University of Wollongong

Joshua Lobb

Relational ethics: writing about birds; writing about humans

Abstract:

Philip Armstrong points out that scholars in Animal Studies are 'interested in attending not just to what animals mean to humans, but what they mean to themselves; that is, to the ways in which animals might have significances, intentions and effects quite beyond the designs of human beings' (2008: 2). This essay asks: what are the ethics of representing birds in fiction? It promotes the model offered by Linda Alcoff in 'The Problem of Speaking for Others' (1992). Alcoff offers a set of 'interrogatory practices' for writers, including an analysis of our speaking position to expose any implicit discourses of domination at work, and, most importantly, a consideration for the effects of 'speaking for' on actual animals. Using Alcoff's interrogatory practices as a framework, I examine the ways writers have allowed for 'ethical relationships' between humans and birds in fictional spaces. I investigate the function of birds as metaphor in three Australian novels: Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book* (2013), Evie Wyld's *All the Birds, Singing* (2013) and Catherine McKinnon's *Storyland* (2017). In each of these, birds serve a symbolic function but are also given space to allow for their own experiences, voices, and knowledges. I will also reflect on the attempts I have made in my own novel, *The Flight of Birds* (2019), to grapple with the discourses of power at work and the impact of that power on the lives of real birds.

Biographical Note:

Dr Joshua Lobb is Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing at the University of Wollongong. His stories have appeared in *The Bridport Prize Anthology*, *Best Australian Stories*, *Animal Studies Journal*, *TEXT*, *Southerly* and *The Griffith Review*. His novel, *Remission*, won the LitLink Unpublished Manuscript Award in 2014, as well as two residential fellowships at Varuna. His 'novel in stories' about grief and climate change, *The Flight of Birds* (2019) is published by Sydney University Press. He is also part of the multi-authored project, *100 Atmospheres: Studies in Scale and Wonder* (Open Humanities Press, 2019). Joshua holds a PhD on the novel form from UNSW and has published on Creative Writing pedagogy and narrative theory.

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Introduction

I say to people: 'I'm writing about birds'. But that's not entirely accurate.

The starting point for this essay is my creative practice: specifically, the writing of my novel, *The Flight of Birds* (2019). Each story in the novel describes an encounter with a different species of bird. Some, like magpies and rosellas, live in human gardens and on suburban streets; others, like lyrebirds and whipbirds, live on the edges of human spaces; still others, like factory-farmed chickens, endangered Gould's petrels, or extinct dodos, are caught in a violent net created by humans. They inhabit the same geographic space, but perceive their worlds in different, sometimes surprising ways. For the purposes of this essay, I pick out two impulses at work in my project. The first is the desire to engage with what cultural geographer Steve Hinchliffe calls 'making oneself available ... to the world of the bird' (2010: 34). I want to respect birds as agents of their own experience. The second impulse might seem to pull in the opposite direction. Literature is full of cross-species confrontations that emphasise the impossibility of understanding nonhuman animals, particularly birds: as Matthew Arnold writes, birds live 'beside us, but alone [from us] …What they want, we cannot guess' (1945: 457). In my writing I ask: could it be possible for me – as a writer, as a human – to inhabit the experiential world of birds?

This question is central to a growing discourse around the representation of nonhuman animals: a field that has come to be called 'animal studies'.[1] Leading scholar in the field, Philip Armstrong, points out that his colleagues are 'interested in attending not just to what animals mean to humans, but what they mean to themselves; that is, to the ways in which animals might have significances, intentions and effects quite beyond the designs of human beings' (2008: 2). Writing can be a place where this interest might play out. Critical animal studies scholar Fiona Probyn-Rapsey makes the case that telling stories about animals can provide a space for nonhuman agency to be acknowledged. She proposes that 'telling "stories" of animals and telling animal's stories turns "behaviour" and/or "instinct" into culture' (2014: 9); or, to put it more directly, 'the idea that *they have stories* complements the idea that *they have subjectivities*' (Ibid. emphasis original). Other critics, however, see the relationship between animals and stories-about-animals differently. The ecofeminist and post-humanist Donna Haraway argues that the representational act is a form of violence against the animal: a kind of slavery – or worse. She asserts: 'We "hail" [animals] into our constructs of nature and culture, with major consequences of life and death, health and illness, longevity and extinction' (2003: 17). If we are to write about animals, we need to take this concern seriously. As literary animal studies critic Susan McHugh declares, it is imperative that the writers of animal stories develop 'a thorough-going critique attuned to the traces of species, to markings of potentials for different orders of agency beyond the human subject' (2009: 487). But, given that writing itself is a human activity, how is this possible? What are the ethical implications of representing nonhuman animals?

A starting point to answer these questions is offered by Deborah Bird Rose, the extraordinary writer and thinker who asked difficult and necessary questions about

humans, nonhumans, and the planet. Rose sees ethical practice, not as an individual act, but a communal process: between researcher and subject, writer and reader, or even human and nonhuman. 'The heart of ethics', she considers, 'is the call from the other' (2013: 11); in this way, ethical relationships – or a relational ethics – depend on a process of active reflection on the effects of one's actions on others. Rose writes: 'They hinge on taking responsibility for one's actions, and considering ramifications in both short and long terms' (2013.: 56). When representing nonhuman animals, then, it is essential to consider the relationship between the (human) teller and the (nonhuman) subject of the tale, and to acknowledge the ways that formal, rhetorical and narrative devices can affect the lives of the animals in the text.

To develop a relational ethics of writing about animals, it also may be useful to investigate the ways that other critical theories concerned with marginalisation have engaged with the problem of representing others. Most notably, theories such as Marxism, feminism, post-colonialism and queer theory have grappled with the link between discursive and actual violence. The productive deployment of these 'representational' theories in animal studies is advocated by Cary Wolfe, who has written extensively on the interconnections between animals, politics, and writing. Wolfe states:

> Given what we have learned in recent decades about many non-human animals … many scholars now think that we are forced to make the same kind of shift in the ethics of reading and interpretation that attended taking sexual difference seriously in the 1990s … or race and gender seriously in the 1970s and 1980s … In such a genealogy, animal studies is only the latest permutation of a socially and ethically responsive cultural studies[:] … an academic expression of a larger democratic impulse toward greater inclusiveness of every gender, or race, or sexual orientation, or – now – species.[2] (2009: 567-568)

If we do decide to draw upon other theories of representation, a potentially useful approach is offered by feminist philosopher Linda Alcoff in her essay, 'The Problem of Speaking for Others' (1992). Alcoff notes that, within the fields of feminism and post-colonial theory 'certain privileged locations are discursively dangerous' (7), and that 'there is a strong, albeit contested, current … which holds that speaking for others is arrogant, vain, unethical, and politically illegitimate' (6). Nevertheless, Alcoff considers the ways we might speak 'for' others in an ethical manner. Her approach pivots on two principles: what she calls 'interrogatory practices'. First, 'We must … interrogate the bearing of our location and context on what it is we are saying' (25). Second, 'We need to analyze (sic) probable or actual effects of the words on the … material context'; or, as she explains elsewhere, 'We must … look at where the speech goes and what it does there' (1992: 26). These questions, I believe, can be transposed to a discussion about the representation of nonhuman animals, and, in the case of my writing, to the representation of birds. Writers can scrutinise their own practice to uncover the discourses of power at work in their acts of representation of nonhuman animals, and, more importantly, can consider the ways 'speaking for' animals might affect our understandings of real animals. While it is difficult to make direct correlations

between textual representation and its material effect on the world[3], I argue that writers might at least analyse the way their formal, rhetorical, and narrative strategies might affect the agency of the nonhuman animals who appear in their texts.

In the next sections of this essay, I will apply Alcoff's interrogatory practices to creative works that portray birds and consider the ways in which the writers of these texts engage with a 'relational ethics' between writer and subject, and between humans and birds. Birds are incorporated into fiction in many ways: they can function as protagonists or even as narrators (most recently, Sorensen's *The Lucky Galah* (2018)), as antagonists (du Maurier's 'The Birds' (1952)), or as catalysts for (human) action (McCarthy's *Birds of America* (1965)).[4] In the interests of space, I choose here to focus on one specific use of birds in fiction: birds as metaphors. The use of nonhuman animals as symbolic devices in fiction is potentially the most dangerous way they can be employed. Ecophilosopher Ralph Acampora declares that, by creating a metaphoric animal, 'the actual animal is transmogrified: it becomes a reduced and abstracted version' (2016: 16). In other words, the representational act is the opposite of Rose's call for ethical relationships and Alcoff's interrogatory principle that considers the material effect of representing others. However, it does not necessarily follow that the symbolic use of animals is always detrimental. I explore the ways three contemporary Australian novels can be seen to function within Alcoff's interrogatory framework and begin to create a 'relational ethics' between humans and birds. The texts I investigate are: Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book* (2013), Evie Wyld's *All the Birds, Singing* (2013) and Catherine McKinnon's *Storyland* (2017). I argue that all three texts make analogies between birds and human concerns – political, personal, and ecological crises – but are careful not to let these comparisons overwhelm the lives of the birds in their novels. In the final section of the essay, I will reflect on attempts in my own writing to engage with the productive strategies these authors deploy, and the ways that I have tried in my stories to grapple with the discourses of power at work in the act of representing birds.

The Swan Book: avian lives matter

In Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book*, the title birds clearly possess characteristics which take them beyond the literal: as Nicholas Birns notes, 'the totemic animal for Wright's novel is not simply the swan, but the symbol of the swan' (2015: 153). To make sense of their changing world, the characters in the novel tell stories about swans, and thus transform the birds into symbols of the past or the future. The most prolific storyteller in the novel is Bella Donna, part of a convoy of refugees who have made their way to Australia from the northern hemisphere. As the group sets out on its voyage, Bella Donna notes that 'a single white swan flew by … the swan had dirty feathers, ingrained with the ash spread through the burnt snow … it did not stay long' (Wright 2016: 28). To provide themselves solace, Bella Donna and the other refugees transform the literal bird into a discursive swan, using a series of human texts:

> Several thousand people began walking in circles through biting wind and rain, their spirits lifting in the talk circulating about a swan that had once landed at the feet of a saint. The sinking into the well of memory about swans on that day was remarkable.

> Back! Back! And even further back, remembering how this very creature was descended from a Knight Swan … Someone yelled to the swan flying above – *Lohengrin*. A chorus, remembering Wagner's opera, replied – *The knight Lohengrin arrived in a boat drawn by a swan*. History! Swan history! Quicker! Quicker! Remember this, and remembering that; and there it was, the swans loved and hated through the ages in stories laid bare by this huddling melee of the doomed trying to find warmth on frozen moss. They grabbed a trillion swans in their imagination, dragged them back from the suppressed backwoods of their minds. (29)

Here, Bella Donna uses the literary images of swans to manage the uncertainty she feels at a time of great ecological change. However, this stabilising act can be seen to remove the agency of the 'real' bird flying overhead; the human story is given more value than the life of the animal. Bella Donna's stories, then, could be seen to show up what animal studies scholar Melissa Boyde calls 'the domination of … human relationships' over animal lives (2013: 133).

But there is another thread of understanding running through Wright's novel which might work to counter this discursive domination. Birns argues that the text constantly 'gestures towards … meaning[s] beyond what is there on the surface' (2015: 153). Given this way of engaging with the novel, perhaps an alternative way of reading the metaphors in the novel is not just 'swans-as-symbols', but something beyond this; something, even, that could provide an agency to the swans of the text. As Jen Webb puts it, the metaphoric language of the text functions like the swans themselves flying through the text: 'it soars above the swamp, crashes to the ground, takes flight again' often in a new direction (2013). The protagonist of the novel, Oblivia Ethyline, devises swan-stories markedly different to those created by Bella Donna. Granted, early in the novel, Oblivia does try to create a discursive cage for the swans. She imposes on the birds a series of human names: 'Hong, or Cigne, Kuui, Svane, Zwaan, Svanr, Svan or Schwan … Goolyen, Connewerre, Kungorong, Muru-ktchi, Kuluin, Mugoa, Kungsari, Koonwaara, Byahmul' (75-76). She calls this process of ascribing human names to the birds 'collecting all of the country's swans'. However, even in this moment of discursive management, the swans are still able to break free. Oblivia observes that the swans can still 'circl[e] the skies' and 'dive … endlessly through invisible crevasses to other worlds' (75-76). Later, when Oblivia has been abducted and forced into marriage, she uses discursive swans to imagine a story of her liberation. She envisages 'hungry swans [flying] around the house in a frenzied flight of destruction. In the melee of crashing and swans' hisses, the huge birds strike at food off dinner plates and attack the banquet' (226). But the symbolic birds do not stay under Oblivia's control. She realises that,

> Strangely, other things fell apart in her mind too, because somewhere far off beyond the house and wedding music and guests milling in talk she could hear the single cry of a swan gliding down a lonely river calling for its mate. (226)

In these moments, the swans are netted by human texts, but they also are able to fly through the symbolism and away from them. In these spaces, then, the birds may be able to function on their own terms – what David Wills refers to as 'the space of the

unknown, of what cannot be known' by the human or by human stories (qtd in Boyde 2013: 130). The 'relational ethic' that seems to be promoted here is a principle for human writers to acknowledge that fictional birds – like real birds – must also be allowed a life and agency of their own.

All the Birds, Singing: avian voices matter

The metaphorical birds in Evie Wyld's *All the Birds, Singing* are also able to break free from human discursive control. Jake Whyte, the protagonist of the novel, runs a small sheep farm somewhere in the United Kingdom. In the cold, wet winter, Jake struggles to preserve her sanity and her flock: someone or something has been attacking and killing her sheep. The novel's opening explicitly links this violence to birds:

> Another sheep, mangled and bled out, her innards not yet crusting and the vapours rising from her like a steamed pudding. Crows, their beaks shining, strutting and rasping, and when I waved my stick they flew to the trees and watched, flaring out their wings, singing, if you could call it that … I wiped my eyes with the back of my hand and breathed in and out heavily to get rid of the blood smell. The crows were silent. When I turned to look, five of them sat in a row on the same branch, eyeing me but not speaking (2014: 1-2).

This metaphoric value of birds as harbingers of death is sustained as the novel progresses: as Jake acknowledges, 'there is always a large bird passing overhead, looking at the sheep or a rabbit … or me' (116). A pivotal scene in the novel confirms the link between birds and the unidentified creature who is attacking the sheep and, potentially, threatening Jake. In this sequence, Jake takes a bath. Birds are included in the narrative account, seemingly only as part of the background: 'While the bath filled I sat on the toilet lid, listening to the sound of the sparrows that nested under my bedroom window waking up as the light began to come into the sky' (186). When immersed in the bath, Jake hears a noise elsewhere in the house: ' [Someone – or something] was pelting up the stairs, faster than his feet could fly, and light, like he had more than one set of legs, and in a second he had beaten a path along the hallway … he was standing right on the other side of the bathroom door, breathing' (187). Jake then jolts in fear and realises that she must have been dreaming. She detects: 'the water was cold and I was no longer sure how long I had been in the bath, it was not even seven when I first ran it, but the light outside was bright and all the birds were singing' (187-188). Although birds are not included in the moment of threat, they do frame it, and it is important to note that the final description makes explicit reference to the title of the novel. Through this, I argue, readers are encouraged to see the birds as more than just figures calling from the trees: they are in some way connected to the symbolic meaning of the action. This certainly has a negative effect on the real birds encountered by Jake on her farm, as she acknowledges: 'The crows roosted in the treetops. Their blackness against the darkening sky made me want to get the gun and scatter them' (182).

However, like *The Swan Book*, Wyld's novel can also be seen to counter this metaphoric control of the birds. Interspersed with the farm narrative, another story thread is included in the novel. This narrative is told in reverse order, travelling back to a traumatic moment in Jake's life. The formative moment, reached in the final pages of the novel, is a bushfire, lit by a teenage Jake, which destroys part of her small coastal town and kills at least one person. The act also kills a significant amount of wildlife in the surrounding bushland, including several species of bird. Jake notes that:

> There is not a single bird to make sound … down by the sea, there's a blackness to the water and to the beach, ash rolls in the waves and dead birds have washed up out of it … I walk past the bodies that must have dropped out of the air. Some of them are perfect, a kookaburra, a honeyeater, a bowerbird. (200)

As the fire is started, the narration again refers to the title of the novel: Jake states that 'the birds are loud and all singing' (223). But unlike the previous invocation of the title, before Jake can take discursive control of the birds, the birds themselves invade the text, their voices taking over from Jake's narration:

> The birds are … all singing at once, *Cuk ... cuk ... cuk ... cuk ... cuk, Hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo hoooo-hoooo, Wup wup wup wup, Quit-quit-quit.* Near my foot is the stamped-out joint and I reach for it. It is a little ripped and flat, but it still lights, and I smoke while I look up at the white sky with those fingers of blue gum, dark against the space. The birds sound faster and sharper, *Cheerliy, cheeriup, cheerio, cheeriup, Chicka-dee-dee-dee-dee, Fee-beee, Cheer, cheer, cheerful, charmer, Tur-a-lee, Purdy purdy purdy ... Whoit, whoit, whoit, whoit.*
>
> I put the red end of my joint to a leaf and it eats it up with no flame, just like someone has taken the leaf out of existence, like it was never there in the first place. … The birds are louder still, or I am stoned, and I do another leaf, *Bzeee-bzeee-bzeee-bzeee, Tsip, tsip, tsip, tit-tzeeeeee, Zray, zray zray zray sreeeeeee, Tsyoo-tsyoo-tsyoo-tswee, Zeeeeeeeeeeeeee-tsyoo, Drink your teeeeee, towhee, Sweet, sweet, sweet, sweet-and-sweet,* and then I take out the lighter and somehow the path is on fire and I don't know if I meant it to be, and it goes up, and the birds scream, they scream at me, *Chip chjjjj, chewk, Jaay and jaay-jaay notes, Tool-ool, tweedle-dee, chi-chuwee, what-cheer ... Wheet, wheet, wheet, weet. Chip, chjjjj, chewk, Jaay and jaay-jaay notes, Tool-ool, tweedle-dee, chi-chuwee, Tur-a-lee, Purdy purdy purdy ... Whoit, whoit, whoit, whoit, what-cheer,* and before I can scream back, before the birds can take flight, it is up, sucking up the trees, with the sound of ice breaking, it goes up, and no amount of stamping will help, I can see that, I just watch it like I am part of it. The birds are loud and then it is just roar and I run for the rocks. (223-224)

The intensity of the birds' cries here can be seen to destabilise Jake's management of the narrative: in the same way that she loses control of her actions ('I don't know if I meant it to be'), she also loses control of the narration: the birds' voices are unassimilable into Jake's account. Their italicised shrieks dominate the text, and, in the words of Leonard Lutwack, this moment of direct avian voice 'stands by itself without pointed reference to something of human significance' (1994: 21). As with the swans in Wright's novel, then, Wyld's birds may have been able to break the discourses of

power in the narrative in order to assert their own voice. The 'relational ethic' here is a principle for human writers to allow for a space in the text for birds to speak for themselves.

Storyland: avian knowledges matter

In the middle of Catherine McKinnon's *Storyland,* the songs of the birds are also overwhelming. One of the characters, having fled into the bush following an apocalyptic weather event, reports 'the noise is deafening. There are too many birds' (2017: 225). Birds are integral to the structure of McKinnon's text. The novel is divided into five nested narratives, each portraying a different character in a different historical moment in the Illawarra region of NSW from 1796 to a speculative 2717. The transitions between narratives are made mid-sentence, as one human narrator takes up the image from another. For instance:

> An eagle with a white belly glides above it, a shadow over the
>
> …
>
> water, its white head and grey claws pushed forward as it plunges toward the lake, ready to take its prey. (267)

The effect on the act of reading is momentarily disorientating. Readers need to adjust to a different world view and a different narratorial voice: the text moves from male to female narrators, from curious children to frightened adults. Probyn-Rapsey, writing about human attempts to imagine the large-scale sweep of environmental and species history, states that 'disorientation is the point'; 'the bigness of it all … risks pitting complexity up against comprehension, making things too complex, the scale too massive for understanding, empathy or action' (2014: 7). McKinnon's novel, I suggest, settles the disorientation by using birds as a metaphor for the link between human stories. As in the case of the example already provided, each of the moments that leap across narrative use birds as their primary focus: 'I see the eagle dive to the / reeds in the lake'; 'And listen, I can hear the / whipbirds'; 'An owl / hoots.' (118; 239; 302). This deployment of birds can be seen as an active application of Thom van Dooren's understanding of 'species as generations': a narrative that acknowledges an experiential history of life on earth. He states:

> What is tied together is not "the past" or "the future" as abstract temporal horizons, but real embodied generations – ancestors and descendants – in rich but imperfect relationships of inheritance, nourishment, and care (2014: 29).

In *Storyland*, the inclusion of birds at these pivot points might indicate the 'imperfect relationships' across human generations. More importantly, it also might give a value to the birds as drivers of the narrative propulsion: the human characters are stuck in their own historical moment, but the birds can fly across time and space. As one of the human characters notes, 'We're a part of their story, not the other way around' (247).

Of course, it could be argued that even though the humans are presented as changing 'generations', the birds themselves are static. The human worlds may change over time,

but the narrative links imply that the birds will remain the same: it is apparently the *same* eagle that flies in 1900 and 1998; the *same* owl that hoots in 1900 and 1822. However, what's important here, I believe, is that the symbolic use of birds is not forced to such an extent that it does the birds harm. The birds fly across the narratives, but in such a way that they have flown off before the characters – or the narrative – can fix their meaning. Despite their presence hovering overhead, the birds in the novel almost never enter into the psyche of the characters – though a rare instance does take place in the 2033 section of the novel. This narrative recounts an ecological disaster as superstorms and rising oceans overwhelm human settlements. Faced with this crisis, the humans use birds to try and make sense of the situation. One character, Steve, explains: 'When I was very young my very old Aunty told me that the white-bellied eagle knew about the meaning of water and land. She said, you must *learn* from them boy. I never understood what she meant but she said it with such gravity' (228). When he sees the birds flying away from the tempestuous seas, he realises 'I still hadn't learnt the lesson she'd wanted me to learn' (Ibid.). However, unlike the other texts I have been discussing, the characters in the novel do not declare the symbolic value of the birds: Steve never discovers the 'lesson' from the birds, and the rest of the characters do nothing more than observe the birds as they pass by. Sometimes they are not even able to observe the birds: as Bel, the 1998 narrator, concedes: 'It's hard to see the whipbirds because they aren't too big, so they can hide really well, and they like to stay hidden' (239-240). The argument that I am making here, then, is that there is nothing wrong with bird metaphors *per se*, as long as human storytellers do no harm; and, once the birds have been 'caught' as symbols, that they be released back into the narrative wilderness, to be able to pursue their own narrative flights. The 'relational ethic' here is a principle to allow for a fictional work that contains space for both human and avian knowledges.

The Flight of Birds: avian/human encounters matter

In my own writing, I have tried to build on the examples of ethical 'good practice' offered by Wright, Wyld and McKinnon, and their decisions to create a space for the lives, voices, and knowledges of birds in their texts. Metaphors are crucial to *The Flight of Birds*. But equally central to my project are my attempts to expose the discourses of power inherent in the act of representing birds, and to explore models and approaches that might allow the birds to avoid symbolic nets. For example, in one story, 'Magpies', I work to expose the dangers of making symbolic comparisons between human and nonhuman actions. The story uses as its guiding focus an analogy between workplace bullying and the common representation of magpies as relentless aggressors towards humans. In the early sections of the story, the narrator uses obvious descriptions to correlate a threatening office manager with magpie attributes and behaviour:

> Her polished hair is shrewdly scraped back and her earrings glint. She has dark pencilled lips and pointed fingernails. The black of her jacket is tailored precisely: v-shaped around the neck, bold at the shoulders, slender at the waist. A permanent silhouette. Only

> occasionally do you see flashes of the white blouse underneath. Her serious eyes dagger about the room (2019: 133).

These kinds of metaphor can be seen to cause explicit harm to real magpies. One of the problems I address in this story is the way in which magpies are always envisioned in a state of swooping humans. The stories we tell about magpies almost always refer to them as attackers, and humans as victims of the attack: as Gisela Kaplan remarks, 'We [humans] regard ourselves as "benign" and magpies as "aggressive" because we perceive these attacks to be unprovoked. Whether or not we deserve the title of "benign" intruders is a matter of opinion' (2004: 120). By making the correlation between magpies and bullying, I confirm these preconceptions of the bird. As the narrator comments: 'We all know about magpies' (135).

However, I also attempt to unsettle the connection between magpie and human aggression. I use Raymond Malewitz's tactic of 'code-switching': a textual operation to confound or undermine conventional modes of representation. Malewitz tenders that a textual animal:

> might gain a temporary agency and legibility at the moment when it has ceased to function according to its assumed use value … In other words, a literary animal's agency can come into being when its behavior [sic] within a narrative temporarily exhausts, confuses, or transforms the use to which it has been put. (2014: 547)

His approach involves drawing attention to a particular 'anthropocentric rhetorical device' and imbuing it with 'conflicting' values: this process causes a 'changed relationship' between humans and animals, as well as a change to the kinds of stories humans might be able to tell about animals (Ibid.: 547-548). In the story, I shift 'magpie metaphors' across different characters and scenarios, complicating the discursive codes. I apply the different behaviours to different characters in the story in order to challenge the binaries of benign/aggressive or victim/aggressor. The office leader is most often the magpie: 'her black wings open and [her victim is] assaulted by the flash of white shards' (135). At other times the victim of bullying becomes the magpie. His safe haven in the stationery cupboard borrows its description from an account of a magpie's nest. Kaplan writes:

> The outer layer of the magpie's nest may also incorporate wire, clothes hangers, fabric from hessian bags, binder's twine, silver paper, strips of clear plastic, rope, even such adornments such as clothes pegs. The inner layer is like a second nest … and much finer in structure, Materials used are softer and more densely packed. (2004: 50).

The safe haven for my victim is presented in the same way:

> The [stationery cupboard] door is plastered with bits and pieces: almost-risqué cartoons, postcards from gloating colleagues, clippings from the social pages showing our not-game-enough-to-be-debauched Christmas parties. It's pretty ratty: the clippings are frayed like hessian bags; the sticky tape is sallow … [inside] I see how organised everything is. A density of stacked manila folders, their rounded corners aligned. Glue sticks in a row like soldiers, hoarded boxes of staples stacked, neat and compact, in a pyramid. (141)

By using these code-switching images, I aim to undermine the fixed human understanding of magpies by offering up multiple stories – and multiple metaphors – about their behaviour. I propose that a multiplicity of visions of magpies might free them from the harm caused by a single authoritative version. Fiction will always include analogy; even if we try to write plainly, without metaphor, the reader can always read even the simplest action as symbolic. But, if fiction presents a multifaceted representation of an animal, one which does not fit neatly into human comparison, perhaps we might see beyond the metaphor, to see textual animals *as* animals with their own lives and knowledges. Thus, the story involves a 'changed relationship' between humans and animals, as well as provoking a change to the kinds of stories humans might be able to tell about animals.

Perhaps this changed relationship can become a discursive act that also provides for an ethical encounter between humans and nonhumans. I think I come closest to this in another story in *The Flight of Birds*: 'What he heard'. At the moment of encounter, the two animals – in this case, human and lyrebird – look each other in the eye: 'The bird paused, a lidless eye staring at the intruder. He, the man, did not look away' (6). It is these moments of eye-to-eye interactions, when species can look at each other on as equal terms as possible, that humans must take account of their effect on birds. As one of the narrators in *Storyland* puts it, 'Birds … stare with so forceful a gaze that I feel a stranger on this earth' (McKinnon 2017: 56); or, as the narrator of *The Swan Book* comments, describing an interaction between Oblivia and a black swan, 'The sight of the swan's cold eye staring straight into hers, made the girl feel exposed, hunted and [but also] found' (Wright 2013: 14). We have to form meaningful and ethical relationships with real birds – before it is too late.

Conclusion

In 'The Problem of Speaking for Others', Alcoff notes another 'interrogatory practice' central to the process of forming ethical relationships. She tenders that 'speaking should always carry with it an accountability and responsibility for what one says' (1991-1992: 25). By linking Alcoff's practises to the representation of birds, I hope to have shown the challenges and also the benefits of scrutinising the process of 'speaking for' animals, in order to ensure that writing not only depicts animals accurately, but also supports the lives, voices, and knowledges of animals in the text. This may lead to a re-evaluation of some of the conventions of representation, even the strategies which we thought provided a positive account of animals' experiences. Alcoff emphasises that anyone speaking for another group need 'a serious and sincere commitment to remain open to criticism and to attempt actively, attentively, and sensitively to "hear" (understand) criticism' (26). I know that there are going to be misinterpretations of birds in the texts I write: I am, after all, using a human mode of expression. However, this does not necessarily lead to the production of anthropocentric texts. In her examination of animals and ecological ethics, Val Plumwood makes an important distinction between physical locatedness and ideological interests. By marking out the difference, she demonstrates that anthropocentrism is a discursive position as opposed to an

intrinsically human trait. Plumwood illustrates the ways anthropocentrism uses the same hegemonic controls as other centric epistemologies such as sexism or racism. These dominant discourses internalise oppressive modes: they link an ideology to a body. I'm a man, *therefore* I must be androcentric; I'm European, *therefore* I must be Eurocentric; I'm human, *therefore* I must be anthropocentric. Of particular note is Plumwood's analysis of the stories we tell of others as 'unknowable', as in the assertion from Matthew Arnold I cited at the beginning of this essay. These kinds of (non)interpretations create a polarising structure: we are known; the Other is mysterious, unreadable. They lead to further 'inevitable' conclusions: that the Other is 'inessential', 'unworthy', 'not worth noticing' (Plumwood 2002: 130-134;106-109; 99; 104). Plumwood asks us to view human/nonhuman relations not as dichotomies of exclusion but as interactions that permit the location and interests of both groups. Through this reconception, we might be able to 'go beyond' the ideological presumptions of our 'locatedness' (Plumwood 2002: 132-133). If we bear Alcoff's interrogatory practices in mind then we can at least minimise the potential for misrepresentation. Haraway writes that 'fiction is in process and still at stake, not finished' (2003: 19-20). If we keep experimenting with new representational forms, and always remain vigilant to the problem of speaking for other animals, then animal narratives are 'liable to show something we do not know to be true, but will know' (Ibid). I say: 'I'm writing about humans. I'm trying to write about birds'.

Endnotes

1. I acknowledge that some critics prefer other disciplinary markers, such as 'human-animal studies' and 'critical animal studies'. I have chosen the broader 'animal studies' to highlight the field as a site for multiple questions, springing from multiple discourses and disciplines. For a more thorough survey of the multiple modes of animal studies, see McCance 2013; Marvin and McHugh 2014; and Herman 2014.

2. I recognise that taking on theoretical positions that emerged out of specific cultural circumstances raises its own problems. As Neel Ahuja points out, there is a danger that such an approach 'flatten[s] … out historical contexts that determine the differential use of animal (and other) figures in the processes of racialization (sic)' (2009: 557-558). Nevertheless, like Wolfe, I do contend that the ethical questions raised about one discursive practice provide a framework for others.

3. A rare exception is the impact Peter Benchley's novel *Jaws* has had on the lives of real sharks. In a recent interview, Benchley laments the contribution his novel has had on the endangerment of sharks. He states that, at the time of writing his novel, 'it [felt] OK to demonize an animal, especially a shark, because … sharks appeared to be infinite in number … [But] I couldn't possibly write Jaws today … not in good conscience anyway' (qtd in Rothfels 2002: viii;vi).

4. For a summary and thorough analysis of the various ways animals are represented in fiction, see Lisa Johnson's 'Animals that Work in stories' (2018). Johnson's essay sits among a new collection of essays that consider the implications of writing for (and even with) animals.

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