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Zoopoetics: A Look at Cummings, Merwin, & the Expanding Field of Ecocriticism[1]

> *I know the Butterfly—and the Lizard—and the Orchis.*
> *Are not those* your *Countrymen?*
> ~ Emily Dickinson

> *That is the kind of poetry I bring to your attention today:*
> *poetry that does not try to find an idea in the animal, that is*
> *not about the animal, but is instead a record of an engagement with him.*
> ~ J. M. Coetzee

Introduction. Ever since its inception, ecocriticism has been interdisciplinary. Recently, however, several scholars have begun redrawing the interdisciplinary boundaries in order to include and emphasize the agency of nonhuman animals.[2] Lawrence Buell compares ecocriticism to a constellation, which helps frame the emergent focal points (133): humans are not the only beings who exhibit agency within environments; one can integrate ideas from animal-studies scholars, ethologists, and rhetoricians who no longer see language as a hallmark of human exceptionality. These interdisciplinary sources become, in a sense, stars that reframe the patterns of ecocriticism. I introduce the term zoopoetics into ecocritical discourse. As *poetics* is, in part, the study of what poetry does—what it accomplishes as a verb—*zoopoetics* provides a theoretical focus to explore what a poem does—as a verb—to our understanding of and relationship with nonhuman animals. Are animals glossed over in a text? Are animals portrayed as having agency? If so, what is the impetus for that agency? How does the text complicate the human/animal divide? Is human exceptionality questioned or affirmed?

I see zoopoetics further clarifying ecopoetics, as defined by Jonathan Bate. For Bate, ecopoetics "engage[s] *imaginatively* with the non-human" (199).[3] Despite the fact that Bate highlights how "whales can commit suicide," "animals feel pain," and an environment is something that all animals "share" (177, 188), the definition of ecopoetics goes in one direction. Though the fundamental premise for ecocriticism is that all that exists is dynamically interrelated, Bate's definition excludes the ways nonhuman animals engage the "human other." Later, Bate further explores this imaginative engagement with the nonhuman, drawing on Heidegger's idea of dwelling (258-266). In *Poetry, Thought, Language* (1971), Heidegger develops the interdependency

between poetry and dwelling: "poetry and dwelling belong to one another ... [for] poetry, as the authentic gauging of the dimension of dwelling, is the primal form of building" (227). "Building" refers to the cultivation of a sense of poetic dwelling on earth. But for Heidegger (and therefore Bate), the capacity to dwell poetically is restrictively a human affair. Nonhuman animals vocalize and gesture, but their sign-systems surely do not approach poetic dwelling. I extend Bate's definition of ecopoetics by focusing on how nonhuman animals also dwell on the earth, engaging imaginatively with their own kind, with other species, with their environments, and with the human-other.

Ecocritics at times indirectly gloss over the agency of nonhuman animals. For instance, in *This Compost* (2002) Jed Rasula explores how poetry functions as a "kind of echo-location" that empowers humans to become deeply connected with their environment (8).[4] Poetry helps cultivate a sense of place for the human, but this cultivation hinges on the metaphor "poet-as-bat." The underlying assumption is that bats (and other nonhuman animals) only navigate space whereas the human transforms that space into place through dwelling poetically. These fundamental definitions in ecocriticism assume that the human is the one who engages the "non-human," thereby eclipsing how nonhuman animals also engage other beings and environments, and this oversight, as slight as it may seem, contributes to what Cary Wolfe calls the "institution of speciesism" (2)—a discourse that routinely exhibits a "fundamental repression" that takes "for granted the subject is always already human" (1). Pronoun use in popular parlance belies this repression—animal as "it"—for objects do not have agency, and such use hints at a more entrenched ideology that shapes how one understands and interacts with the "other." What if other animals also dwell on the earth, cultivating a sense of place? Zoopoetics helps augment a paradigm shift in which the agency of nonhuman animals is taken more seriously within both the humanities and ecocriticism, but this agency needs clarification.[5] The following section clarifies this agency and consequently provides a theoretical basis for the next section where I apply zoopoetics to a reading of Cummings's and Merwin's poetry.

Defining Zoopoetics. Unlike the term ecopoetics, few scholars or theorists have used the term zoopoetics. Most famously, Jacques Derrida mentions the term in passing when talking about his cat: "The cat I am talking about does not belong to Kafka's vast zoopoetics" (6)—suggesting merely the abundance of animals within Kafka's stories. Derrida then moves to his deconstruction of the human/animal binary within western philosophy, and never returns to the concept of zoopoetics. Often, when a scholar uses

the term, she or he simply quotes Derrida but gives little attention to defining it (for an example, see Danta 160). However, in *Animals, Technology, and the Zoopoetics of American Modernism* (2008), Christopher White begins to develop the concept of zoopoetics, drawing on Derrida's use and conflating it with Thomas Sebeok's work on zoosemiotics. White's third chapter focuses on the "zoosemiotic tour de force" of Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* ([1930] 115), suggesting that, in general terms, zoopoetics illuminates the commonality between human and nonhuman signing. The notion of zoosemiotics extends zoopoetics, but zoopoetics can encapsulate more than the sign-systems of nonhuman animals. Zoopoetics is best understood as a poetry that revisits, examines, perplexes, provokes, and explores the agency of the nonhuman animal. Though this definition has many possible trajectories, in what follows I establish three premises for this agency: nonhuman animals dwell imaginatively, rhetorically, and culturally on the earth.

The concept of the imagination has a rich history, and the application of such a faculty to nonhuman animals invites dissent. A specific definition is therefore needed. I use the term to describe the capacity that enables any animal to innovate, think, project, problem solve, teach, learn, and pretend. For instance, orca whales demonstrate "clear examples of vocal culture, with pod-specific dialects ... and interclan (but not intercommunity) whistle similarity ... that is believed to be used to maintain group cohesion" (Sargeant and Mann 161). We now know this, yet the question still remains whether a clan's vocal culture "proves" an imaginative quality as defined above. Do the differing dialects emerge through word play, emulation, "secret handshakes," and then transmission? Such may be the case. Orcas demonstrate another behavior that further indicates they possess imagination. A few adult whales generate a wave that washes over an ice floe, pushing a seal from safety and into the water. Moments later, the seal is back on the ice floe in clear sight of the orcas. Notably, a young orca observes this behavior, and seems to watch as the adults undertake the task a second time. Though interpretations are necessarily speculative, this behavior suggests that 1) at some point, an orca or group of orcas discovered that they could use a wave as a tool to wash a seal into the water; 2) orcas improved upon this discovery with other innovations until the technique became what it is today: a few adults generating a wave with flawless coordination; 3) the hunting technique is passed vertically from generation to generation through intentional teaching, i.e., pretending to hunt for the benefit of the younger generation; 4) the vocal culture and the bodily gestures of the clan must be sophisticated enough to collaborate and communicate that it is time to pretend to hunt, or rather, that it is time to teach; 5) the adults must project into the future and grasp the importance of passing down the behavior to the young generation; and 6) the young

orca must also have the capacity to project into the future, to imagine the possibility of making a wave in order to eat. We do not know if later the young orca attempts to make a wave, and if the adults understand the vocalization and gesture of the attempt and then rally to support the acquisition of the tradition. Such a scenario seems tenable, though, and the entire process demonstrates how orcas innovate, think, project, problem solve, teach, learn, and pretend.

The imaginative capacity is not unique to orcas, for in the *Planet Earth* episode on humpbacks, we discover a similar example of innovative breakthroughs (Fothergill). The cinematography focuses first on a circle of bubbles erupting at the surface of the ocean, piquing one's curiosity. Then the cameras move underwater to capture several humpback whales working together, coordinating bursts of air from their blowholes, spiraling around innumerable unseen krill, corralling them before turning toward the now dense cloud of krill in order to feast. Such behavior moves beyond the traditional view of "instinct" and into the reality that such a ritual is a learned behavior, passed down from one generation to another. The footage begs us to speculate that, at some point, a group of whales collectively discovered that such a technique was possible. Perhaps one whale had the initial, innovative idea. She or he had to realize that bubbles could become a tool and that a group could work together to corral the krill. They had to communicate through gestures and vocalizations embedded within those gestures. To accomplish such a feat of innovation and communication, the whales must have the capacity to imagine.

It is easier to attribute an imaginative faculty to cetaceans than to a mere insect. Another episode from *Planet Earth*, however, suggests otherwise. The narration establishes the insidious nature of the Cordyceps fungus (Fothergill). When the fungus infects an ant, the fungus spreads to his or her brain, making the ant crawl deliriously upward. After the ant dies, the fungus sprouts out of the ant's brain, grows several inches, and then buds spores. If an infected ant crawls above the colony, the fungus could infect them all. Remarkably, in one moment of the episode, the camera captures some of the ants hauling away an infected member. The narrator interprets this action as precautionary and preventative, for they carry the ant far from the colony and drop him down to the jungle floor. Again, such behavior moves beyond mere "instinct," for the ants had to observe the erratic behavior of the infected ant, recognize the causal link between such behavior and the imminent danger to the colony, conclude, communicate through embodied signs, and act. Ants—as well as humpback whales and orcas—are not passive

beings functioning on mindless instinct; rather, they demonstrate agency through their imaginative capacities.

Another indication that nonhuman animals possess an imaginative quality leads us to the second facet of agency that underwrites zoopoetics: nonhuman animals are rhetorical beings. They gesture, and when they vocalize, the sounds are always already embedded in these gestures. To make a gesture, all animals must perceive an audience and have a purpose. The ability to create a gesture, deliver it to an audience, and achieve a specific purpose indicates the rhetor possesses some level of imagination. Indeed, all animals participate in what George Kennedy calls "rhetorical energy." He uses the trope of taxonomy to remind us that human language is but one expression of thought and emotion.[6] Comparing each sign-system (human and nonhuman) to types of *species*, he then queries what the common *genus* might be. Through this trope, Kennedy establishes an evolutionary framework for readers to contemplate the origin of language. The origin of human language, its *genus*, is "rhetorical energy":

> Rhetoric in the most general sense may perhaps be identified with the energy inherent in communication: the emotional energy that impels the speaker to speak, the physical energy expended in the utterance, the energy level coded in the message, and the energy experienced by the recipient in decoding the message. (2)

He sees semantics as only "one vehicle of rhetoric" and identifies some of the "universal rules of rhetorical code" that all animals (and even plants) share (3, 10). Essential to his argument is the axiom that rhetorical energy is "present in physical actions, facial expressions, gestures, and signs generally" (4), and because this rhetorical energy is "prior to speech" (4), it is something in which all animals participate: "We [all animals] share a 'deep' universal rhetoric" (6).[7]

Much of his support for this argument comes from his studies and observations of the rhetorical energy infusing the rituals of crows, but he extends the observation to other animals:

> A kind of proto-rhetoric can be said to exist in those creatures that can react to a challenge by change of color or shape or by spewing out some substance as does an octopus. Some action produces sound, which other creatures can perceive although the originator of the sound may not. Many insects create sound instrumentally, by sawing a part of the anatomy on

> another. A rattlesnake's rhetoric consists of coiling or uncoiling itself, threatening to strike, and rattling its tail, which other creatures hear, even though a rattlesnake is itself deaf. (12-13)

Admittedly, a rattlesnake's rattle emerged not through innovation but rather through natural selection. However, many species have developed dialects within the vocalizations of their species. Such behaviors are not rendered passively, like the rattlesnake's rattle. They emerge from the innovations of a being whose agency is driven by a sense of rhetoric.

These observations augment a shift from holding human language as separate and superior to all other forms of communication to recognizing human language as embedded in the rhetorical energy exhibited by myriad other social, interactive, communicative beings with whom we co-inhabit the earth. Even a human word is always already embedded in some gesture—whether that gesture involves typeface, font-size, and a host of formatting decisions or involves intonation, inflection, amplification, pitch, facial expression, bodily tilt, etc. Rhetorical energy always buoys up a word, and if seen dialogically, it always affects the word's meaning. In this light, zoopoetics helps diffuse the boundary between the human and the animal as it explores and exposes the rhetorical energy in spheres shared by all animals. [8]

The imaginative capacity of nonhuman animals, coupled with the "deep universal rhetoric" shared by all animals, establishes a framework to enter into the third facet of agency, the argument that nonhuman animals are cultural beings. In the introduction to *The Question of Animal Culture* (2009), Laland and Galef share their solicitation of several "established authorit[ies] on either social learning or a related field" to enter into a focused debate (2). They asked each contributor whether "animals have culture," and requested that each response should both define the concept of culture and provide evidence that supports their position (2). Those that argue for animal culture point out "behavioral variation underpinned by social learning, group specific repertoires, or the diffusion of innovations," while those that argue for a fundamental difference between animal traditions and human culture argue that social learning mechanisms are different between human and nonhuman animals and that the latter do not demonstrate "cumulative culture" (10).

This debate and the tension surrounding it exemplify Donna Haraway's work on "odd boundary creatures" that have a "destabilizing place in the great Western ... narratives"

(2). She continues, "[t]hese boundary creatures are, literally, *monsters*, a word that shares more than its root with the word, to *demonstrate*. Monsters signify" (2). Chimpanzees and great apes, for example, destabilize the assumption that only humans have culture. An increasing number of nonhuman animals also *demonstrate* that they are *boundary creatures* as well who possess imagination, rhetorical energy, and a degree of culture, including dolphins, humpbacks, finches, mockingbirds, rats, crows, and ants, all of whom *The Question of Animal Culture* discusses. William McGrew, one of the first ethologists to argue for primate culture, contends that the gestures of nonhuman animals—such has hand-clasp grooming (47)—ought to be taken seriously as the development of culture (54), although he is hesitant in his argument, questioning whether we trust the meaning of words or the gestures in which those words are embedded (i.e., "this is fantastic!"—followed by an eye roll). McGrew, though, ought to have listed the many gestures that create human culture, without which its cultural richness would be drastically diminished. Handshakes, hugs, bows, kisses, high-fives, fist-bumps, secret-handshakes, winks, nod of the head—all of these gestures for greeting and departing vary across groups and enrich the sense of belonging. They help define culture. It may be time, then, to consider gestures as fundamental generators of nonhuman culture as well.

Sometimes nonhuman animals develop maladaptive behaviors that spread through the species by social learning (Laland et al. 177). These behaviors can damage an ecosystem, as is indeed the case when the nature/culture binary extends to nonhuman animals, which, in turn, further extends ecocritical discourse by acknowledging the impact nonhuman cultures have on an environment. Hal Whitehead writes with a tone of urgency: "If animals have what we call culture in humans, we should say so both for accuracy and so that its implications, both biologically and in other realms, such as ethics ... can be assessed" (149). Humans are thus guilty of extinctions and of the cultural effacements of endangered species whose populations are no longer large enough to support the diversity and richness of innovative, socially learned behaviors that generate culture. If ethologists recognize a nature/culture binary in nonhuman animals and push for the ethical implications of effacing nonhuman animal cultures, the humanities ought to have insights to contribute as well.

From the evidence outlined above, it seems appropriate to view the differences between human and nonhuman cultures to be in degree rather than in kind. We have no way of knowing whether adult orcas tell a story as they teach their young how to use a wave to wash a seal off an ice floe—whether they somehow communicate "we are passing this down to you as it was passed down to us." There are no museums, or books, or artifacts

to commemorate and preserve the "oral" tradition of vocalizations embodied in gestures that adult orcas employ while teaching, and therefore orca culture is much more ephemeral than human culture, but this seems to be a difference, again, in degree and not in kind. Just as Kennedy sees rhetorical energy as the common *genus* of all animals out of which myriad sign-systems emerge, so it seems plausible that many animals share a common origin, or *genus*, of culture.

The premise of zoopoetics, therefore, is that nonhuman animals have agency as imaginative, rhetorical, and cultural beings. These three facets are interrelated, for animal culture could not exist if not for the rhetorical energy shared between individuals who possess a faculty of the mind to imagine the interplay between purpose, audience, and medium (the rhetorical energy of the gesture). This threefold premise, in turn, provides focus for the reading of poems to explore how they expose these capacities of nonhuman animals.

The Zoopoetics of Cummings and Merwin. Though zoopoetics could be applied to the works of many poets, this paper focuses on E. E. Cummings and W. S. Merwin. Together, their work spans nearly a century and therefore highlights the enduring investigations into the borderlands where humans and animals converge.[9] Cummings and Merwin may seem at first to be a strange pairing of poets. If Cummings is the poet who looks, Merwin is the poet who listens. The former is often reduced to his exuberant celebration of a *mudluscious* Spring, while the latter explores ecological questions with a pensive existentialism. Though Merwin has explored many forms of poetry, he never imitates nor resembles Cummings's innovative (and controversial) forms. Despite these differences, several commonalities draw these poets together. Both move beyond merely writing *about* animals. They have developed, like Kafka, a "vast zoopoetics" (Derrida 6), but instead of using animals as parable, Cummings and Merwin explore the agency of nonhuman animals in ecosystems outside the text. To clarify, Kafka's animals have agency, but they are often anthropomorphized figures serving to further the metaphysical inquires of the given parable. After looking at Kafka's vast zoopoetics, one does not gain insight into the agency of nonhuman animals that exist outside of the parable. Cummings and Merwin, though, tend to explore the agency of an animal stripped (as much as possible) of the anthropomorphized construct. Moreover, there is a reciprocity of agency. The human engages the "other," but the "other," likewise, engages the human.

Another similarity is that both poets argue for the reader to be a performer, an essential premise to their poetics. In "Coney Island," Cummings compares the spectators of the circus to the participants of the roller coaster:

> Whereas at the circus we are merely the spectators of the impossible, at Coney we ourselves perform impossible feats—we turn all the heavenly somersaults imaginable and dare all the delirious dangers conceivable; and when, rushing at horrid velocity over irrevocable precipices, we beard [*sic*] the force of gravity in his lair, no acrobat, no lion tamer, can compete with us. (258)

Moments later in the essay, Cummings emphasizes with all capital letters "THE AUDIENCE IS THE PERFORMANCE, and vice versa," and then he suggests that this will become a "formula" he intends to "make the most of" (258). Though Merwin's idea of the dialogical interplay between text and reader is far from that of a rollercoaster, he nonetheless places responsibility upon the reader's performance of the poem. One of the reasons he eradicated all punctuation from his poetry in the middle of *The Moving Target* (1966), never to return to using it in his many publications thereafter, was that he wanted the reader to "pay attention to things" (Folsom et al. 62). An absence of punctuation entreats the reader to listen actively—a crucial concept in Merwin's poetics—to the "weight of the language as it move[s]" (Folsom et al. 62). Both poets developed a poetics that deepens the reader's experience of poetry by inviting him or her to move beyond observation and into performance.

Along with these similarities, both poets founded their poetics upon a humble understanding of poetry, language, and the extra-textual. Merwin's definition of form, for instance, hints at a broader scope of poetry. He defines poetic form as "the setting down of a way of hearing how poetry happens in words" ("Open Form" 295): poetry is a happening, which is similar to how Cummings saw poems as verbs, and this happening may occur somewhere other than on a page. "The Cold before the Moonrise" exemplifies how Merwin's poetics often gravitate away from human language to some of the other places where poetry happens:

> It is too simple to turn to the sound
> Of frost stirring among its
> Stars like an animal asleep
> In the winter night
> And say I was born far from home

If there is a place where this is the language may
It be my country (ll. 1–7)

The infinitive, "to turn" carries an august resonance throughout Merwin's work as his poems turn from an egocentric or anthropocentric paradigm toward a zoological, ecological, and therefore interrelated ways of being. Here, he turns through listening to the "sound of frost," and he hears the infinitesimal quietness of molecules colliding and crystallizing. He wants the "place where this is the language" to become his "country." Through the trope, Merwin undermines a national identity by suggesting that he wants a "country" that places him directly in contact with the language of the earth. The language Merwin speaks of is, of course, the "sound / Of frost stirring," but he charges this language with the dialogical energy of a simile. By comparing the stirring of frost to an "animal asleep / In the winter night," Merwin animates the frost. As an animal stirs due to his or her agency, so the frost stirs as a result of some other, deeper, working within the earth. And as the stirring frost enhances our conception of a sleeping, dreaming animal, we may recognize that the speaker of this poem yearns for a place where this rhetorical energy is a language and a home. Strikingly, this "place" becomes the poem, not because of the meaning of the words, but because an onomatopoetic hiss of s's permeates the first three lines, allowing a portion of the rhetorical energy of the frost's animated whispering to seep into the poem.

Likewise, Cummings fundamentally situated his poetry within the greater context of the extra-textual earth. Similar to Merwin, he knew that poetry happens in other places than words. It exists within the gestures of animals, an idea he makes explicit in his discussion of sea life: "the fluent technique of seals and of sea lions comprises certain untranslatable idioms, certain innate flexions, which astonishingly resemble the spiritual essence of poetry" ("Circus" 256). Here, Cummings conflates the gestures of poetic form with the gestures of animals, and this concept underwrites many of his typographical explorations where the gestures and vocalizations of nonhuman animals disrupts human language thereby creating an interspecies convergence. Cummings not only discusses these ideas in prose, but he also explores them in his poetry. In an early poem (1919-1920)—one that therefore establishes a perspective of animals that helps illuminate his life's work—Cummings gravitates to the rhetorical energy of a green bird:

in front of your house i

stopped for a second in the

rain,in the Spring.
At the window
only your hands

beautifully,
were

(and the green bird perched carefully upon
a gesture
knew me.) (ll. 1–10)

Cummings juxtaposes two moments. The speaker of the poem stands in the rain and first sees a woman's hands in the window and then sees a green bird. The parentheses reverse the expected hierarchy, for what is inside them (the gesture of the green bird) becomes even more rarified, private, and significant than what is outside (rain, window, hands). The poem hinges on the line breaks and spacing of the final lines—in other words, in the gestures of the poem itself. The bird could have been perched upon the eaves, a branch, a mailbox, a fencepost, a curb, etc., and the line break creates suspense and intensity that otherwise would not be there. When we read that the bird perches upon a "gesture" another line break allows us to linger in this word. The poem, like the bird, gestures to entreat us to contemplate the particular bodily expression, tilt of head, and look of an eye that exhibited enough rhetorical energy to communicate to Cummings, at least, that the bird "knew" him. Consequently, the poem reverses another expectation. One may expect a bird poem to engage a nonhuman "other" and to contribute to the epistemological process of the human knowing that "other"; instead, the human becomes the "other" that the *bird* engages through its own epistemological process. As the bird gestures, so does the poet (through the poem's form), and this reciprocity of agency generates an interspecies borderland amidst the poem's seeming simplicity.

Many of Cummings's poems use language to explore the complex movements of acrobatic beings. His grasshopper and cat poems ("r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r" and "(im)c-a-t(mo)," for instance, both exhibit a fractal textuality: the "leap" of the grasshopper occurs on several different scales, as does the "flip" of the cat (Moe, "Chaos" 20-23; Moe, "Autopoiesis" 114-16). If we think of Cummings's grasshopper poem in the context of gestures we discover a profound statement about movement, rhetorical energy of nonhuman animals, and language. Cummings allows the rhetorical energy of the grasshopper's leap to disrupt the traditional patterns of human language:

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                        r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r
                  who
   a)s w(e loo)k
   upnowgath
               PPEGORHRASS
                                 eringint(o-
   aThe):l
          eA
             !p:
S                                              a
                     (r
   rIvInG                .gRrEaPsPhOs)
                                          to
   rea(be)rran(com)gi(e)ngly
   ,grasshopper; (ll. 1–15)
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The poem "reads" *grasshopper, who as we look up now gathering into the leap arriving as to rearrangingly become grasshopper*—with three scrambled, frenzied spellings of "grasshopper" throughout. Many readers, though, stop here and think only of these moves as "gimmicks" rather than as philosophical musings about what it means to exist in the "now" or in what Cummings called The Verb. The textual and extra-textual grasshopper epitomizes this, for her or his antenna and foot (the "a" on the far right of the poem and the "s" on the left) break out of the strictures of the box, leaping out of the poem (Terblanche, "Fluid" 135; Nänny). This larger leap contains several other leaps of letters (Moe, "Chaos" 20-21), one of which contains a tremendous amount of linguistic energy: "gRrEaPsPhOs." Here, Cummings renders the "grass" lowercase and has the "hOPPER" leap out of the grass, beginning with the lowercase "h" (Webster 111). And yet, the text leaps backwards—REPPOh—surprisingly, just like the extra-textual animal. Amidst these larger leaps, Cummings's fragmentation exhibits the paradoxical wholeness within each part. The fragment "eA" encapsulates a wholeness of the motif of the animal's ":l / eA / !p:," for the fragmentation generates rhetorical energy as the uppercase "A" leaps out of the word into the blank space within the poem, which reenacts the extra-textual energy of the leaping grasshopper. In this way, the poem confronts the reader with the energy of the animal in a fresh and surprising way.[10]

And if we linger within the poem, we recognize that this manifestation of the grasshopper's energy results not only in the frenzied gestures of its leap but also in the embedded sounds within those leaps. Terblanche observes that the poem exhibits many of the sounds that are prime examples of a zoosemiotics:

> Various whirring and clicking sounds of the leap, familiar to anyone who has been surprised by it as has the speaker in this instance, are onomatopoetically suggested by the creative rearrangement of letters on the page: examples include "r-p", "s-s", "g-r", "RHR", "SS", "Ph", "rr", and "gRr." ("Incredible" 16)

The poem moves beyond simply reenacting the grasshopper's leap through a creative rearranging of language. The rhetorical energy and zoosemiotics of a grasshopper infuse human language, thereby creating a porous, interspecies borderland. The grasshopper, as a being with agency, enters into the cultural construct of human poetry. We can only reach this realization, though, when we recognize that Cummings's visual poems often contain an innovative, auditory dynamic.

In the poem "(hills chime with thrush)," Cummings observes behavior suggestive of hummingbird culture. Provocatively, the poem begins by parenthetically acknowledging the presence of thrush in the nearby hills. The behavior, then, of the two hummingbirds, which the following stanzas focus on, is embedded within the greater context of the cultures of other birds. The poem, therefore, exhibits multiculturalism: the culture of thrush, the culture of hummingbirds, and the culture of humans represented by the sign-system of the English language. Cummings' language is ruptured, indicating how the gestures and vocalizations of thrush and hummingbirds destabilize traditional poetics and consequently the assumption that only humans possess poetic dwelling. To use Haraway's language, the birds *demonstrate* in all of their *signifying power*:

> (hills chime with thrush)
>
> A
> hummingbird princess
> FlOaTs
> doll-angel-life
> from

Bet:To;Bouncing,Bet

the
ruby&emerald zigging
HE
of a zagflash king
poUnc

es buzzsqueaking th

ey
tangle in twitter
y t
wofroing chino
ise

r(!)i(?)e(.)s (ll. 1-19)

For readers who have not witnessed the cacophony a "t / wofroing" frenzy generates, the following image may be helpful. A rufous "zagflash[es]" and "buzzsqueak[s]" near a female ruby-throat:

(Photo by Stull, used with permission)

The rapidity of flight, gestures, and vocalizations may cause viewers to dismiss the activity simply as noise rather than to accept it for a rich, layered, and nuanced interaction between birds. For the same reasons, readers may dismiss Cummings's poem, at first, because of the seeming random rupture of words. This rupture, though, like that in the grasshopper poem, is a result of the poem becoming a multi-species

borderland. By infusing the poem with the embodied sign-system of hummingbirds, Cummings allows the words to become an arena of gestures themselves, with surprising bursts of capital letters and sudden breaks of words. Specifically, in the final three lines, the energy ruptures and refigures three words—*hi*, *noise*, *cries*—into "chino / ise // r(!)i(?)e(.)s." The permutation suggests that the vocalizations and gestures, which to some people are nothing more than *noise* and *cries*, are multifaceted, ranging from the welcoming "hi" to exclamatory "(!)", inquisitive "(?)", and declarative "(.)" gestures. These vocalizations and gestures contribute to the cultivation of hummingbird culture, and though some ethologists would hesitate at such a claim until more data definitively "proves" that this behavior is an accumulative, social tradition that differs enough from other populations of hummingbirds, Cummings does not wait. To use J. M. Coetzee's idea, Cummings engages the spectacular and capricious behavior of hummingbirds—but he goes one step further. The poem becomes a place where the hummingbirds engage us.

From hummingbirds, to grasshoppers, cats, green birds, seals, and sea lions, Cummings's poetry exhibits not merely an abundance of animals; rather, his poetry becomes a porous borderland where nonhuman animals enter and engage the reader. Zoopoetics exposes this borderland through highlighting how Cummings's animals are presented as having imagination, rhetorical sensibility, and incipient culture. Similarly, the moves Merwin crafts urge the reader to *listen* to the *weight of the language as it moves*, and in the following poem, the movement of the language—its form—entreats the reader to sense the august movement of the poem's subject, a whale. In "Leviathan" Merwin writes heavy, sonorous, alliterative verse, full of present participles that heave forward, as well as many hyphenated words that reinforce the idea that one word cannot hold such a sublime creature. The first sentence ranges across several lines, further emphasizing that the leviathan may be too robust for any sentence, or poem for that matter:

> This is the black sea-brute bulling through wave-wrack,
> Ancient as ocean's shifting hills, who in sea-toils
> Traveling, who furrowing the salt acres
> Heavily, his wake hoary behind him,
> Shoulders spouting, the fist of his forehead
> Over wastes gray-green crashing, among horses unbroken
> From bellowing fields, past bone-wreck of vessels,
> Tide-ruin, wash of lost bodies bobbing
> No longer sought for, and islands of ice gleaming,

> Who ravening the rank flood, wave-marshaling,
> Overmastering the dark sea-marches, finds home
> And harvest. (ll. 1-12)

The poem allows the elemental energy of the leviathan's movement to enter language. The reader, then, engages the energy even if only a fraction of it. When this happens, the agency of the whale infuses the boundary between humans and animals, thereby creating, like Cummings's poems, a place for interspecies convergence.

Merwin wrote many other poems that explore whales, including "The Shore." Seen from the perspective of zoopoetics, "The Shore" laments the loss of culture experienced by blue whales. The poem begins by establishing how blue whales could once "hear another / whale at the opposite end of the earth" (ln 2-3), and yet how the "sounds of hollow iron charging / clanging through the ocean" (ln 7-8), combined with the "harpoons of humans / and the poisoning of the seas" (ln 9-10), has made it so "a whale can hear no farther through the present / than a jet can fly in a few minutes" (ln 11-12). The loss of hearing—of *listening*, which again, is the ever-present motif in Merwin's work—is catastrophic. The poem hints at the extinction of whales by harpoons—which is abominable enough—but focuses on the consequences for the surviving whale(s). They cannot hear each other, and therefore they are cut off from social interaction. As the many ethologists discuss in *The Question of Animal Culture*, cetaceans have developed vocal variations and nuances that distinguish one group from another, so when a whale becomes a solitary sojourner, she or he loses that sense of belonging. In the final two stanzas, Merwin juxtaposes a gathering of blue whales with a solitary wanderer, leaving the reader to infer that something has been lost:

> in the days of their hearing the great Blues gathered like clouds
> the sunlight under the sea's surfaces sank
> into their backs as into the water around them
> through which they flew invisible from above
> except as flashes of movement
> and they could hear each other's voices wherever they went
>
> once it is on its own a Blue can wander
> the whole world beholding both sides of the water
> raising in each ocean the songs of the Blues
> that it learned from distances it can no longer hear

it can fly all its life without ever meeting another Blue
this is what we are doing this is the way we sing oh Blue Blue (ll. 13-24)

The last two lines emanate a tone of anguish, "this is what we are doing," but we may wonder, what is "this"? It is not simply driving a species into extinction; rather, it is how an imminent extinction likewise effaces culture for the survivors.

Merwin, though, is not concerned only with the large, endangered species that readily capture the imagination; "common" animals also captivate him. In the early eighties, Merwin undertook an exercise to distill the poetic moment as briefly as possible. In an interview, he shares his aim: "I wanted to see what it was that made a poem complete as a small, if not the smallest, unit; it was a way of discovering what was the single thing that would stand by itself" (Folsom et al. 44). He did not intend to experiment with the tradition of Haiku, but the outcome resulted in a book of Haiku-esque tercets, *Finding the Islands*. The poems often present the reader with observations that establish the context for the poem's turn, and many of these observations and turns glimpse the ways nonhuman animals engage environments, for instance, a lizard:

Rain on the tin roof
lizard hands on the tin ceiling
listening

The turn occurs between the second and third line. The vivid image of the lizard with her or his "hands on the tin ceiling" contextualizes the "listening," and as the reader lingers in the final word, several suggestive ideas emerge. The lizard engages the vibrations of the rain through his or her hands—hands being a prominent symbol of agency[11]—and therefore, this listening happens through the tactile intimacy of feeling, more like a blind person reading Braille. *Listening* is, for Merwin, one of the most indispensible attributes of poetic dwelling. The poem does not venture into the mind of the lizard to ascertain how the phenomenological experience impacts the lizard's psyche, nor should it. In light of Derrida's limitrophy, the poem leads us into the abyssal limit between the human and the animal. In this borderland, we are invited to imagine the vibrations of rain humming beneath the poised hands of a being fully engaging her or his environment.

As discussed earlier, Merwin turns toward the language of the earth—the "sound of frost stirring"—and desires such a place to be his "country." Part of his turning involves exploring not only the mammals and reptiles of the earth, but insects as well. One poem

in particular from *Rain in the Trees* (1988) celebrates the rhetorical energy of insects. An insect may not, at first, capture the imagination like a leviathan, but Merwin's "After the Alphabets"—like Cummings' "r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r"—cultivates a respect and admiration for the agency of insects who dwell imaginatively upon the earth through their unique register of language:

> I am trying to decipher the language of insects
> they are the tongues of the future
> their vocabularies describe buildings as food
> they can depict dark water and the veins of trees
> they can convey what they do not know
> and what is known at a distance
> and what nobody knows
> they have terms for making music with the legs
> they can recount changing in a sleep like death
> they can sing with wings
> the speakers are their own meaning in a grammar without horizons
> they are wholly articulate
> they are important they are everything (ll. 1–13)

"After the Alphabets" revisits the idea from "The Cold before the Moonrise" as the speaker turns toward a nonhuman sound, to a language other than the alphabet of human discourse. The notion that insects hold the "tongues of the future" resonates with the apocalyptic motif throughout Merwin's work, and therefore this homage to the insects is simultaneously an elegy to the mammals. This is the language that will endure long after *Homo sapiens* vanishes from the planet.

Some readers may think Merwin forces the idea that insects possess enough cognition and memory to recount metamorphosis (ln 9); however, the *Planet Earth* footage of ants carrying away members infected by the Cordyceps fungus suggests otherwise. Some insects demonstrate they recollect former events. Perhaps it is the size of insects that "permits" some people to dismiss them as lesser beings, when according to Merwin, they are "wholly articulate" through sounds that are embedded within their bodily gestures, such as their ability to make "music with the legs" or sounds "with wings." The poem does not explicitly suggest an insect culture emerges from the gestures and embedded sign-systems of insects, but it nonetheless points in that direction. Beekeepers, for instance, often speak of a particular hive's "personality," suggesting

variances in culture between subpopulations of the species. The queen bee determines the behavior, and it spreads through the hive not because of genetic determination but rather by social interaction. Merwin's use of linguistic metaphors of "vocabularies," "tongues," and "grammar" suggest that insects possess the foundation for culture to emerge, albeit a culture of a different degree than that of humans. This culture of embedded signs within rhetorical gestures allows these social beings to interact, engage, and thrive.

Earlier in *Rain in the Trees* (1988), Merwin includes a philosophical poem concerning language. Without the context of his other works, we may be tempted to interpret the poem solely in human terms. However, in light of the poems explored in this essay, "Utterance" makes a profound statement about all manifestations of rhetorical energy: human, nonhuman, and perhaps even elemental:

> Sitting over words
> very late I have heard a kind of whispered sighing
> not far
> like a night wind in pines or like the sea in the dark
> the echo of everything that has ever
> been spoken
> still spinning its one syllable
> between the earth and silence (ll. 1–8)

This "kind of whispered sighing" and "echo of everything that has ever / been spoken" includes nonhuman registers. Merwin listens for that "one syllable" that is "still spinning" and forming and surfacing, and though human words contribute to the *spinning of the one syllable*, so does the language of insects, the language of the earth, the "wind in the pines," the "sea in the dark," the sound of frost stirring, a lizard's posture of listening hands, and the vocalizations and gestures of the leviathans of the deep. In this way, Merwin explores how nonhuman animals have agency as they interact with their kind, other species, and environments as makers of "utterances."

Conclusion. Though Cummings's and Merwin's forms differ drastically, they share a similar zoological vision—one that subverts the humanist tendency to dismiss nonhuman animals. Both poets complicate and extend the limit between the human and the abyss of the animal; both poets slowly gnaw away at the deeply rooted speciesism within Western ideology; both poets perceive the nonhuman animal as interacting with a given environment; both poets rupture and destabilize the Western narrative that

perceives the human to be the sole possessor of imagination, rhetoric, and culture through observing and exploring how many nonhuman animals demonstrate these qualities as well; and both poets, therefore, published poems that, when discussed from the perspective of zoopoetics, become borderlands where the agency of human and nonhuman animals converge.

This borderland is only possible because the poems exhibit a typographical arrangement, meter, image, or sound that demonstrates (in Haraway's sense of the word) the gestures and vocalizations of extra-textual, nonhuman animals. In other words, they allow nonhuman "texts" to interact and infuse human texts. Such moves, however, provide only an initial grounding for the potential of a zoopoetic approach to literary studies. Just as multiculturalism redrew the boundaries of the traditional literary canon, zoopoetics redraws boundaries to include nonhuman texts. For instance, when discussing place in an ecocritical course, the class could speculate that if nonhuman animals have agency as rhetorical beings, they may, in fact, construct meaning out of experiences that happen in specific places. Elephants pause along their migratory journeys where other elephants, in past migrations, died. These spaces for the elephants become charged with memory, meaning, and significance, transforming them, and the elephants generate enough rhetorical energy around such places for us to see they grieve. Zoopoetics grants a framework, then, to take seriously the rhetorical energy of nonhuman animals rather than dismissing such observations under the misunderstood fallacy of anthropomorphism.

Likewise, zoopoetics helps reframe the constellations within the poetic tradition. We teach scansions of Hopkins's sprung rhythm and Dickinson's slant rhymes. In order to balance the narrow repertoire of the poetic text, discussion ought to include scansions of the gestures and vocalizations of nonhuman animals. If humpback whale songs demonstrate repetitive sounds—playful rhyming—and if these rhymes are one of the ways in which the dialects differentiate, thereby creating cetacean culture, then after scanning "I dwell in Possibility," a class could scan a series of whale songs, already available online. In this way, the classroom would epitomize Merwin's *turning towards the earth* to discover the other places where poetry happens, and, in turn, such a process would cultivate the art of listening. Likewise, Cummings saw how the rhetorical energy of seals and sea lions exhibits *untranslatable idioms*, and one could integrate these idioms into assigned readings. Moreover, after an exploration of his hummingbird poem, a class could watch a video, in slow motion, of the "t / wofroing" frenzy (l. 17). The class could give the behavior a basic, rhetorical analysis simply identifying when one bird

enters into a rhetorical situation, crafting a text with a specific purpose for a specific audience. We should not limit scansion or rhetorical analysis to human texts; the gestures and expressions of nonhuman animals could be explored as well.

If ecocriticism evolves not as waves but as expanding, nonlinear patterns of constellations (Buell 133), zoopoetics exposes new patterns within existing constellations. The expanding field is best understood as constellations within constellations, patterns within patterns that, like ecosystems, interact in dynamic ways. These new patterns contribute to the shift within the humanities in which nonhuman animals are taken much more seriously on a theoretical and practical level. For this to happen, though, the humanities, literary studies, and ecocriticism must take seriously the implications of Merwin's "Utterance." Not just human vocalizations and gestures—but also those of insects, leviathan, lizards, hummingbirds, thrush, grasshoppers, green birds, *ad infinitum*—contribute to the spinning of that one syllable.

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Notes

1. I capitalize Cummings's name based upon the arguments made by Norman Friedman.

2. See, for instance, *ISLE*'s 2010 "The Special Forum on Ecocriticism and Theory." Jim Warren, Robert Wess, and Astrid Bracke reexamine the interdisciplinary boundaries of ecocriticism, and Greta Gaard and Helena Feder call specifically for these new boundaries to include and emphasize nonhuman animals. Gaard extends Simon Estok's work on ecophobia and speciesism (Gaard 650-51; Estok 208) while Feder extends Glotfelty's use of "the social" (Feder 776; Glotfelty xix). Other examples include Louise Westling, who argues for a paradigm shift towards a more informed understanding of nonhuman animals (qtd. in Arnold et al. 1104), and Greg Garrard, who recently revised his chapter "Animals" to highlight the work being done in animal studies.

3. Bate's definition of ecopoetics resonates with Kevin Hutchings' articulation of ecocriticism's foundational premise that "literature reflects and helps shape *human responses* to the natural environment" (1, my emphasis). Bate, of course, specifies what

this response looks like for humans, but both definitions implicitly exclude possibilities that nonhuman animals likewise respond with agency.

4. Rasula draws on Calvin Martin's idea, from *In the Spirit of the Earth* (1993), that a human is "fundamentally an echo-locator, like our distant relatives the porpoise and the bat" who uses "words and artifice" as the "primary instruments of self-location" in order to discover a sense of place within the biosphere (8).

5. Sarah McFarland and Ryan Hediger's introduction to *Animals and Agency* contributed to my understanding of the agency of nonhuman animals.

6. For a summary of the controversial reception of "A Hoot ..."—and a defense of its ideas—see Debra Hawhee.

7. In "The Origin of Metaphor: The Animal Connection," Shepard observes a host of animal infinitives within human language that suggest an etymology, not in Latin or Greek, but in the rhetorical energy of animals. He writes, "The great zoo of animal infinitives—to bear, to lark, to hound, to quail, to worm, to badger, to skunk—is likewise irreducible" (9). Though Shepard does not use the term "rhetorical energy," he surmises how these words emerged from humans who, as hunters and gatherers, engage with the gestures of nonhuman animals that quail, bear, lark, hound, worm, and badger.

8. Because poems often explore the rhetorical energy of human gestures and expressions, zoopoetics is not limited to nonhuman actors; rather, it is a useful term to explore rhetorical energy whenever and wherever a life-form makes such energy manifest. Two poems readily come to mind: Rilke's "The Spanish Dancer" and Brooks's "We Real Cool" (Rilke 43; Brooks 547). Both poems use words to explore the rhetorical energy emanating from the human body. In "The Spanish Dancer," the energy is erotic, and Rilke compares the dancer's arms and castanets to an "aroused" rattlesnake and rattle. Though there are complications with the comparison of the female, erotic body to an animal, from the perspective of rhetorical energy, the comparison highlights how the human exhibits a rhetorical energy shared by other animals. In "We Real Cool," the youth playing hooky utter few words—"We / Sing sin" (ln 5)—and even then the emphasis is placed on the way they deliver the words rather than on the words themselves. They express their defiance in their strut. Brooks observes this, and then uses language to convey the rhetorical energy of their gestures.

9. Derrida's theory of "limitrophy" has shaped my thinking on the borderlands where humans and animals converge. Derrida speaks of the "abyssal limit" between the human and the animal, and how he aims to extend the limit through "complicating, thickening, delinearizing, folding, and dividing" it (29). I see the limit as a porous edge where the energy from multiple species ebbs and flows.

10. See also Moe, "Urban."

11. For an excellent discussion of the hand as a symbol of agency, see Stephanie Rowe.

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