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“A Short Burst of Inconsequential Information:” Networked Rhetorics, Avian Consciousness, and Bioegalitarianism

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Abstract

This essay uses the concept of “avian consciousness” to reconsider assumptions about human communication and theorize networked rhetorics. By adopting an ornithomorphic frame, I critically read Don DeLillo’s *The Body Artist* as an exploration of overlaps between human and avian consciousness. I then argue that avian consciousness provides a richer metaphor for understanding networked rhetorics than autistic consciousness, which is an increasingly dominant trope for explaining interaction with digitally networked media. I explore how Twitter, explicitly modeled on avian communication, can be understood as circulating information in ways analogous to the contact and assembly calls of birds. The essay concludes by noting that seeing avian features in human communication diminishes the perceived gap between human and nonhuman animal, holding out hope for a more bioegalitarian relationship between species.

Keywords: avian consciousness, networked media, neurodiversity, bioegalitarianism, ecocriticism, DeLillo

On “Thinking in Tweets”

People using the Twitter microblogging service often remark that they catch themselves “thinking in tweets.” This confession hints at how Twitterers’ consciousnesses are at least occasionally formatted by the 140-character limit of messages on Twitter, which is understandable as our selves are invariably shaped by the expressive possibilities enabled by different media. The brevity of tweets, and the seeming communicative chaos of the “Twitterverse,” departs significantly from familiar conceptualizations

of rhetorical production. As opposed to the great speech or the great novel, which demand extended concentration, feature unified themes, and unfold sequentially, tweets are brief, sometimes random, and often-disjointed messages that circulate through digitally mediated social networks. Twitter is often derided as the meaningless circulation of inconsequential information. However, much like the chirps of the birds that Twitter self-consciously models itself after, a single tweet is but one piece in a broader mosaic of tweets full of meaning. How might taking the avian metaphor embedded in Twitter inform our understanding of contemporary communication practice? Moreover, if humans indeed adopt avian modes of communication through Twitter, then might the speciesist hubris connected to representational speech erode and thus benefit the broader project of bioegalitarianism?

Twitter's ascendance as a communication platform provokes consideration of potential connections between communication, the networked imaginary, and ecology in ways that direct us toward some tentative answers to these questions. The first part of this essay examines how the representational consciousness that congealed with print culture reinvigorated the rationale for separating human animal from nonhuman animal. Then, to theorize an alternative to representational consciousness, I extend Jeffrey Karnicky's analysis of avian consciousness in Don DeLillo's *The Body Artist*. Rather than reading *The Body Artist* as an appreciation of avian intelligence, as Karnicky does, I identify how DeLillo's characters themselves perform elements of avian consciousness, particularly as they engage with (inter)-networked media. The affordances of networked media accentuate and make more visible these otherwise sublimated avian tendencies. I then argue that avian consciousness is preferable as a conceptual frame to the "autistic consciousness" thought to accompany the diffusion of networked media. Finally, I suggest that taking seriously how humans inhabit a kind of avian consciousness through networked media aids bioegalitarianism. Seeing the human animal as participating in other modes of consciousness, like the avian, helps green rhetorical theory by envisioning agency, affectability, attention, and meaning beyond anthropocentric models of communication.

On Representational Consciousness and Bioegalitarianism

What Emily Plec calls "that very human obsession with the structure and substance of verbal utterances" historically forms the backbone of speciesist domination (2013, p. 3). The capacity of speech to (selectively) represent the world, to sustain complex logical formulations, and to develop lengthy sequences of thought are all regularly marshaled as reasons for the righteous domination of the human animal. "We" human animals use representational (and meta-representational) language, and "they" nonhuman animals cannot. For John Muckelbauer, "reflective rationality," that "alleged ability to reflect on actions through *logos* [both reason and language]," is historically at the center of anthropocentric theories of communication (2011, p. 96). Intellectual luminaries like Chomsky, Habermas, Heidegger, Lacan, Levinas, and, following Stephen Lind's

(2013) analysis, Kenneth Burke, all figure verbal speech as a gulf demarcating human animals from nonhuman animals.

These speciesist assumptions about human communication coalesced in the early modern era under the rubric of “representational consciousness” (Hariman, 2002). The standardizing effect of print congealed an assumption that language could be made to simply mirror nature and that a “knowing and speaking subject who understands the world and communicates that understanding with eloquence and grace” could thus address persistent social problems (Davis, 2011, p. 88). This representational consciousness depends on what I. A. Richards calls the “proper meaning superstition” – each word denotes one and only one meaning able to be permanently stabilized (1936, p. 11). In the early modern imaginary, words with fixed meanings would, through the exercise of reason, describe a world that would yield before human action. The hopeful *telos* of the bourgeois public sphere, for example, was underwritten by an assumption that the printed word’s ability to better represent the world would make the transmission of knowledge more seamless and the solving of problems more obvious. More contemporary critics like Neil Postman illustrate the persistence of representational consciousness as an ideal of print culture: “to be confronted by the cold abstractions of printed sentences is to look upon language bare, without the assistance of either beauty or community” (1985, p. 50). This position is hopelessly naïve, as rhetorical conceptions of language acknowledge interpretation never unfolds without the assistance of beauty, community, and rich webs of affect and association borne of social location, history, and experience.

The fetishization of representational consciousness frustrates the pursuit of a bioegalitarian agenda. Donal Carbaugh (2007) notes:

A challenge ... for all of us is to open our understanding to the world beyond our words, beyond our representations of it, to learn anew from it, and to be in a position better to speak about what we come to know and thus to act accordingly. This suggests further that our words not become the primary or exclusive measure of things, but that nature be so. Put differently, the medium of words must not dominate our means of communication when striving to know nature’s world. (p. 68)

Despite lingering residues that privilege representational consciousness, the late modern imaginary complicated the simplistic representational logics of early modernity. Part of this is attributable to cognitive studies on nonhuman animals that prove reason and symbol use is not the sole province of human beings (Condit, 2010, p. 103). Another part of this story, though, involves a shift in systems of mediation. Robert Hariman claims “modernity’s powerful development of technologies for recording and communicating reality has caused modern norms of representation to buckle under the endless reproduction of signs” (2002, p. 270). Electronic media ushered in a postmodern world of fragments and pastiche that undermined representational logics. The advent of digital media accelerated this process. What prevails in contemporary networked contexts, instead of the simplistic semiotic foundational to representational consciousness, is a proliferation of signs under many different codes, a constant questioning of

representations, and a deep multiperspectivalism and skepticism aided by the expansion of possible point sources of publicity.

Given this wild proliferation of media, the networked imaginary theoretically supports a range of different consciousnesses. The notion that humans participate in an “avian consciousness” is a conceit, a fanciful connection that makes provocative but useful connections to understand everyday communication in an internetworked era. Yet, a turn to avian consciousness is not without dangers. The traditional problem of identifying overlaps between human animal and nonhuman animal communication is that most classic of anthropomorphic sins: seeing “our” behavior in “them” by linguistifying nonhuman animal behavior in ways that overlay our own rhetorical and social formations over alternative modalities of being. As Thomas Nagel (1974) famously argued, how would you know what it is like to be a bat—or a bird, or any other animal? Speaking for animal others is plagued with traps. Experience is so species-specific that any observation about animals risks the transposition of human subjectivity onto the nonhuman animal.

At the same time, the radical approach to animal alterity implies a kind of solipsism that is no more practical and a bit more dangerous. If bat-ness is situated as totally alien, then appreciating bat sentience becomes a much more difficult project. While we cannot know what it is like to be a bat, inference allows us to make some educated guesses. Inference creates empathy within and across species. Seeing a little bit of “us” in “them,” as George Kennedy argues, acknowledges some trans-species commonalities borne of evolution and makes ecological empathy more likely (1998, p. 12). But we must also see a little bit of “them” in “us.” Advancing Debra Hawhee’s “zoomorphic” interpretive strategy of calling “attention to a human’s bestial side” is one way to counterbalance inevitable, if latent, anthropomorphism (2010, p. 174). I focus Hawhee’s zoomorphism further by adopting an “ornithomorphic” frame to interpret communication through networked media like Twitter. Let us, in other words, see the avian in the contemporary rhetorical practices of the (digitally networked) human animal.

Why privilege the term “consciousness,” given the role of that term in the history of anthropocentrism? The prevailing sense of human consciousness—*cogito ergo sum*—is bound to Descartes’ vivisection experiments that purported to prove nonhuman animals were merely automata with no real feelings of pain. The yelps of his victims were simple examples of stimulus–response, not conscious reactions to being hurt. In what is arguably world history’s most baseless and troubling inferential leap, Descartes concluded from these experiments that animals felt no pain, thus no consciousness, and consequently no soul. This elision between consciousness and soul reaffirmed the human animals’ placement of themselves at the apex of the biosphere.

The term “consciousness,” then, is an enticing one to consign to the trash heap of intellectual history, freighted as it is with speciesist baggage. Debra Hawhee acknowledges the overwrought position of consciousness in rhetorical theory by arguing that the recent scholarly interest in nonhuman animals invites us to “suspend the habituated emphasis on verbal language and consciousness” (2011, p. 83). Though I concur

with the suggestion to decenter verbal language, I am wary of suspending the language of consciousness. For better or worse, consciousness is a powerful ideograph capable of mobilizing action for public audiences. The problem with consciousness (at least for the purposes of this essay!¹) is not the broad sense of the word, which is embedded within a web of terms like sentience, awareness, subjectivity, relationality, interaction, and rhetoric. At a minimum, consciousness is the experience of paying attention and being affected by what is paid attention to. The idea of consciousness can be appreciated without a relentless privileging of *human* consciousness grounded in the liberal, rational, unified subject. Rather than abandoning the trope of consciousness, and losing a powerful rhetorical *topos* for bioegalitarianism, we might instead revalue multiple kinds of consciousness and see the human animal as simultaneously participating in these plural modes of being. Embracing the “diverse zoology of the self” opens opportunities for trans-species identification (Shepard, 1997, p. 80). Don DeLillo’s novella *The Body Artist* is a rich study in how the human animal contains zoological multitudes and a useful starting point to draw out communicative features of avian consciousness.

On Avian Consciousness

Don DeLillo’s novella *The Body Artist* explores the relationships between performance artist Lauren Hartke, her critically acclaimed filmmaker husband Rey Robles, a mysterious man Hartke names “Mr. Tuttle,” and a host of birds. *The Body Artist* begins with Hartke and Robles at the breakfast table in their rented house, near a remote coastal town. In the middle of making tea, Hartke notices a blue jay among the small brown birds on the feeder. Captivated, “she thought she’d somehow only now learned how to look. She’d never seen a thing so clearly” (DeLillo, 2001, p. 21). DeLillo continues:

She tried to work past the details to the bird itself, nest thief and skilled mimic, to the fixed interest in those eyes, a kind of inquisitive chill that felt a little like a challenge. When birds look into houses, what impossible worlds they see. Think. What a shredding of every knowable surface and process. (DeLillo, 2001, p. 22)

Hartke first observes the bright coloration of the bird and then “falls into a reverie through which she comes close to an experience of non-human animal consciousness” as she tries to imagine what the bird must be thinking as it watches her (DeLillo, 2001, p. 10).² This reverie between Hartke and blue jay mirrors the consubstantial identification that Sowards (2006) and Milstein (2011) find in human–orangutan and human–whale interaction. Far from being a Cartesian automata, or reflecting behavior justifying the old insult bird brain, the blue jay is credited with a unique kind of consciousness: it is affected and affectable.

This quiet human–avian interaction is soon shattered. In a newspaper article reprinted between Chapters 1 and 2, the reader learns that Robles committed suicide shortly after this breakfast. The balance of *The Body Artist* features Hartke reckoning

with Robles' death. Returning to the remote house after the funeral, Hartke starts work on her next performance piece as she watches birds at the feeders:

There were five birds on the feeder and they all faced outward, away from the food and identically still. She watched them. They weren't looking or listening so much as feeling something, intent and sensing. All these words are wrong, she thought ... they read a message in some event outside the visible spectrum. (DeLillo, 2001, p. 53)

Hartke senses the inadequacy of language to represent avian consciousness even as she uses the metaphor of reading to describe how they are interpreting messages beyond what is visibly represented. That the visible, representable spectrum does not capture all the layers of affecting sense data – that there is more than meets the human eye – is a subtle rejoinder to theories of representational consciousness.

Drawing on recent work in cognitive ethology, Jeffrey Karnicky's critical interpretation of *The Body Artist* recuperates the idea of avian consciousness by underlining how Hartke perceives birds as beings *with* consciousness. Karnicky's interpretation of avian consciousness in DeLillo's novella can be pushed in more radical directions by probing how Hartke herself slips into, or reflects features of, an avian consciousness. I interpret Hartke's ritualized interactions with birds throughout the novella as stimulating "a social process of (dis/re)ordering through interaction with the more-than-human world" (Bernacchi, 2013, pp. 147–148). Hartke's dis- and re-ordering of the performances that constitute her "self" are inspired by her interaction with birds and manifested through bodily movement, thought, and vocalization.

Like the jay, Hartke is a skilled mimic. Hartke's performance art is recognized for intensely accurate mimesis of others' bodies (DeLillo, 2001, pp. 103–110). For Hartke, this is not a fully cognized mimesis, as when she leans into the recesses of a refrigerator early in the novella and "let out a groan ... She was too trim and limber to feel the strain and was only echoing Rey, identifyingly, groaning his groan, but in a manner so seamless and deep it was her discomfort too" (DeLillo, 2001, p. 9). Though the reader is first cued to Hartke's mimesis through imitation of another human, the feathered beings she intently watches eventually inscribe themselves on to her body as well. At one point, she looks out to the coast, "tasting the breeze for latent implications" (DeLillo, 2001, p. 9) much like the birds who were earlier reading messages outside the visible spectrum. After Rey's death, she returns to the rented house and considers how "her body felt different to her in ways that she did not understand. Tight, framed, she didn't know exactly. Slightly foreign and unfamiliar. Different, thinner" (DeLillo, 2001, p. 33). After this reflexive consideration of her body, she looks around for something to eat and settles on prototypical bird food: bread crumbs (DeLillo, 2001, pp. 33–34). Distracted from Rey's death, she imagines being an observer in the kitchen, "seeing a small hovering her in the air somewhere" (DeLillo, 2001, p. 34). Later, she frenetically grooms herself with pumice stone and emery boards, with skin and nail flying, much like a caged bird uses a cuttlebone to keep beaks and claws trim (DeLillo, 2001, p. 76). DeLillo's figurative language signals Hartke's ontological realignment, which rear-

ranges her “common state of consciousness precisely in order to make contact with the other organic forms of sensitivity and awareness with which human existence is entwined” (Abrams, 1997, p. 9).

Of course, human animal transitions to nonhuman animals are a literary staple, most famously in Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*. Throughout the novella, DeLillo plays with the human–avian overlap not just in terms bodily performance, but also in terms of thought and speech. In an early passage that shows how Hartke’s thoughts flit from topic to topic, DeLillo writes:

She got up to get something. She looked at the kettle and realized that wasn’t it. She knew it would come to her because it always did and then it did. She wanted honey for her tea even though the water wasn’t boiling yet. She had a hyper-preparedness, or haywire, or hair-trigger, and Rey was always saying, or said once, and she carried a voice in her head that was hers and it was dialogue or monologue and she went to the cabinet where she got the honey and the tea bags—a voice that flowed from a story in the paper. (2001, p. 16)

The stream of consciousness form of this passage is repeated several times throughout the novel. This, too, is a familiar literary technique that exposes representational consciousness as a construct. Like the birds outside her window, Hartke’s mind jumps from one thing to another, reacting to information as she moves through her environment with past experiences popping up in the guise of interpreting her current situation.

Although we do not know what it is like to be a bird paying attention, observation of their attention routines indicates that avian attention is more episodic than the model of human attention traditionally presupposed in models of representational consciousness. Witnessing a hummingbird flit from flower to flower, or a robin hopping in a moist garden full of worms, or a chicken picking through grain, suggests that constantly shifting attention, rather than sustained focus, is more the avian norm. Typical avian behavior involves a constant registration of shifting environmental cues. Similarly, “Hartke’s attention,” Karnicky explains, “is divided between routine events” (2009, p. 10). The presence of Hartke’s scattered thoughts throughout the novella implies that division of attention is not solely a product of avian consciousness, but is perhaps a feature of consciousness in general. This ornithomorphic interpretation of *The Body Artist*—recognizing observable avian attention patterns in the human—erodes the traditional assumption that attention is a cognitive resource that is intentionally summoned, constantly marshaled, and systematically deployed. In contrast to the normative model of attention assumed in models of representational consciousness, avian consciousness relies on a different model of attention, but not necessarily a lesser one (Gordon & Bogen, 2009).

This different model of attention and consciousness plays out in a curious character in *The Body Artist*: the mysterious Mr. Tuttle. One day after Rey Robles’ death, a man just appears in one of Hartke’s unused bedrooms (DeLillo, 2001, pp. 40–41). He has no name and no evident history. Neither Mr. Tuttle nor Hartke know how he got into the house, or where he’s from, or anything about him, because he does not communicate in a familiar

idiom. The relationship between Lauren Hartke and Mr. Tuttle is undeniably strange. He could be an amnesiac, a hospital patient, an escapee from a psychiatric ward, a ghost, or even a figment of Hartke's imagination (Karnicky, 2009, p. 7). Despite her initial impulse to call hospitals, she does not. Instead, she allows Mr. Tuttle to stay, assigning him that name because he reminds her of an old high school science teacher and "she thought it would make him easier to see" (DeLillo, 2001, p. 48). Just as she tries to get into the blue jay's world, so does she attempt to get into Mr. Tuttle's. Although Hartke never explicitly considers this possibility, Mr. Tuttle displays many of the characteristics popularly associated with autism. In her first efforts at communicating with him, Lauren observes "[t]here was a certain futility in his tone, an endlessness of effort, suggesting things he could not easily make clear to her no matter how much he said. Even his gestures seemed marked by struggle" (DeLillo, 2001, p. 46). Using a common trope for people with autism, she wonders if this is a grown son living with his parents who regularly goes wandering off "into the bubble world" (DeLillo, 2001, p. 50). Mr. Tuttle's difficulty communicating and interpreting emotion is similarly indicative of autism:

There's a code in the simplest conversation that tells the speakers what's going on outside the bare acoustics. This was missing when they talked ... He didn't register facial response to things she said and this threw her off. There were no grades of emphasis here and flatness there. She began to understand that their talks had no time sense and that all the references at the unspoken level, the things a man speaking Dutch might share with a man speaking Chinese—all this was missing here. (DeLillo, 2001, pp. 65–66)

DeLillo's semiotic turn underlines Mr. Tuttle's potential autism while drawing an apparent parallel for trans-species communication. Hartke, looking into the inquisitive eye of a jay or Mr. Tuttle, shares a moment but not the code necessary to make sense of it all. However, through shared experience, Lauren eventually begins to understand Mr. Tuttle: "He talked. After a while she began to understand what she was hearing. It took many levels of perception. It took whole social histories of how people listen to what other people say" (DeLillo, 2001, p. 50). DeLillo echoes Carbaugh in suggesting that the hope for trans-species identification persists if we learn to listen differently and long enough.

On Different Orders of Address

Mass media and networked media play a central role in *The Body Artist*, allowing DeLillo to problematize the representational consciousness associated with the mass media and further thematize the avian connection to networked media through the character of Mr. Tuttle. DeLillo illustrates how actual reading practices defy the conventional account of representational consciousness by playing with two polarities of mass media engagement: Rey absorbs nothing from the newspaper while Lauren is so engrossed that she daydreams herself into the news stories. During the extended breakfast scene that opens the novella, Lauren "looked up and understood he [Robles] wasn't reading the paper. He was looking at it but not reading it and she understood

this retroactively, that he'd been looking at it all this time but not absorbing the words on the page" (DeLillo, 2001, p. 20). Robles attends to the newspaper at a surface level, letting his eyes trace over the words on the page but not registering them at a deeper cognitive level (a familiar feeling for anyone who spends time around lots of text). Attention is no guarantee of uptake—just because we are literally reading the same page does not mean that we are figuratively *on* the same page.

Lauren, on the other hand:

tended to place herself, to insert herself into certain stories in the newspaper. Some kind of daydream variation. She did it and then became aware she was doing it and then sometimes did it again a few minutes later with the same or a different story and then became aware again. (DeLillo, 2001, p. 14)

Lauren represents the other extreme of mass media engagement, becoming so involved in the stories that she sees herself as a participant instead of just an observer. DeLillo's oblique observation that our fantasy worlds color any hermeneutic project is uncontroversial enough. But there is something else going on here that signals a stronger parasocial relationship, for incidents in the newspaper "gather her into it" (DeLillo, 2001, p. 18). Right after she sees the jay during that early breakfast:

She folded a section of the newspaper and read a line or two and read some more or didn't, sipping tea and drifting ... She read and drifted. She was here and there ... She had a conversation with a doctor in a news story ... She sipped her tea and read. She more or less saw herself talking to a doctor in the bush somewhere, with people hungry in the dust. (DeLillo, 2001, pp. 23–24)

Hartke's reading of the newspaper story illustrates how individual attention sometimes slides along a scale of intensity in any given rhetorical engagement. Still reading the newspaper, Lauren reflects that:

there are people being tortured halfway around the world, who speak another language, and you have conversations with them more or less uncontrollably until you become aware you are doing it and then you stop, seeing whatever is in front of you at the time, like half a glass of juice in your husband's hand. (DeLillo, 2001, p. 19).

Lauren's reading of the newspaper plunges her into a complex world of affects that always already compromises the rational processing of news stories presumed with representational consciousness.

These uncontrollable conversations with mass-mediated figures—the doctors in the dust, the tortured foreigners—are examples of parataxic distortion, the phenomenon common in schizophrenics whereby actual and fantasy people interact. Lauren Hartke is pretty clearly not schizophrenic, for it is *only* when she is reading the newspaper that she experiences these parataxic distortions. Her absorptive engagement with the mass media is, in fact, perfectly in line with the deep identification that characterizes her performance art and is, furthermore, apparently just a contemporary instantiation of a long connection between broadcast media and parataxic distortion. John Durham Peters notes that, in the heady days of early broadcasting over the radio, some people per-

ceived the “wireless transmission” of voices over the radio to be personally addressed to them (2010, p. 128). Experiencing parataxic distortion at the turn of the twentieth century, some mental patients complained of a lack of a filter, being uncontrollably drawn into conversations and fearing constant “thought broadcasting” (2010, p. 132). These coinciding phenomena lead Peters to suggest that there is an “elective affinity between broadcasting and schizophrenia” (2010, p. 132). The weak version of the relationship is that broadcasting provides a metaphor for schizophrenic experiences, while the strong version advances the claim that modern communication technology actually constitutes schizophrenia as such. An intermediate position might maintain that engaging with mass media contains schizophrenic possibilities. Silent reading means the voices are in your head. Here one moment, they fade when the next story comes. Sometimes there are recurring figures, but most often they just come and go.

If schizophrenia is the interpretive malady of the early broadcasting era, Peters boldly identifies autism as one of the new “disorders of address” in the early networked era (2010, p. 138, see also Kane & Peters, 2010). “In a digital age,” Peters explains:

large segments of our species carry out much of their social lives by machine. Interactive, portable keyboarded devices are nudging out audiovisual genres as dominant modes of everyday communication ... [digital media] favor data-processing and logistical convenience over the staging of face-to-face interaction. The “it” disease for new media, with their low affect machine interfaces, appears to be autism. (2010, p. 138)

Peters echoes the concern that people use internetworked media to tailor their information environments in ways that reduce surprise and routinize attention patterns in ways that depart from face-to-face interaction (see Sunstein, 2001). Though there is some overlap between accounts of autism and the strong preference for regularized, predictable, and controlled interactions in digitally networked environments, the metaphor of autistic consciousness relies, as I shortly argue, on a neuronormative understanding of autism.

The appearance of Peters’ “low affect machine interfaces” in *The Body Artist* helps decipher the question of Mr. Tuttle’s consciousness and unpack the problems with describing communication through internetworked media as autistic. Lauren obsessively watches a video webcam pointed at a barren stretch of highway near Kotka, Finland:

She spent hours at the computer screen looking at a live-streaming video feed from the edge of a two-lane road in a city in Finland. It was the middle of the night in Kotka, Finland, and she watched the screen. It was interesting to her because it was happening now, as she sat here, and because it happened twenty-four hours a day, facelessly, cars entering and leaving Kotka, or just the empty road in the dead times. The dead times were best. She sat and looked at the screen. It was compelling to her, real enough to withstand the circumstance of nothing going on. It thrived on the circumstance ... it was simply the fact of Kotka. It was the sense of organization, a place contained in an unyielding frame, as it is and as you watch, with a reading of local time in the digital display in a corner of the screen. Kotka was another world but she could see it in its realness, in its hours, minutes and seconds

... she didn't know the meaning of this feed but took it as an act of floating poetry ... It was best in the dead times. It emptied her mind and made her feel the deep silence of other places, the mystery of seeing over the world to a place stripped of everything but a road that approaches and recedes, both realities occurring at once. (DeLillo, 2001, pp. 38-39)

Just as it is dangerous to suggest that there is an essential avian consciousness, so is it problematic to homogenize across the spectrum of autism. However, just as there are recurring behaviors that we observe in birds, so are there recurring depictions of autism from people with autism and their caregivers. In this extended passage from DeLillo are a number of these recurrent features of autism: obsessive attention to detail, repetitive behavior, embrace of familiar routine, and a contained world of predictable signs (Oakley, 1999, pp. 102-103). While DeLillo frames this in the context of a live-streaming webcam, the passage captures the draw of much internet networked media. The happenings of networked media are always happening now, and twenty-four hours a day; often compelling even though nothing is really happening; real enough even in an obviously hypermediated form; punctuated not by days (the preferred temporal cycle of the mass media) but by steadily ticking seconds, minutes, and hours.

And so we return to the mystery of Mr. Tuttle. Earlier, I suggested that Mr. Tuttle shows many of the signs of autism based on his difficulties translating interior thoughts, his flat affect, and his lack of knowledge about social codes and cues. In trying to decode Mr. Tuttle's origins, Lauren "amused herself by thinking he'd come from cyberspace, a man who'd emerged from her computer screen in the dead of night. He was from Kotka, Finland" (DeLillo, 2001, pp. 44-45). Peters' link between internet networked media and autism authorizes an interpretation of Mr. Tuttle as an embodiment of the internet, representing all the potentially autistic tendencies of the medium. But if Mr. Tuttle is some kind of internet incarnate, DeLillo's account of Mr. Tuttle's communication shifts us away from the autistic metaphor and toward the avian:

"Being here has come to me. I am with the moment, I will leave the moment. Chair, table, wall, hall, all for the moment, in the moment. It has come to me. Here and near. From the moment I am gone, am left, am leaving. I will leave the moment from the moment." She didn't know what to call this. *She called it singing* ... She felt an easing in her body that drew her down out of laborious thought and into something nearly uncontrollable. She leaned into his voice, laughing. She wanted to chant with him, to fall in and out of time, or words, or things, whatever he was doing, but she only laughed instead ... She was laughing but he was not. It came out of him nonstop and *it wasn't schizophrenic speech* or the whoop of rippling bodies shocked by God ... Was he telling her what it is like to be him, to live in his body and mind? (DeLillo, 2001, pp. 74-75, emphasis added)

As *The Body Artist* progresses, Lauren adopts an ornithomorphic interpretive strategy herself in trying to understand Mr. Tuttle. His voice is described as "reedy and thin and trapped in tenses and inflections, in singsong conjugations" (DeLillo, 2001, p. 63). Later, Lauren mimics his voice and describes it as a "dry piping sound, hollow-bodied, like a bird humming on her tongue" (DeLillo, 2001, p. 101). All of these descrip-

tors—reedy, thin, singsong, piping, hollow-bodied, and humming—are descriptors of birdsong. Mr. Tuttle is as avian as a featherless bipedal creature can be; he, as DeLillo writes, “violates the limits of the human” (DeLillo, 2001, p. 100).

While Peters suggests that autism is the networked *disorder* of address, Lauren “found the distance interesting, the halting quality of his speech and actions, the self-taught quality, his seeming unconcern about what would happen to him now” (DeLillo, 2001, pp. 44–45). Rather than hypothesizing a communicative *disorder*, Hartke appreciates Mr. Tuttle’s *different* order. Despite the difficulties in communicating through representational speech, Lauren and Mr. Tuttle share a series of corporeal moments of identification, hinting at how affectability needs no *logos*. *The Body Artist*, then, is a rich exploration of how human animals exhibit cognitive, affective, and corporeal behaviors that overlap with the avian. My ornithomorphic interpretation of Hartke and Mr. Tuttle illustrates how, in practice, human cognition rarely reflects the conventional account of representational consciousness. While humans have always exhibited elements of avian consciousness, the digitization and networking of the contemporary media ecosystem draw out these avian communicative features more obviously. As I explore more in the next section, networked rhetorics replicate the brief, seemingly inconsequential, communicative features that we often see in birds.

There are a number of reasons to seek, in avian consciousness, a metaphoric alternative to Peters’ autism diagnosis. First, it is only through a limited understanding of autism that legitimizes it as what Ann Jurecic calls “a disturbing new metaphor for the postmodern self, disengaged from the world and from others” (2007, p. 422). The neurodiversity movement understands autism not as a disorder of address, but as a different way of ordering experience. For example, Temple Grandin, the animal scientist who has written on her own experience of autism in *Animals in Translation* (2005), explains how she uses visual images instead of representational language in navigating social complexities. Such visual representations of experience are only a *disorder* if the linguistic, representational mode of communication is privileged.

Second, the autism metaphor underestimates the potential of networked media to coordinate social relationships. The traditional diagnosis of people with autism as those who are less able to interpret and respond to affective cues in conventionally prescribed manners does not match up with the predominantly affective, sociable communication on sites like Facebook and Twitter. Social networking sites are credited with ushering in a phatic media culture that relies on, and even enhances, the value of prudent affective response (Miller, 2008; Rice, 2008). Both birds and networked intermediaries sometimes do just sing into the air. Sometimes that singing simply is, like the tweet with zero retweets, but at other times it participates in a complex symphony that coordinates relationships.

Third, the autism metaphor cedes too much ground to systems theorists who suggest that systemic complexity produces hermetically sealed subsystems with their own unique, autopoietic, nontranslatable codes. Habermas refers to this flawed conceptualization of society as fundamentally autistic, arguing that communication always enables hermeneutic

bridges between different discourse communities (1998, pp. 335–343). The avian metaphor assumes, in contrast to the autistic metaphor, that complex systems self-organize and thus may provide more resources to understand internetworked public culture.

Finally, the autism metaphor risks medicalizing rhetoric, inviting the importation of “therapy” from the medical field to “cure” autistic communication. Alternatively, seeing the avian in the human forces us to embrace the multiplicity of our own selves and the different ways that we experience attention to the world around us. Avian consciousness is a richer, more neurodiverse metaphor for our engagement with networked media.

On Interpreting Networked Media Ornithomorphically

My exegesis of DeLillo’s *The Body Artist* vis-à-vis avian consciousness focuses on how speciest assumptions about affectability can be reconsidered within an ornithomorphic frame. Taking avian consciousness seriously means acknowledging that apprehension occurs beyond the boundaries of representational language, that selves become zoologically diverse through interaction, that attention is experienced and enacted in many different ways, and that being in the moment opens up new modes of interrelation. This ornithomorphic frame, then, can be used to analyze communicative phenomena in networked environments. Twitter, with its iconic blue bird logo, is an apt place to focus this analysis. An interview with Twitter co-founder Jack Dorsey on the origins of the name reveals just how explicitly the avian metaphor functions as part of the networked rhetorical imaginary:

we came across the word “twitter,” and it was just perfect. The definition was “a short burst of inconsequential information,” and “chirps from birds.” And that’s exactly what the product was. The whole bird thing: bird chirps sound meaningless to us, but meaning is applied by other birds. The same is true of Twitter: a lot of messages can be seen as completely useless and meaningless, but it’s entirely dependent on the recipient. So we just fell in love with the word. It was like, “Oh, this is it.” We can use it as a verb, as a noun, it fits with so many other words. If you get too many messages you’re “twitterpated” – the name was just perfect. (quoted in Sarno, 2009a, February 18)

One of Dorsey’s early sketches of a Twitter prototype indicates the kind of inconsequential information – “in bed” and “going to park” – he presumed would be a prominent feature of the communication through the site. From the vantage point of representational consciousness, this kind of communication is inconsequential at best. The harsher critique is that it is self-indulgent, narcissistic, vacuous noise that distracts attention from more meaningful communication. But Dorsey embeds a rejoinder to that position in his explanation of the overlap between Twitter and avian communication. There is not, in I. A. Richards’ phrasing, a “proper meaning” that emanates from a chirp. Instead, it is the node of reception that produces meaning. While Dorsey’s bed or park status is irrelevant to most of the billions of creatures on the planet, it may well be relevant to those closest to him and thus serve a non-negligible function. More im-

portantly, each individual tweet is but a small piece of a larger communicative tapestry. Like birdsong, the utility of tweets in understanding patterns of affiliation and communication is better appreciated in the aggregate. “Meaning” is further generated by data mining words, retweets, location, hashtags, and sentiment. The more tweets there are clustered around a subject, the more interesting the possibilities for analysis.

Twitter, like much of networked media, thrives on information. If televisual mass media created a personality-driven public culture focused on the event (Hariman, 1995, pp. 91–92; Hart, 1999), networked media “exhibit an information-driven structure” (Xenos, 2008, p. 500). Of course, what we understand to qualify as information is fundamentally changing in digitally networked public cultures. “Information” now includes the everyday and sometimes banal moments of life. The gradual aggregation of this everyday information results in increasingly rich accounts of ever more phenomena and, like bird chirps, different audiences find salient meaning in any given piece of information – or not.

An information-driven communicative culture is relentlessly focused on the now. Hartke obsesses over the webcam in Kotka, Finland because it makes her feel a part of the *nowness* of the place. Likewise, Mr. Tuttle’s Whitmanesque singing of being in the moment underlines how his own avian consciousness is preoccupied with the present moment. “What’s happening?,” Twitter’s present-centered motto, is a catchphrase reflective of the episodic cognitive culture of birds, who are constantly gathering and circulating information about the now. As Dorsey reflects in the context of Twitter-linked human animals:

Suddenly you have all these people on the street roaming about, and they’re able to report on everything they see. So a certain mass of them can report on the earthquake they just felt, and another mass reports on what they felt about the Obama inauguration, and another group on the homeless issues in San Francisco. You’ve got a further richness to add to a typical journalistic process. And when you have a mass of people updating about a particular thing, you’re exposing a trend: This is happening right now in this location or on this topic. It gives you an immediacy and relevancy for what people are talking about right now. (quoted in Sarno, 2009b, February 19)

This kind of information-driven communication actualizes the benefits of continuous, real-time, constant contact; indeed, Twitter is famous for spreading information about natural disaster response and aiding the coordination of protests. The obvious risk of a communication mode relentlessly dedicated to cataloguing the features of the now is being captured in the eternal present of the avian mind. Dorsey admits as much, confessing:

I don’t go back in time [to read old tweets]. You’re kind of as good as your last update. That’s what you’re currently thinking or doing, or your current approach towards life ... It’s only relevant in the now, unless I’m fascinated by it. (quoted in Sarno, 2009b, February 19)

The closer one identifies with representational consciousness, the more frightening is such a sentiment. Identifying relevance as that which is happening now rewards

the kind of ahistorical thinking that humans repeatedly perfect. However, the situation is not irreparably dire, as Dorsey's confession that he is only interested in the now comes with a substantial caveat: "unless I'm fascinated by it." Fascination encourages Dorsey to scroll through past tweets, getting lost in the maze of hyperlinks that mark networked rhetorics. There is a latent potentiality in any internetworked site of public discourse to toggle between surface reads of the now and depth reads that push beyond the now. This toggling mirrors the distinction made by George A. Kennedy between avian "contact" and "assembly" calls (1992, p. 5). Contact calls are used throughout the day as a way for a single bird to keep track of the larger flock, assist in foraging for food sources, and warn of predators. The frequent clucking of chickens and honking of geese is low on informational content (the avian version of phatic communication) but high in sociability. Many tweets perform a similar function, creating a zone of constant contact within human groups to coordinate activity in the face of increasingly complex societies. Answers to "What are you doing?," "What are you eating?," "What are dangers you face?" are reflective of so much content on Twitter and other social networking sites because both humans and birds exert immense rhetorical energy posing and answering these questions, with or without Twitter to report it.

Although contact calls predominate in both avian and human circles, there is another variety of call: the assembly call. Kennedy is oriented to the assembly call by witnessing a murder of crows that appeared to "come together to debate some issue of general interest" (1998, p. 20). Of course, the crows were not holding court in a Habermasian-flavored coffee shop or participating in a Fishkin-style deliberative opinion poll. Kennedy argues that the assembly calls are epideictic because they function as a "reaffirmation of group identity" (1998, p. 21). Since complex deliberation is difficult 140 characters at a time, Twitter tends to reveal "publicly articulated relationships" more than solve problems (boyd, 2004). But forging group solidarity is a necessary precursor to any deliberation, for the collective must precede collective decision-making (Calhoun, 2002). The kinds of assembling that occur around certain hashtags often spur concise insights and, by linking to nodes in the broader networked media ecosystem, orient attention not exclusively to what one is doing now but to larger public issues.

Again, the closer one aligns with representational consciousness, the more incredulous this analogy must appear. Admittedly, the broader rhetorical palette afforded by the human palate gives our species a wider range of communicative tools than our avian cousins. Yet, as Kennedy observes, bird song is not so distant from traditional Greco-Roman rhetorical practice:

[in most birdsong] a short phrase functions as a proemium to attract attention and announce the song; then a theme is stated and varied and may be followed by other themes repeated, interwoven, and varied ... Amplification involves repetition, variation, combination, and substitution of themes. Erasmus's famous treatise *On Copia* is the fullest description of how this was traditionally done in the West, using tropes and figures. (Kennedy, 1998, p. 23)

Tweets are short phrases that attract attention, spurring either tweets in agreement, in response or, perhaps more commonly, simply retweets. While it is easy to mock the value of retweeting, such a function parallels communication in the broader animal kingdom, where “overstatement and redundancy are the means of overcoming distracting noise in the environment, securing attention, and expressing confidence and resolve to prevail” (Kennedy, 1998, p. 14). Overstatement and redundancy – two words oft-associated with Twitter – may well serve a valuable attention gathering function, which is increasingly important in an era of information abundance (Lanham, 2006).

Toward Bioegalitarianism: Ways of Being Avian

Taking avian consciousness seriously provides a novel frame for exploring communicative phenomena mediated by digitally networked technologies. There is no sin in observing that bird behavior can do so, but leaving the conclusion there replicates the anthropocentric fallacy that uses birds to better us human bipeds. Karnicky hopefully concludes, based on his observations about Hartke’s engagement with the blue jay, that “differences in ways that humans see the world can lead to differences in ways that humans act in the world” (2009, p. 7). For T. X. Barber, recognizing avian intelligence will spark a reordered ecological relationship (1993, p. 148). The hope that changing the way we *see* birds changes the way we live with them is an optimism I wish I could partake of more fully. Alas, though people largely acknowledge nonhuman animals as sentient creatures that feel pain, slaughterhouses still kill billions of chickens a year, human population growth increasingly devastates birds’ natural habitats, and some city walkers still kick pigeons.

Perhaps we need to change not just our way of seeing, but how we see our way of being. Birds do not just possess a meaningful consciousness that we should recognize. *We share elements of that consciousness with them.* Recognizing this overlap in consciousness might aid trans-species identification. As Thomas Gannon speculates, “when you can make the imaginative leap that ‘you’ is also a bird, another species, whether this is only metaphorically or mystically true, in the western scheme of things, the world will be a better ecological place” (Gannon, 2009, p. 316). DeLillo’s protagonist makes that leap, and it is conceivable to imagine Twitterers as making that leap as well. Perhaps the speciesist hubris that privileges the human animal will dissipate with a recognition that the human animal is intrinsically plural, an amalgamation of many beasts, and capable of many ways of attending, affecting, representing, and belonging. Such recognition cannot but help to advance the cause of bioegalitarianism.

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Notes

1. I will engage the large body of literature on philosophy of mind and consciousness only lightly here. There is at least some basic consensus that nonhuman animals have at least two senses of consciousness. The first sense of consciousness is marked by wakefulness; there is a difference between an animal that is awake and an animal that is asleep (unlike plants, for example, who appear to always be in the same basic state). The second sense of consciousness is grounded in perception and response, and here, too, nonhuman animals seem to pass the test. The third sense of consciousness is more contested. Drawing from Block's (1995) conception of "access consciousness," this third sense identifies the capacity to draw on mental representations to rationally guide speech and action. While cognitive ethologists argue that nonhuman animals do use these cognitive representations toward rational ends, the ability to think about thought has, at least in the Greco-Roman tradition, been attributed solely to the human species (see Griffin & Speck, 2004; Hurley & Nudds, 2006).
2. This moment resembles what Christine Oravec (1981) identifies as "the sublime response" of someone witnessing a magnificent natural event. Though the sublime is usually associated with sweeping landscape vistas or megafauna like whales (Milstein, 2008, p. 187), DeLillo artfully conveys how the sublime manifests in quotidian contexts as well.

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