

Voices of the Others: A Few Considerations for Listening to *Cricket, Tree, Crow*

David Dunn

Beyond the auditory surface and surround experience of *Cricket, Tree, Crow*, Stephanie Loveless has also intended a subtle polemic:

“As a city dweller who is so much more attuned to humans than other forms of life, I wanted to embark on a project that would challenge this. The project was intended as a prescription and potential cure for my own anthropocentrism, through listening to and sounding with non-human others. It also put into practice the idea that we, as a species, need to develop greater attention to, and intimacy with, other life forms on this planet—their subjectivities and phenomenologies—if we want to shift from our current ecological paradigm.”

This polemic can be buoyed by several supporting arguments. An explanatory framework within neuroscience that has evolved alongside that of the more popular theory of neocortical symmetrical brain halves with functional localizations, has been a model that describes three major hierarchical tiers of brain structure inherited from evolutionary precursors: “reptilian”, “paleo-mammalian”, and the hominid neocortex. The Papez-MacLean theory of emotions has described these three levels of the brain as maintaining an uncomfortable coexistence, each embodying a separate state of subjective intelligence that is forced to cooperate with the others despite great differences in their organization of reality. Dr. Paul MacLean has described this phenomenon in particularly colorful terms:

“Speaking allegorically of these three brains within a brain, we might imagine that when the psychiatrist bids the patient to lie on the couch, he is asking him to stretch out alongside a horse and a crocodile.”¹

While this idea is useful as a metaphoric framing of an evolutionary lineage for human neurophysiology, in the light of more recent research into the multiple paths of development that diverse life forms have followed as evolutionary bifurcations, it is clear that this characterization—to the extent that it attempts to correlate the various layers of the brain to specific associations with major taxonomic groupings of life as a linear progression—is oversimplified. While it is unclear just how well the integrative wiring between these different brain systems manages to keep the whole system from tearing itself apart, it is clear that there is a significant difference between the “old brain” limbic system (MacLean’s reptilian and paleo-mammalian brains that together have remained unchanged for millions of years) and the “new brain” with its recent explosive growth of the neocortex. Arthur Koestler pondered what the implications might be for humanity:

“For the moment let us note that the origin of the evolutionary blunder which gave rise to man’s schizophychological disposition appears to have been the rapid, quasi-brutal *superimposition* (instead of *transformation*) of the neocortex on the ancestral structures and the resulting *insufficient coordination* between the new brain and the old, and *inadequate control* of the former over the later.”²

If there is an evolutionary heritage to be traced within the structure of the brain and nervous system, there must also be corresponding modes of structural coupling to the “world” available to us, in addition to those that we otherwise readily recognize as language. The schizophychology that Koestler refers to implies a need to give voice to our ancient structures—and their natural history of bifurcations—in order to maintain coherence. Here I invoke Antonin Artaud and his search to touch an archaic proto-linguistic world through an insistence upon seeking the deepest metaphoric context

1 David Dunn “The Voices of the Others” liner notes for **Audience Editions 002** – September 2013

possible, so as to counterbalance the cognitive hegemony and rational limits of human language:

“It is a matter of substituting for the spoken language a different language of nature, whose expressive possibilities will be equal to verbal language, but whose source will be tapped at a point still deeper, more remote from thought.”³

Ultimately this is an argument for the necessity of understanding and preserving the continuity and richness of human and non-human communication as essential components of the complex networks from which both perception and evolution arise.

In *Cricket, Tree, Crow*, Stephanie Loveless has chosen to delve down into this proto-linguistic ocean of communication shared with non-human forms of life. She states the questions that motivated her in the following terms:

“Interconnectedness is material as well as philosophical—we make each other up, we constitute each other, symbiotically. So, what can I learn from the life forms that live with and around me? Is it possible to come to know these others who are so radically different? Can I stretch beyond my human individualism, into some form of communication, communion, or alliance with these beings? In listening deeply, and in tuning and attuning my voice to theirs, can I be transformed? Can I expand the boundaries of my own subjectivity to include them?”

The human sense of self is an emergent pattern from the total fabric of proto-linguistic and linguistic background of consciousness. It is also a suspended pattern that comes and goes, emerging from and falling back into a non-linguistic web of consciousness. It is essential to remember that we carry these proto- and paralinguistic expressions into the more abstract and specific modes of human language through such things as gesture, tone of voice, singing, glossolalia, crying, moaning, and laughter. We are all capable of manifesting a rich range of coupling across this full spectrum in everyday communication. To unpack this pre-conscious domain has been—starting with William James and Freud—one of the foreground projects of the 20th century but it did not sufficiently include the awareness of just how deeply we might manifest and share these expressive modes in ways that link us to the non-human world. Stephanie alludes to such a deeper awareness:

“I wanted to use the piece as a way to open up my limited human perceptions and concerns—not in an otherworldly way, but in a completely worldly (mundane) way. I felt that this was a natural animal endeavor, perhaps related to the way humans developed language and have always navigated through the world. At the same time, I felt that my desire for loss-of-self and oneness-with-the-world outside of humans and human design was futile.

The conceit of the piece was to come to know or understand these others (all creatures found all over Montréal, my hometown and the town in which I began working on the piece), but I also knew that I could never know what it is like to experience as another species. Still, in the distance between the attempt and the impossibility, I hoped to stretch myself—for the good of my own psyche, for the good of my creative work, and mostly because it is the kind of empathic cross-species and cross-person practice that I think is urgent.”

When back tracing from the human brain the evolutionary continuity of the neural circuitry of life, neurologists and biologists cannot tell us at what level consciousness stops. Nor can they tell us when in the natural history of life did it first emerge. And yet we organize our lives, cultures, and politics from a perspective that presupposes our unique possession of this trait while in denial of the constantly expanding domain of life’s sentience that surrounds us. The 20th century now appears as a vast haunted landscape of failed ideologies and anodynes for the human condition. Art in the 20th

century dreamed that baptism in the generative pools of the subconscious mind would be enough to take us back to ground and an ontological middle path but as Thomas Berry has phrased it in his book, *The Dream of the Earth*:

“[We] must go far beyond any transformation of contemporary culture...None of our existing cultures can deal with this situation out of its own resources. We must invent, or reinvent, a sustainable human culture by a descent into our pre-rational, our instinctive resources. Our cultural resources have lost their integrity. They cannot be trusted. What is needed is not transcendence but “inscendence,” not the brain but the gene.”⁴

To strive towards such a condition has also been a recurrent goal of “art” and artists since the prehistoric to the postmodern. We intermittently revisit points on a chaotic attractor of a co-emergent “nature” to confront what we have otherwise mostly been ignoring since the last Neolithic ice age: the world around and inside us is conscious in ways that we do not yet fully comprehend. Stephanie describes her process in attempting to touch that enveloping and nested consciousness:

“So, what is the experience of singing-with like for me? I would say that it is like an elaborately set up meditation practice. There is an element of giving myself over to the sound. There is the vibrating of my body. As I sing, my throat and my breath vibrate my body in sympathy with the sound I am listening to (on headphones) and singing with (into a microphone, and usually in a dark room where I am as alone and unheard as I can manage). Within the concept of the piece, I wanted to imagine that this sympathetic vibration is meaningful, that it awakens knowledge in my body and psyche and opens a pathway for understanding other perspectives ... that the song of the species carries something in it that I am learning from and participating in.

Because the sounds that I am attempting to reproduce do not have human rhythms, sounds or breaths, my concentration is fully taken up. It could be any sound that I am singing with, but it does matter what I am singing with because I consciously dedicate myself to what I am singing with in that moment. It is very much like prayer.

It is also an experiment in empathy, as I give over my full attention to the sound and try to place myself in that soundmaker’s perspective—try to experience my senses and my world differently, based on what I know and feel about the creature as I sing.

Finally, there is the discovery of new ways of making sound with my mouth throat, and breath as I try to meet the sound with my vocal instrument. I have an intuition that these methods of vocalization are meaningful, that in finding the space in my throat to caw like a crow (or to approach cawing like a crow) that some kind of material enactment of our connection takes place.”

This kind of sensory empiricism is similar to what humans must have always done to commune with and—in some sense—acquire “non-human language” as a way to counteract the power of the external environment, share resonance with these other living systems, and give credence to an experience of a greater collective mind. What is different is our current capacity to dislocate the soundscapes we listen to and imitate through the “time binding” of electronic technology. In Stephanie’s own words:

“I began my research by soundwalking, paying attention to local species, and talking to birders and old friends who know much more about local flora and fauna than I. Originally, I wanted to make field recordings as well, but as it was winter in Montréal and I didn’t have specialized recording equipment or training, I decided to work with where I was for the time being—reading about and listening to recordings of different species, watching videos, and reading mythology to learn more about the bodies and worlds of the species I was going to be singing with.

As I became more interested in certain species, I began doing more intensive listening and some light processing (stretching and frequency parsing) of selected field recordings, paying attention to what their sounds evoked in me, and experimenting with what it did to me to try to sing with them.”

In contrast to Marshall McLuhan’s vision, such experimental work and embrace of technology is less about the design of electronic culture as a form of global tribalism, and more about the implications of a new form of animism (and ethics) that must co-emerge with that culture, for us to actually be able to live in it. Can we co-exist without a need for hierarchy such that the non-human is afforded greater respect by human beings?

At this moment in human history, perhaps the job of the artist is not merely to critique the present and give shape to a future culture but to construct a more liminal cultural membrane through which a co-emergent “nature” can once again speak to us. *Cricket, Tree, Crow* is part of the fabric from which that membrane may emerge.

Notes:

1. Koestler, A. 1978. *Janus: A Summing Up*, New York: Random House.
2. Koestler, A. op. cit.
3. Artaud, Antonin. 1958. *The Theater and Its Double*, New York: Grove Press.
4. Berry, T. 1988. *The Dream of the Earth*, Sierra Club Books.

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