of the signifier, which so inundates the symbolic order that it portends the latter's dissolution in a dancing, singing, and *poetic animality*.” (This happens in uncanny places, such as the logo for Washington State University: the *WSU* exhibits a dramatic zoomorphism into a cougar in a deluge that overwhelms the letters.) To bolster her theory, she draws on psycholinguists who argue that the concrete operations of gestures “precede the acquisition of language, and organize the preverbal semiotic space.” All of this surrounds and helps articulate Kristeva's theory of the inexpressible, ineffable *semiotic chora* which, again, resonates with Kennedy's notion of rhetorical energy, for it is the “discrete quantities of energy [that] move through the body [which are] always already involved in a semiotic process.”<sup>15</sup>

Part of her work highlights how the poetic revolution challenged the social and political order through the rupturing of language by the *semiotic chora*, but another emphasis encourages readers to relish in this energy:

Reading means giving up the lexical, syntactic, and semantic operation of deciphering, and instead retracing the path of their production. How many readers can do this? We read signifiers, weave traces, reproduce narratives, systems, and driftings, but never the dangerous and violent crucible of which these texts are only the evidence.<sup>16</sup>

Kristeva's emphasis on the “dangerous and violent crucible” resonates with Abram's theory of language. Though Abram draws on philosophers, he still acknowledges how poets infuse language with the animate world. He delivers the insight, though, within parentheses: “(Every poet is aware of this primordial depth in language. . .).”<sup>17</sup> Kristeva's theory suggests that the “primordial depth in language” is exactly what generates the “deluge of the signifier,” and she, like Abram, prompts readers to trace not signifiers but rather the vestiges of the pre-linguistic *chora* always buoying up even a written, alphabetic word.

Even though Kristeva utilizes the trope of the animal to establish her theory—and I think of the phrase “poetic animality”—her work omits one crucial emphasis: actual nonhuman animals. To put it another way, it is one step to recognize the overwhelming presence of textual gestures within avant-garde poetics and to bestow those gestures with the animating power of animality. A second step involves taking seriously the notion that many other species also undergo their own participation within a preverbal *chora*. We know that subgroups within orca communities speak their own dialect. We also know that primates who have learned how to sign can horizontally (across peers) and vertically (across generations) transmit those coded gestures to initiates within their community. Nonhuman animal signs are, like human signs, always already buoyed up by a body in an act of *poiesis*. Kristeva’s trope, nonetheless, points us in a direction that further diffuses the arbitrary line dividing humans and other animals. A third step, though, requires tracing how the *poiesis* of nonhuman animals contributed to the “deluge of the signifier” characteristic of the poetic revolution. To do so, we must linger in the work of Paul Shepard’s *Thinking Animals: Animals and the Development of Human Intelligence*.

### *Minding Animals*

Shepard laments the current mass extinction of many species for several reasons, but the one his work foregrounds is not the expected. A lack of animals depletes human intelligence. “My thesis,” Shepard states, “is that the mind and its organ, the brain, are in reality that part of us most dependent on the survival of animals.” He continues, “We are connected to animals . . . by sinews that link speech to rationality, insight, intuition, and consciousness.” In order for human imagination, culture, and language to continue to flourish, we utterly depend upon what he calls *minding animals*—an experience many poets, including Whitman, have sought out. Shepard does not discount that other aspects of the more-than-human world shaped the emergence of language, but he focuses primarily upon animals, for the interspecies dynamics surrounding prey and predator push animals to read signs: “hunter and hunted are engaged in an upward, reciprocal spiral of consciousness with its constituents of stratagem and insight.”<sup>18</sup> Perhaps this is why Kennedy claims that “writing is prior to speech,”<sup>19</sup> for human animals learned to read the etchings, markings, traces, scents, imprints, and tracks on the fabulous tablet of the earth—as well as the materiality of bodily *poiesis* evinced in the stalking wolf—prior to discovering ways to turn signs into speech. Shepard’s work allows us to see that natural selection encouraged animals to mind one another, read one another, and enter into what we now see as a material-semiotic exchange between

prey and predator, to use Haraway's phrase again.

Shepard's and Abram's work complement one another. Shepard laments mass extinction of animals as it leads to a depletion of human intelligence. Abram does as well:

As technological civilization diminishes the biotic diversity of the earth, language itself is diminished. As there are fewer and fewer songbirds in the air, due to the destruction of their forests and wetlands, human speech loses more and more of its evocative power. For when we no longer hear the voices of warbler and wren, our own speaking can no longer be nourished by their cadences. . . . as we drive more and more of the land's wild voices into the oblivion of extinction, our own languages become increasingly impoverished and weightless, progressively emptied of their earthly resonance.<sup>20</sup>

Shepard also argues that nothing can replace minding a wild animal: "Neither pets nor zoos, books nor films can replace it."<sup>21</sup> It is no wonder that animals utterly pervade children's stories and therefore the early stages of language acquisition (out of the hundreds of books I have read to my daughter, I can think of just a few that only have human characters)—but according to Shepard, we are mistaken if we think such simulacra replaces a child's miming of a butterfly after chasing one through a field, or attempting a full-bodied growl or snarl after confronting a coyote. Provocatively, children's yoga encourages a child's minding of animals, for many poses such as the snake, the dog, the lion, and the turtle encourage children to participate in animal gestures and vocalizations. For Shepard, though, watching animal gestures on a yoga video may be a start, but it again does not replace living enmeshed within a reciprocal exchange of material signs with species whom the simulacra precedes.<sup>22</sup>

To bolster his argument, Shepard includes a non-exhaustive list of scores of animal infinitives still at work in our language, such as *to bear*, *to quail*, *to badger*, *to scurry*, *to bug*, *to bullshit*, *to outfox*, *to growl*, *to skunk*, *to parrot*, *to duck*, *to wolf your food*, *to worm your way*, *to clam up*, *to horse around*, *to leapfrog*.<sup>23</sup> Such infinitives, pervasive through human discourse, demonstrate how the origin of language lies not in an Indo-European root, but rather, in part, from minding an animal's gestures, their ways of being, their vocalizations. Human ontology is bound up with animal ontology. For instance, many recognize the onomatopoeic dynamic within the word *growl*, but there is more. The diphthong of the "oo<sup>o</sup>ww<sup>w</sup>" can encourage the mouth, lips, jaw, teeth to reenact the accompanying gesture out of which the vocalization arises. One does not merely make the sound of growling, but one's face mimes it in its own moment of bodily *poiesis*. Much more could be said on Sir Paget's "gesture-speech theory," from which I draw, but that will have to wait.<sup>24</sup>

Another similarity between Shepard and Abram is that both discuss the importance of minding birds. Shepard does so briefly,<sup>25</sup> while Abram explores, at length, how the minding of birds shaped the language of the Koyukon Indians in the northwest of Alaska. The Koyukon people do not place human and other animal languages on a hierarchy but rather see the vocalizations and gestures transferring back and forth across species lines. Concerning bird calls, Abram highlights how, as a result of “listen[ing] attentively to subtle nuances and variations in the calls of birds,” their names for birds become “highly onomatopoeic.” When “speaking their names,” the language simultaneously “echo[es] their cries.” This dynamic epitomizes what Shepard calls *minding animals*, and because the process shaped language, it also epitomizes what I call zoopoetics. As Abram puts it, “the sounds and rhythms of the Koyukon language have been deeply nourished by these nonhuman voices.”<sup>26</sup>

Abram and Shepard both expose how the interactions between humans and other animals profoundly shaped human intelligence, human language, and therefore human culture. My departure point, though, involves the recognition that this *minding animals* still occurs, at a profound level, within the tradition of American poetry. This is not to diminish, for instance, Abram’s work, for without exposing how birds influence the language and culture of the Koyukon people, we may not readily recognize the same dynamic within the work of E. E. Cummings, Elizabeth Bishop, Marianne Moore, William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens, Gary Snyder, W. S. Merwin, Brenda Hillman, Emily Dickinson, and Walt Whitman—to name a few. Indeed, the way in which the animate world infuses the language of the Koyukon people (through the minding of animals) also infuses the innovative discoveries of poetic form.

### *Original Energy*

As mentioned, it is beyond the scope of this essay to fully articulate the zoopoetic dynamic within twentieth-century poetry and poetics. Here, I focus on the crucial forerunner, Walt Whitman. I see Whitman as that figure from chaos theory: a butterfly with powerful wings who sent swirls and eddies into the poetic atmosphere. Any study of twentieth-century poetry and poetics cannot be complete without delving into the initial conditions of his work. Whitman’s innovative forms arose, in part, through minding animals, but before articulating this, I address the perplexing question concerning why the zoopoetic dynamic has been overlooked within literary studies and Whitman scholarship.

To answer this question, I turn to Cary Wolfe, a leading scholar in both animal studies and posthumanism. In the introduction to *Zoontolo-*



gies, Wolfe discusses “the radically changed place of the animal itself in areas outside the humanities,” and he argues that the “humanities are . . . now struggling to catch up.”<sup>27</sup> In *Animal Rites*, Wolfe further elucidates the gap in humanist studies through the term “discourse of speciesism” which he defines as “a fundamental repression that underlies most discourse . . . taking it for granted that the subject is always already human.”<sup>28</sup> This is precisely what happened with Whitman. Despite the mice, moose, geese, hawks, ants, frogs, snakes, oxen, spiders, and eagles (to name a few) that populate Whitman’s *oeuvre*, they have received very little scholarly attention. In the 2010 article “As if the beasts spoke?: The animal/animist/animated Walt Whitman,” M. Jimmie Killingsworth notes that “the significance of animal speech in *Leaves of Grass* has been mostly overlooked in Whitman criticism,” and he points readers to Thomas Gannon’s other recent article.<sup>29</sup> Killingsworth’s 2010 article begins to fill in the absence of animals in his earlier work. In *Whitman’s Poetry of the Body* from 1989, Killingsworth exemplifies the discourse of speciesism (which many of us have unknowingly participated in at one time or another), for he does not explore a single nonhuman animal’s bodily poetics present within Whitman’s work. His discussion of the poetics of the human body advances the field, but other animals remain outside this discussion. The next step is to extend Killingsworth’s notion of “physical eloquence” to include nonhuman animals, and to see how such nonhuman bodily eloquence shaped Whitman’s poetry.<sup>30</sup>

Returning to his 2010 article, “As if the beasts spoke?,” I highlight the need for the theory of zoopoetics. Killingsworth gravitates to the passage I include as the epigraph of this essay from the poem which eventually evolved into “Song of Myself”: “I see in them and myself the same old law” (*LG* 1855, 21). Killingsworth notes that the human barbaric *Yawp* and the *Ya-honk* of the geese are cross-stitched together through their similar sounds, and he concludes that Whitman, therefore, “refused to . . . reinforce the Great Chain of Being,”<sup>31</sup> but there is more within the “same old law” to unpack.

In the context of a zoopoetics informed by Abram’s *Spell of the Sensuous*, Kennedy’s universal rhetorical energy, Kristeva’s deluge of the signifier, and Shepard’s minding animals, I clarify what “the same old law” refers to. Animals, including humans, are makers. In many instances, a few discussed below, Whitman minded animals, and when he did, he developed breakthroughs in his poetic form. The bodily poetics of animals (I focus on nonhuman), shaped the poetic gestures of the page, thereby contributing to the deluge of energy that inundates the signifier. And this is not a minor element within Whitman’s poetics. In “A Backward Glance o’er Traveled Roads”—his prose piece concluding the 1892 edition of his tome—Whitman says “Leaves of

Grass' is avowedly the song of Sex and Amativeness, and even Animality—*though meanings that do not usually go along with those words are behind all, and will duly emerge*" (LG 1892, 436, emphasis mine). I suggest that Whitman's "Animality" and the "same old law" refer to that "original energy" shared by all animals who undergo a bodily *poiesis*. "Original energy" is not a monospecies event for Whitman despite how many critics have limited that energy to the bodies of humans. All animals are zoopoetic, generating poetic energy through the illimitable gestures and vocalizations of their bodies. Of course, that well-known phrase, "original energy," occurs within the 1860 *Leaves of Grass*. In all later editions, it remains and eventually migrates to the first section of "Song of Myself." And this leads me to my departure point from Cary Wolfe. The humanities overall may lag behind the radical revaluation of animals in human culture, but the poets have not. Whitman's multispecies "original energy" has been there all along, even, I suggest, as a prototype to Kennedy's rhetorical energy. In "The Poet"—published in 1844 and read by Whitman prior to the publication of *Leaves of Grass*—Ralph Waldo Emerson calls for a new poem: "For it is not metres, but a metre-making argument that makes a poem—a thought so passionate and alive that like the spirit of a plant *or an animal* it has an architecture of its own."<sup>32</sup> Much Whitman scholarship delves into the plants in Whitman's poetic vision,<sup>33</sup> but now it is time to uncover the animals. Emerson provides a seed for the second focus of zoopoetics: the minding of an animal to such an extent that the architecture of a poem becomes revolutionized. And though I doubt Kristeva had Whitman in mind when she wrote *Revolution in Poetic Language*, we see that the energy of animal *poiesis* contributes to the deluge of the signifier in Whitman's original architectures.

In many moments throughout his *oeuvre*, Whitman closely reads the bodily poetics of another species. For instance, in "Locusts and Katydid," Whitman paid very close attention to the locust-song:

A single locust is now heard near noon from a tree two hundred feet off, as I write—a long whirring, continued, quite loud noise graded in distinct whirls, or swinging circles, increasing in strength and rapidity up to a certain point, and then a fluttering, quietly tapering fall. Each strain is continued from one to two minutes. The locust-song is very appropriate to the scene—gushes, has meaning, is masculine, is like some fine old wine, not sweet, but far better than sweet. . . . Let me say more about the song of the locust, even to repetition; a long, chromatic, tremulous crescendo, like a brass disk whirling round and round, emitting wave after wave of notes, beginning with a certain moderate beat or measure, rapidly increasing in speed and emphasis, reaching a point of great energy and significance, and then quickly and gracefully dropping down and out. Not the melody of the singing-bird—far from it; the common musician might think without melody, but surely having to the finer ear a harmony of its

own; monotonous—but what a swing there is in that brassy drone, round and round, cymbaline—or like the whirling of brass quoits.<sup>34</sup>

Here, we have not only a description of the locust-song, but also evidence of the second facet of zoopoetics: the rhythms, cadences, and sounds of the locust-song shaped Whitman's prose. He uses many verbful adjectives that, taken together, suggest an augmentation of energy: *whirring, swinging, increasing, fluttering, tapering, whirling, emitting, beginning, increasing, dropping, whirling*. We notice, too, how the form of his prose—the length of phrases and the energy within his sentences—likewise exhibits an *increasing, whirling, swinging* augmentation. Readers of this kind of sensuous language experience the immediacy of the animate world as nonhuman animals influence the form of a sentence—even a sentence within alphabetic discourse.<sup>35</sup>

Another instance further exposes the zoopoetic dynamic in Whitman's *oeuvre*, "A Noiseless Patient Spider" (*LG* 1892, 343). Rather than seeing the spider merely as a trope for Whitman's soul, I suggest that the impetus for the poem emerged from Whitman's minding of a spider undergoing her own act of bodily *poiesis*: web-making.<sup>36</sup> From this perspective, the poem hinges not on the turn to the soul in the second stanza, but rather on the line "It launch'd forth filament, filament, filament, out of itself." The spider's *poiesis* animates the poem on several layers of iconicity. Most obvious, perhaps, is the onomatopoetic effect of the five *f* sounds, the *ffffff* of the thread launched into the "vacant vast surrounding." A more involved reader, though, begins to mime this launching of the thread—mime, therefore, the bodily *poiesis* of the spider—gesturing with one's arm and hand out toward the "vacant vast surrounding" in front of him or her. This insight leads to a third level of iconicity: the spatial/temporal dynamic both on the poetic page and in the empty space around the spider/reader. Because the line pulses with a dactylic beat (IT launched forth FILament, FILament, FILament, OUT of itSELF)—we expect the two soft beats following SELF. A patient reader pauses not only because of the line break, but because of the stillness generated by the absence of the soft beats. We then see the last *f* trailing off in this temporal pause into the "vacant vast surrounding" of the spatial poetic page at the end of the line break, and this coincides with the empty space around the spider/reader who launches (or mimes launching) the filaments. The audio/visual/bodily/spatial/temporal iconicity allows the reader to experience vestiges of the *poiesis* of the actual, extratextual spider Whitman attentively engaged.

But that is not all. The dactylic pulses from "filament, filament, filament" augment throughout the poem. Much like the *whirling, swinging, emitting*, energy of the locust-song, the dactylic energy of the *filament, filament, filament* gives shape to harmonious iambic/dactylic/

anapestic rhythms of three stresses in “the vacant vast surrounding” (iambic); “measureless oceans of space” (dactylic); “Till the bridge you will need be form’d” (anapestic); “till the ductile anchor hold” (anapestic); “Till the gossamer thread you fling” (anapestic). This rhythm of threes (filament occurs three times; filament has three syllables; each phrase quoted has three strong beats; there are three *till*’s), manifests itself in the title and first line’s iambic trimeter “A Noiseless Patient Spider.” Whitman could have said “thread, thread, thread” or “silk, silk, silk”—but he selected *filament, filament, filament*. That constellation of repeated words becomes the starting point that shapes the rhythms throughout the entire poem, and I suggest that he chose that word through minding an actual spider who launched more than one or two threads. Consequently, this poem transcends the alphabetic system it begins in and becomes an ideogrammatic, material architecture where, to use Abram’s titular phrase, the spell of the sensuous readily surfaces.

When we take the bodily *poiesis* of a spider seriously—and when we realize that the spider is much more than a trope for the soul—we see how Whitman’s minding of a spider enabled him to achieve significant breakthroughs in poetic form, especially the interrelated constellations of iambs, dactyls, and anapests that all gyrate out of the iconic *fffff* of a spider launching a filament. “A Noiseless Patient Spider” is one of the best poems, for in it, the body of a spider re-appears.

Zoopoetics, then, illuminates an overlooked dynamic within Whitman’s *oeuvre*, and there is more to explore. We could recast Whitman’s titles to be “I Sing the Eagles Electric,” thereby introducing a comparative study of human bodily *poiesis* (“I Sing the Body Electric”) and that of the eagles (“The Dalliance of the Eagles”). “The Dalliance of the Eagles” also complements “A Noiseless Patient Spider,” for the eagles’ bodily *poiesis* happens in the same creative space as the spider: the “measureless oceans of [atmospheric] space.” The spider, the eagles, the locusts, and the human all follow the “same old law” of a *poiesis* emerging from the “original energy” of the body.

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Like the Koyukon Indians whose language was shaped by bird songs, nonhuman animals shaped Whitman’s making of poems. Zoopoetics exposes the dynamic within Whitman’s *oeuvre* that, as mentioned, has been largely overlooked. Kennedy’s work on rhetorical energy, though, offers the insight that Whitman’s “original energy” includes all animals. It is, to use Kennedy’s category, the *genus* that includes all processes of *poiesis*. From the intense morphing of the mimic octopi to the kneading of a cat’s paws on a human thigh, animals are makers too. Within alphabetic systems, then, the micro-universe of poetry exists where a minding

of animals pushes poets to innovatively create new architectures. Here, language is intensely iconic, thereby becoming a borderland between the human reader and the animal *poiesis* infused therein.

We must return, though, to the concern of Abram and Shepard, both of whom emphasize human dependence upon other animals for the nurturing of human language, imagination, and culture. If Whitman did not mind locusts, spiders, eagles, and the innumerable other species populating his poetry and prose, the sensuous energy of his work would be diminished. I recognize that mass extinction effaces—and mass simulacra eclipses—animals, thereby diminishing our experiences of interspecies interactions. Whitman’s vision set forth in “Song of Myself” involves teaching readers how to discover and make our own poems: “Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of all poems, . . . You shall not look through my eyes . . . nor take things from me” (*LG* 1892, 30). Minding animals contributes to our understanding of the “origin of all poems” and how we might enact Whitman’s educational imperative. However, once the eagles are gone, poems like “The Dalliance of the Eagles” will have no referent, and they will become their own elegiac simulacra for the species no longer animating new architectures within human language.

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## NOTES

- 1 Brian Rotman, *Becoming Beside Ourselves: The Alphabet, Ghosts, and Distributed Human Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 3.
- 2 Richard Lanham, *The Electronic Word: Democracy, Technology, and the Arts* (University of Chicago Press, 1993), 43.
- 3 Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (Philadelphia: David McKay, 1891-2), 176. Hereafter, *LG*. Available on the *Walt Whitman Archive* ([whitmanarchive.org](http://whitmanarchive.org)).
- 4 David Abram, *Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2010), 3, 176.
- 5 David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1996), 101. Hereafter, *Spell*.
- 6 I have found only two uses of zoopoetics prior to mine. In *The Animal that Therefore I Am*, ed. Marie-Louise Mallet, trans. David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), Derrida mentions “Kafka’s vast zoopoetics” (6), but his usage refers to the abundance of animals in Kafka’s work. Chris White uses the phrase in his 2008 dissertation “Animals, Technology, and the Zoopoetics of American Modernism,” (Pennsylvania State University, 2008), but chooses another phrase, “the uncanny zoology of modernism” in his publication that emerged from the dissertation. See “The Modern Magnetic Animal: *As I Lay Dying* and the Uncanny Zoology of Modernism,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 31:3 (Spring 2008): 81–101. White draws on notions of the magnetic, electric animal as well as the term zoosemiotics to diffuse the

line between humans and other animals in Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, while I draw on rhetorical theory to establish a bodily poetics shared by all animals in order to trace how such poetics contributed to the revolution of form within 20th-century poetics. In "Zoopoetics: A Look at Cummings, Merwin, & the Expanding Field of Ecocriticism," *Humanimalia: A Journal of Human/Animal Interface Studies* 3:2 (Spring 2012), I establish some initial thoughts on zoopoetics that this essay extends.

7 Diane Davis, *Inessential Solidarity: Rhetoric and Foreigner Relations* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010), 155.

8 Debra Hawhee, "Toward a Bestial Rhetoric," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 44:1 (2011), 81, 82.

9 George A. Kennedy, "A Hoot in the Dark: The Evolution of General Rhetoric," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 25:1 (1992), 6. Hereafter, "Hoot." Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 206, 42, 232.

10 Kennedy, "Hoot," 12, 5, 1.

11 See Kristen Abbey's "Dog Theory," *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 17:4 (Autumn 2010), 777–780. Abbey provides a close reading of the innumerable, often overlooked, material signs exchanged between her greyhound and her before heading out for a walk. Her work provides another example of a nonhuman animal possessing agency in a bodily *poiesis* necessary to navigate the rhetorical situation.

12 Kennedy, "Hoot," 6.

13 Aristotle, *History of Animals, Books VII–X*, trans. and ed. D. M. Balme (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 335, 333–369. Fascinatingly, Aristotle recognizes that many animals do not merely "hear sounds" but are able to "distinguish the differences between the signs" thereby making "learning and instruction, some from each other, some from humans" possible (215). The Greek word he uses for "signs" is *semeion*, the root for *semiotics*. More to the point, a search on the digital tool at [perseus.tufts.edu](http://perseus.tufts.edu) highlights how *semeion*—to use Tim McGee's phrase from our email exchange on this subject—"looms large" in Book 1, Chapter 2 of Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, and it occurs sixty-two times throughout *Rhetoric* as a whole. Was Aristotle a proto-posthumanist? Regardless of how one answers that question, Aristotle saw an intra- and interspecies rhetoric at work founded on an animal's ability to make and read signs.

14 When I discuss zoopoetics with colleagues, I often receive the hesitant "but isn't attributing agency to nonhuman animals a form of anthropomorphism?" Several other thinkers in animal studies have addressed this question at length. Anthropomorphism is only a fallacy when we are staunch humanists. If continuity, rather than stark divide, informs how we see humans and other animals, then we need anthropomorphisms and zoomorphisms (attributing animal characteristics to humans) in order to understand that continuity. Greg Garrard distinguishes between a "critical" and a "crude" anthropomorphism in *Ecocriticism*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2012), 160; hereafter, *Ecocriticism*. Philo and Wilbert call for a "guarded anthropomorphism" in *Animal Spaces, Beastly Places: New Geographies of Human-Animal Relations* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 19–20. Such terms open space to explore the continuity between all animals in a field hesitant to become posthuman.

15 Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 122–23, 79 italics added, 27, 25. Hereafter, *Revolution*.

16 Kristeva, *Revolution*, 102–103.

17 Abram, *Spell*, 145. I find it strange Abram places parentheses around what could easily be a book. A sub-argument running through my approach to zoopoetics involves seeing the poet on the same plane as the philosopher, theorist, and rhetorician. When one needs credibility within Animal Studies, she or he cites the philosophers, theorists, ethologists, and rhetoricians much more readily than the poet. It is this gap my work aims to fill—though I recognize that my reading of Whitman, to gain credibility, needs the rhetoricians and theorists to open space.

18 Paul Shepard, *Thinking Animals: Animals and the Development of Human Intelligence* (New York: Viking Press, 1978), 2, 6–7. Hereafter, *Thinking Animals*.

19 Kennedy, “Hoot,” 13.

20 Abram, *Spell*, 86.

21 Shepard, *Thinking Animals*, 249.

22 Greg Garrard applies Jean Baudrillard’s well-known theory of simulacra to ecocriticism (*Ecocriticism*, 190–193). I cite Garrard’s application over the original source because Garrard emphasizes the unnerving implications when simulacra precede and eclipse all that interacts within depleting ecosystems.

23 Shepard, *Thinking Animals*, 27.

24 In “Language as Sensuous Action: Sir Richard Paget, Kenneth Burke, and Gesture-Speech Theory,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 92: 4 (November 2006), 331–354, Hawhee traces the Darwin, Paget, Burke lineage concerning the body’s presence within language, and as she does so, she recapitulates Sir Paget’s theory set forth in *Human Speech: Some Observations, Experiments, and Conclusions as to the Nature, Origin, Purpose and Possible Improvement of Human Speech* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1930). In short, Paget argues that the mouth, lips, tongue, and jaw unconsciously mimed the gestures of the hands. Over time, hand gestures migrated to the region of the mouth. Speech arose when breath passed through a gesturing mouth while the hands were busy. In hundreds of roots within and beyond the Indo-European, Paget exposes how the motions of a speaking mouth correspond to the gestures/actions of the body (Paget 140–145). And so, when we say “hither,” our tongue still mimes the gesture of waving someone to come *hither* (138). When we say *spit* or *spew*, our lips still mime the actual action/gesture of *spitting* and *spewing* (153). To be clear, this is not “onomatopoeia” but rather what Paget calls a “pantomimic gesture” of the mouth (174). I cannot say whether Paget’s theory is *the* theory concerning the origin of language, but it articulates a contributing influence. Poets have routinely exploited this pantomimic effect. When we say *could twist the sinews of thy heart*, our jaw and cheeks mime the twisting action of the hands twice: once with *twist* and once with the first syllable of *sinews*. William Blake, therefore, demonstrates how the sensuous world animates the language of alphabetic systems, but it takes Paget’s gesture-speech theory to illuminate the origins of this pantomimic effect.

25 Shepard, *Thinking Animals*, 34–35.

26 Abram, *Spell*, 145–153; 146, 147.

27 Cary Wolfe, *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), xi.

28 Cary Wolfe, *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and Posthumanist Theory* (University of Chicago Press, 2003), 1.

29 M. Jimmie Killingsworth, “‘As if the beasts spoke’: The animal/animist/animated Walt Whitman,” *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 28:1–2 (Summer/Fall 2010), 35n5, hereafter, “‘As if the beasts spoke’”; Thomas C. Gannon, “Complaints from the Spotted Hawk: Flights and Feathers in Whitman’s 1855 *Leaves of Grass*,” in *Leaves of Grass: The Sesquicentennial Essays*, ed. Susan Belasco, Ed Folsom, and Kenneth M. Price (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 141–178. My research uncovered an earlier, fascinating article by Edmond Reiss: “Whitman’s Debt to Animal Magnetism,” *PMLA* 78:1 (March 1963), 80–88. I surmise, though, that the reason why Reiss’s work did not generate more influence in the field is due to the lack of context for ideas such as animal magnetism. That said, Reiss’s work, coupled with Lippit’s *Electric Animal: Toward a Rhetoric of Wildlife* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000) has many synergetic possibilities for future discussions.

30 M. Jimmie Killingsworth, “Whitman’s Physical Eloquence,” in *Walt Whitman: The Centennial Essays*, ed. Ed Folsom (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1994), 68.

31 Killingsworth, “‘As if the beasts spoke,’” 22.

32 Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Brooks Atkinson (New York: Modern Library, 2000), 290, emphasis mine.

33 For excellent reads on Whitman’s ecology of vegetation, specifically grass, see Killingsworth’s *Walt Whitman and the Earth: A Study in Eco-poetics* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2004) where he sees “This Compost” as “Whitman’s greatest contribution to the literature of ecology” (11); Jed Rasula’s *This Compost: Ecological Imperatives in American Poetry* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2002), a performative argument that uses Whitman’s ecological composting as a guiding trope; and Paul Outka’s “(De)composing Whitman,” *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 12:1 (Winter 2005), 41–60, a thoroughgoing ecocritical read of “This Compost” and Whitman’s “proto-toxic consciousness” (56).

34 Walt Whitman, *Complete Prose Works* (Philadelphia: David McKay, 1892), 89. Available on the *Walt Whitman Archive* ([whitmanarchive.org](http://whitmanarchive.org)).

35 My first example highlights the zoopoetic dynamic in prose. Often, a writer with poetic sensibilities can accomplish what Whitman does here. I suggest, though, that the genre of poetry yields a more fruitful exploration of zoopoetics simply because many more variables (stanza breaks, line breaks, word breaks, expected musicality, etc.) create more flexibilities of form, making more space than prose to gesture within and through the limited alphabetic system of writing.

36 Readers may balk at the assumption that a spider possesses agency, but I see the other position—that a spider is nothing more than a programmed, instinct-driven machine who has no more sense of being-in-the-world than a stone (to echo Descartes and Heidegger) to be the absurd one. Greg Garrard provides glosses on Descartes and Heidegger’s positions (*Ecocriticism*, 28, 34), and Derrida deconstructs a philosophical tradition, which includes Descartes and Heidegger, in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. I imagine that Tatiana—the Siberian tiger who escaped from her cage in the San Francisco zoo, tracked down the humans who taunted her, and killed one—possesses more agency than a spider (see McFarland and Hediger, *Animals and Agency: An Interdisciplinary Exploration* [Boston: Brill, 2009], 1). One may argue that making a web, for a spider, is an unconscious activity devoid of agency. Human gesticulations



are unconscious as well, but as Kennedy's work suggests, gesticulations in all of their unconscious movement still generate a tremendous amount of rhetorical energy. We often are impacted by the energy of gesticulations that buoy up a word rather than the word itself. I also point out that human makers rarely attribute their work solely to the conscious mind but recognize some inscrutable feedback loop between the unconscious and the conscious, the id and the ego, out of which their *poiesis* emerges. I cannot offer more than a non-scientific perspective on the agency spiders possess. For far too long, though, humanists have limited agency to humans alone rather than seeing a continuity of different degrees of agency throughout all species. And yet, Darwin (nor God, nor Darwin and God, whatever one's perspective is) did not turn agency "off" for the arachnids, insects, amphibians, reptiles, and birds while leaving it "on" for the mammals. Differences between species are in degree, not kind. What Edgar Allan Poe said of his cat whom he watched figure out how to open a door holds true, in my mind, for any animal, like a spider, who must problem solve to one degree or another: "The line which demarcates the instinct of the brute creation from the boasted reason of man, is, beyond doubt, of the most shadowy and unsatisfactory character—a boundary line far more difficult to settle than even the North-Eastern or the Oregon" (477–478). I cannot help but see Poe's trope of mapping. To overlay a bioregion with a political map is as disastrous as trying to impose a border between humans and all other animals. See Poe's "Instinct vs. Reason—A Black Cat," in *Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe, Tales and Sketches, 1831-1842*, ed. T. O. Mabbott, volume 2 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), 477–479.