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Adrift in History, Who Is This One?: Art in the Critical Zone

Abstract: This article explores the capacity of art for representing the question of ecological grief now confronting us in the Anthropocene. My art work is an ongoing series of drawings and paintings of dead birds entitled “Adrift in History.” In reflecting on the meaning of this artistic practice through environmental narrative and art as a complex site of productive experimentation, I place the experience of grief—regarding both human and animal mortality in our rapidly diminishing environment in the Anthropocene—on display and for interpretation within multiple modalities. This project brings together art, literature, poetry, psychology, philosophy, phenomenology, environmentalism, cultural ecology, anthropology, ornithology, and naturalism to frame the cycle of life, death and transformation. My goal is to juxtapose an ecocritical theoretical lens with the art work to create a discursive intermedial effect—one that asks, reflexively, what the value might be of contemplating, while creating, an interspecies, archetypal image of the soul and its potential emotional resonance in the traumatic contemporary moment of the Anthropocene condition.

In “Who Is This One?”—a recent suite in the series “Adrift in History”—I dwell on the image of the North American robin—*Turdus migratorius*—a common backyard species, and one of the many birds now facing great risk. So, I depict the robin at rest, contingently, in a state of limbo between life, death and the after-life. Influenced by Jon Young’s environmental narrative, *What the Robin Knows: How Birds Reveal the Secrets of the Natural World*, and the ecocritical concept of strategic empathy, I represent what the robin might *feel*. I am

interested in how such images—and their capacity to evoke sympathy in the system of affinities between the embodied human mind and the more-than-human world enfolding animals, nature, and the environment as interdependent forces—might contribute to efforts to move us through and beyond grief, toward active investment as answerable, and ethical agents of social change.

Keywords: Art in the Anthropocene; Ecology of grief; Bird as archetype; North American robin (*Turdus migratorius*); Jungian psychology; Bakhtinian dialogism.

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Figure 1: Christine Ramsay, Detail, "Who Is This One?" (2019), Pastel on Arches Paper, 24"x30."

Ecocriticism, Environmental Narrative and Intermediality in the Anthropocene

Erle C. Ellis defines the concept of the Anthropocene as a “flashpoint” (1) in understanding our current geological era. He notes that the word, coined by atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen in 2000 (1), is now used to describe how the activity of Anthropos—humans—has affected the relative stability of the Holocene, the previous geological era. We are no longer mere “biological agents,” Ellis writes, but “geophysical agents,” a “force of nature,” which is bringing on the sixth major extinction (111-113; 131). As profound “disrupters” of earth’s ecosystems, we wield an ever-increasing power to extract its resources, accelerate “disturbance” of its life-worlds, and “end nature itself” (11-15).

While humans are a force of nature, Ellis observes that we are also a force of narrative, having “always used narratives” to explain our origins and relationships “to the world and its many actors—from animals and plants to more mystical beings and forces” (4). By acting on and transforming our environment, we have shaped it through the power of imagination, story-telling and discourse. Ellis identifies one of those key discourses as the division between “human” and “non-human nature” which freed the West, since the late eighteenth century, to “civilize” (104) nature, and use it as an infinite resource. Now, however, as Dipesh Chakrabarty suggests, the discourse of the Anthropocene has begun to stir a loss of faith in and critique of such grand “narratives of freedom” (210), including globalized capitalism. Ellis affirms Jason Moore’s indictment of the “Capitalocene,” which started with a “turning point

in the history of humanity’s relation with the rest of nature, greater than any watershed since the rise of agriculture and the first cities—and *in relational terms, greater than the rise of the steam engine.*” Capitalism, not industrialization, caused Earth’s transformation by producing massive social inequalities that supported “audacious strategies of global conquest, endless commodification, and relentless rationalization.” (Ellis 135-136; 137)

As Anthropocene narratives invite us to see, the chickens of anthropogenic global environmental change—shifting carbon and nitrogen cycles, ocean acidification, pollution, plastic and chemical contamination, deregulation, fire, floods, habitat destruction, forced migration, and mass extinction (Ellis 2-3)—are coming home to roost. We are not free from nature; or to (ab)use nature as an objective infinite resource ‘out there’; or to continue sacrificing places, people and other animals, as Naomi Klein puts it, to the systems of globalization, capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy (Klein qtd. in Ellis 136). Instead, we are being called by the climate crisis to realize that *we are nature and nature is us*. “Ecology” derives from “the Greek ‘oikos’ (house)” —a shared home, a family of “terrestrial ecosystems” (Ellis 104; 120), in an integrated biosphere, which supports, if not articulates, the survival of all forms and patterns of life on earth, including human.

Bruno Latour takes up the political, emotional, and existential importance of reframing the modern, transcendent sense of nature as non-human; of facing the fact that nature is immanent; and of realizing that we belong to a “*common world*” (2) that is now in fundamental danger—one created by ourselves! As Latour writes, “the sense of vertigo, almost of panic that traverses all of contemporary politics arises owing to the fact that the ground is giving way beneath everyone’s feet at once, as if we all felt attacked everywhere, in our habits and in our possessions” (8). “Have you noticed,” Latour continues,

that the emotions involved are not the same when you’re asked to defend nature—you yawn, you’re bored—as when you’re asked to defend your territory—now you’re wide awake, suddenly mobilized?

If nature has become territory, it makes little sense to talk about an “ecological crisis,” “environmental problems,” or a “biosphere” to be rediscovered, spared, or protected. The challenge is much more vital, more existential than that—and also much more comprehensible, because it is much more direct. When the rug is pulled out from under your feet, you understand at once that you are going to have to be concerned with the floor... (8)

As the earth “turns back on itself” in the new climactic regime, says Latour, “little by little, we find that *under* the ground of private property, of land grabs, of the exploitation of territories, *another ground*, another earth, another soil has begun to stir, to quake, to be moved” (17; 18). Latour’s argument is that we in the West are finding that we must abandon the attitude of disembodied abstraction, of being extrinsic to nature, as if looking down at earth from a position in outer space (70; 77), and reimagine ourselves as embodied and enfolded subjects of the earth as our *shared dwelling*, in order to embrace its reality as our *shared territory*. However, as Métis anthropologist Zoe Todd cautions, Latour and other contemporary Western thinkers must pay attention to Indigenous thinkers “for their millennia of engagement with sentient environments, with cosmologies that enmesh people into complex relationships between themselves and *all* relations, and with climates and atmospheres as important points of organization and action” (6-7)—thinkers such as Kathleen Absolon, Robin Kimmerer, Rosemarie Kuptana, Leroy Little Bear, Susie Napayok-Short, and Sheila Watt-Clouthier. As Absolon writes: “We view our position in Creation with humility and practice reverence to those elements of Creation that gave us life, such as the earth, sun, water and air... Indigenous thought is wholistic in terms of looking to our past to understand our present and to have regard for the future” (58).

Still, Latour rightly turns us toward “the Terrestrial” (40; 89-90)—Todd’s “sentient environments”—as what matters now in a world where the denial of climate change “organizes all politics at the present time” (24). Latour identifies these stakes of a new politicized ecology (90) in terms of what a network of researchers in the earth sciences calls

the “Critical Zone”:

a miniscule zone a few kilometers thick between the atmosphere and bedrock. A biofilm, a varnish, a skin, a few infinitely folded layers.

Speak of nature in general as much as you like, wonder at the immensity of the universe, dive down in thought to the boiling center of the planet, gasp in fear before those infinite spaces, this will not change the fact that everything that concerns you resides in the miniscule Critical Zone. This is the point of departure and also the point of return for all the sciences that matter to us. (78)

And, he argues, all of the agents which “engender” (82) this living zone through our myriad interactions and interdependencies have neither the “privilege” nor the “possibility” to remain “uninterested” (79) or unaffected. We are earthly creatures, and this ecological fact is inescapable now in framing how we can begin to “*generate alternative descriptions*” of nature by attending empathetically to “the stuff that makes up the earth for us” (94)—or, rather, *with* us.

Alexa Weik von Mossner traces the rise of ecocriticism in the early 1990s and links it to her interest in the power of environmental narratives “to have lasting effects on the attitudes and behaviours of their readers” (8)—to generate alternative actions toward nature and the environment by generating alternative descriptions, or stories, about the relationship between them and ourselves as perceptive, embodied, emotional beings. While her focus is on literature and film, she describes the scope of environmental narrative to include “any type of narrative, in any media that foregrounds ecological issues and human-nature relationships, often but not always with the openly stated intention of bringing about social change” (3). Simon Estok agrees, seeing contemporary ecocriticism as “any theory that is committed to effecting changes by analyzing the function—thematic, artistic, social, historical, ideological, theoretical, or otherwise—of the natural environment, or aspects of it, represented in documents (literary or other) that contribute to material practices in material worlds” (16-17).¹

I am interested in the potential of visual art, its affective possibilities, and critical thinking about them, as one such material and intermedial practice of ecocriticism as it intersects environmental narrative and its focus on human-nature relationships. “Intermediality,” Klaus Bruhn Jensen writes, “has been most widely used with reference to multiple discourses and modalities of experience and representation, as examined in aesthetic and other humanistic traditions of communication research” (1). I exercise intermediality in its humanistic tradition as a dialogic concatenation of discourses in which media function as texts: “delimited objects of immanent analysis and interpretation as sources of introspection and insight, typically unique artworks that, arguably, transcend historical time” (2). More particularly, I situate my intermedial practice in the series “Adrift in History”² in the

“cultural ecology” branch of ecocriticism. As Hubert Zapf outlines in his discussion of ecology, ethics and “the relationship between *text and life*,” cultural ecology “considers the sphere of human culture not as separate from but as interdependent with and transfused by ecological processes and natural energy cycles” (847; 851). Thus, “productive analogies” can be drawn between “ecological and cultural processes,” in that the textual forms of imagination and creativity, such as art and literature, hold “illuminating” and transformative ecological power (851-852).

Lawrence Buell articulates the unique quality of environmental narratives and texts across disciplines. He delineates four particular criteria at play:

1. The nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history.
2. The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest.
3. Human accountability to the environment is part of the text’s ethical orientation.
4. Some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text. (7-8)

And he observes how the power of an ecocritical imagination originating in nature writers, such as Thoreau, first conjoined environmentalism and aesthetics, enabling “a deeply personal love and reverence for the nonhuman,” to lead to and model for us, “over time,” and hopefully with increasing force into our precarious future, “a deeply protective feeling for nature” (137).

In “Who Is This One?,” my project on the North American robin—*Turdus migratorius*—from the larger series “Adrift in History,” the inner landscape of my mind plays with an emotional environmental analogy, or impressionistic visual narrative—creating an intermedial aesthetic site that brings together birds and humans, natural history and family history, through our common ancestry as sentient creatures inhabiting the long mystery of being born and dying. As Donna Haraway would agree, birds are our multispecies “kin” (8). Robin Kimmerer elaborates on the notion of kin from her Potawatomi language, which involves a deep “grammar of animacy” (3). Her people speak of animals, plants and the rock of the earth not objectively, as “it” (5), but as relations that are respected, honored and loved as part of the grand scheme of things. Kimmerer therefore playfully advocates for an addition of the word ‘ki’ to English—derived from the Potawatomi “Aakibmaadiziiwin” for “a being of the earth” (6)—that signifies all of us, the human and more-than-human. ‘Ki’ would work in perfect acoustic harmony with ‘qui,’ she says, the Latin root for ‘who,’ and lend the dignity of being to all matter (8). In this light, my work also takes part in what Piers Locke and Ursula Muenster describe as “multispecies ethnography,” a sub-field of anthropology which acknowledges the deep interconnection between all life forms on earth, as well as the meaningful agency of all species in any contemporary accounting of who we think we are. If the robin is my kin, perhaps I can generate a useful *alternative description*,

through the intermedial practice of visual art and critical reflection on it, of the *value of our nature together* in the Critical Zone, adrift in history, in the Anthropocene.

Art in the Critical Zone

As Neville Ellis and Ashlee Cunsolo write, although ecological grief is now being widely experienced, “it often lacks an appropriate avenue,” such as rituals and practices, for “expression and healing.” What does it mean to be human in the Anthropocene? they ask, gesturing to environmental botanist Phyllis Windle’s influential concept of the ecology of grief for insight. Windle writes: “Ethics claim that for environmental protection to succeed, society must relate to nature on various levels, including the emotional.” Moreover, as we have seen above, the art and politics of ecocriticism insists that in order to identify emotionally, we must recognize what it means for humans to be in continuity with all living beings—embracing plants, animals and ourselves as part of our extended eco-social-geographical-multi-species assemblage—what Windle calls the “grand rhythms” of the “biogeochemical cycles”; Lauren Rickards describes as humanity’s “geological force” (283); or Primo Levi traces as our “long cosmic history” (*The Periodic Table* 225).

Windle observes how science is actually a “labor of love” in which nature holds a profound “emotional tone” for her and many of her colleagues as they increasingly face grief over the subjects and territories of their studies:

Biologists often love their organisms. Ecologists often love their field sites. Does anyone really doubt it? Read E.O. Wilson’s work and speculate how he feels toward ants. Watch Jane Goodall interact with chimpanzees and ask what she feels for them. Read some of George Woodwell’s essays, or Rachel Carson’s, and gauge the depth of their passion... Probably others feel the same about Hubbard Brook and Coweeta; the mountain research stations in Crested Butte and Nederland, Colorado; Warren Woods and the biological station at Douglas Lake in Michigan; and all the other beautiful places [at which] we have studied, done research, and taught.

Although she confesses that her attachment to her own research subject, the tenacious melaleuca tree, and her lifelong love of dogwoods, have sometimes “embarrassed” her, and she has been tempted to dismiss her feelings as “irrational, inappropriate, anthropomorphic,” Windle ultimately has come to not doubt the “importance” of the emotional bond, the need to critique the old scientific ideal of the “dispassionate observer,” or the validity and authenticity of her grief in the face of species extinction. She also works as a chaplain, counselling people with feelings of rage and despair about the meaning of life in the Anthropocene, and advocates for the use of art and “rituals, even funerals, for the

species and places we are losing” in order to “affirm our faith in the processes of ecology and evolution” (4, 6). She offers as an example the monument to the last passenger pigeon dedicated by the Wisconsin Society for Ornithology in 1947. In avoiding meaningful expressions of grief, she writes, we only become more overwhelmed, depressed, fearful and indifferent to the problem or loss at hand. Grief is difficult, but it’s urgent and demands “passion, commitment, creativity, energy, and concentration” (6). Art has a singular ability to embody and embrace the emotional openness to change, death and transformation that life has always asked of humans.

There is another wonderful example of science meeting life, affect, grief and art in the work of Primo Levi, the Nobel Prize-winning chemist, creative writer and Holocaust survivor. In writing his book *The Periodic Table*, Levi used his background as a chemist in contemplating everyday life in his Italian-Jewish family, and in recounting his experience as a prisoner in Auschwitz during World War II. He became a chemist, he writes, somewhat ironically, because the “nobility of Man, acquired in a hundred centuries of trial and error, lay in making himself the conqueror of matter,” and he wanted to “remain faithful to this nobility” (41). And he became a testimonial writer, grieving his experiences in the war, by destiny rather than choice (Levi, “Beyond Survival” 9). Each of the twenty-one chapters in this marvelously unconventional collection is named for and uses an element from the periodic table as a metaphor for understanding things about our relationship to our time and place in the world, on earth, and in the universe. He opens *The Periodic Table* by talking about the profundity of the carbon atom as the key particle in the hundred million year chain of humanity—a tale of “flesh and mind, divine inspiration and dust” (4). Without the matter of nature (or the nature of matter) and its vicissitudes, “there would not be a trace of life on this planet,” Levi reflects, while insisting that every element “says something to someone” (225) in the eternally recurring evolutionary storm of human history.

Levi closes *The Periodic Table* with the story of a carbon atom in a limestone quarry in 1840, dislodged by “a blow of the pickax” and sent careening “into the world of things that change” (226). Carried by the wind and photosynthesis, it binds itself in turn to all manner of matter: oxygen, an Italian grape leaf, a drop of water on the leaf, the water’s glucose, the vine’s trunk, its dangling grapes, then finds itself drunk up as wine and oxidized, expelled through the drinker’s lungs, launched across countries, and swallowed by a wood worm in Lebanon. Levi’s carbon atom is then imagined to “fly three times around the world, until 1960” as it “enters and reenters the cycle of life” (231). He ends in meditation on the endless “division, duplication and fusion” through which we are all born and die as his atom lands in his glass of milk:

It is swallowed; and since every living structure harbors a savage distrust toward every contribution of any material of living origin, the chain is meticulously broken apart and the fragments, one by one, are accepted or rejected. One, the

one that concerns us, crosses the intestinal threshold and enters the bloodstream: it migrates, knocks at the door of a nerve cell, enters, and supplants the carbon which was part of it. This cell belongs to a brain, and it is my brain, the *me* who is writing; and the cell in question, and within it the atom in question, is in charge of my writing, in a gigantic minuscule game which nobody has yet described. It is that which at this instant, issuing out of a labyrinthine tangle of yeses and nos, makes my hand run along a certain path on the paper, mark it with these volutes that are signs: a double snap, up and down, between two levels of energy, guides this hand of mine to impress on the paper this dot, here, this one. (232)

As a narrator, Levi is ingenious in expressing his abiding feelings for the facts and vicissitudes of the energy cycle—the evolutionary network of physics, chemistry and biology—as he reflexively traces the imbrication of nature with embodied human consciousness to reveal, grieve, and celebrate the point of life in the living territory of the Critical Zone: convergence and transformation.

As Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin suggest, many artists, in addition to writer-scientists like Windle and Levi, are responding in rich ways to this question of affect, empathy and their role in expressing concern and grief in encountering life in the Anthropocene as a “sensorial phenomenon” (3). Art, they write, is a “polyarchic” practice—a democratic space of “aesthesis”—of experimentation in perceiving, feeling, thinking and surviving in what is becoming our increasingly “toxic” and “damaged” world (3; 4). However, they say, it’s good to remind ourselves, as philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy does, that everything in nature is always already coming and going, emerging and decaying (8). In the long view, which Levi articulates so artfully, one drifts in a complex history—what Yuval Noah Harari describes as the forging of humankind from fourteen billion years of evolution through physics, chemistry, biology, culture and cognition (3), or Mikhail Bakhtin has called the centrifugal and centripetal forces of Great Time (*The Dialogic Imagination* 425). But, Bakhtin insists, in this grand history we are not alone: there is always the other, giving us the gift of shape, form and meaning. From our point of view in the Anthropocene, the other now includes everything: from our ancestors, parents, families and friends, to companion species, plants, the geological substrate and the very universe itself. As Bakhtin puts it, we exist within the world in “ethical and aesthetic activity,” and so we are “answerable” (*Art and Answerability* 2). It matters how we drift; how we steer and fly and get taken up in relationships, like Levi’s carbon atom, both because of and despite ourselves; how we live and die, together. As the Romanian poet Paul Celan reminds us in “Threadsun” about the “grayblack” death-march of the Holocaust: “A tree-high thought grasps the light-tone: there are still songs to sing beyond mankind” (Celan; see also Hollander). For this reason, I challenge Latour’s insistence that our concern can be limited to the immanent—the few kilometres’ height of the Critical Zone, here and now—since it is itself merely another piece (although a crucial

and irreplaceable piece) within the infinitely larger jigsaw puzzle of eternally converging, transforming and transcendent existence, where all the pieces matter.

Jonathan Franzen describes how birds, being 150 million years older than humans, “bind the planet together like a hundred billion filaments” (“Why Birds Matter” 37). For a brilliant artistic embodiment of Franzen’s perceptive metaphor, see *Ornitographies*, the time-lapse photography project by Xavi Bou. Inspired by birdwatching walks that he took with his grandfather as a child, it is science designed as visual poetry to capture, “in a single time frame,” the shapes birds generate in flight. For Bou, the “organic form images” that result “stimulate the imagination,” in order to make “visible the invisible.” Thus, he says, these works respond to the human yearning to fly through images at the “limits of human perception”—images “which are no longer a single portrait of reality but become a witness of the instants that, for a moment, were past, present and future all at once” (Bou).

Figures 2-3: Xavi Bou, *Ornitographies* (2014-2020).

Figure 4: Xavi Bou, *Ornitographies* (2014-2020).

Franzen then turns to the Red Knot, a shore bird, whose life is a monumental pilgrimage between Tierra del Fuego and the Canadian Arctic, and describes the “long-lived individual named B 95 (for the tag on its leg)” who has “flown more miles than separate the earth and the moon” (37). Ubiquitous in their flying, swimming and, of course, singing, birds are “our last, best connection to a natural world that is otherwise receding,” Franzen argues, and so a good barometer of the “health” of our “*ethical* values” (38). As descendants of the dinosaur, they let us glimpse earth in Bakhtin’s Great Time, as it was before we arrived in the Critical Zone. They are now disappearing in alarming numbers due to the effects of habitat loss in the Anthropocene, so to not “cherish” and “support” them, but consign them to “oblivion,” will be to “forget what we’re the children of” (39).

What the Robin Knows, What the Robin Feels

The North American robin is my favorite bird. A member of the thrush genus, and first described in Western science by Linnaeus in 1776, it is a migratory songbird whose population is still relatively healthy throughout North America, with an estimated 320 million individuals from southern Canada to central Mexico. But even its numbers, along with warblers, blackbirds, starlings and sparrows, are beginning to wane—to the tune of “29 percent, or nearly 3 billion, since 1970” (Goldstein; see also Franzen “Emptying the Skies”; Semeniuk; Rosenberg *et al.*; Zimmer). And, another startling fact, as Amy Huva reports,

is that, due to climate change, the robin is appearing in the Arctic, along with mosquitoes, so that Inuit communities now have a word for it: 'Ikkagilik.' However, as Kuptana and Napayok-Short explain, the creation of this new name is part of the Inuit way as "masters of adaptation" who have survived for "over 20,000 years" on the North American continent by applying their science of observation, experiment and holistic respect for all of life to the world around them.

Jon Young knows, and feels, that robins have much to teach him: They are "one of the most expressive of all birds, vocally and in its body language" he writes (xiv), and learning to observe and read their "deep bird language" (xv) with one's "adaptive unconscious" reveals how "that robin over there" is not only "an individual like you and me"—or B 95—but one unique existential moment in an "ancient" chain of being (xix). Like "every living being," the robin has "a purpose, a mission, a life strategy, a set of gifts, and a set of weaknesses," such that we must "[s]et aside any assumption that its behavior is random and meaningless" (xxv). Young has also learned, from Indigenous teachers and their tracking skills, that intra- and inter-species communication is tens of thousands of years old (xxii) and that an attitude of recognition and care is as important to the scientist as it is to the hunter and the humanist. Watt-Cloutier concurs: "To live in a boundless landscape and a close-knit culture in which everything matters and everything is connected is a kind of magic. Like generations of Inuit, I bonded with the ice and snow" (xiii-xiv). Deep ecocritical understanding is a crucial practice that, like science, music, writing or art, requires an "investment from the heart, spirit, soul, and body, too," Young writes. "[U]nderstanding the birds really does help us to understand ourselves and, if we wish, make some changes" (xxvii).

Twenty-two years ago, when we moved from central Canada's biggest city, Toronto, Ontario, and bought our house in Regina, the capital of Saskatchewan, in the heart of the western, drought-prone Canadian prairies, my partner Ken Wilson and I decided to try to make some changes. Our yard was a monoculture of half-dead Kentucky bluegrass, a no-man's land of indifference. Tending to it as part of this place meant xeriscaping—reducing the need for water from irrigation, and planting local, drought-tolerant, plants. He was inspired to create a prairie garden, in part, by the one developed at the Royal Saskatchewan Museum a few blocks from us, which he wrote about in "Wild in the City," as well as by writers Trevor Herriot and Lorraine Johnson. In the early days, prairie crocus, native grasses, coneflower, aster, long-fruited anemone, bergamot, burr oak, wild rose, pin-cherries and Saskatoon berries, among others, thrived. And, while some have not survived (it's harder than you'd think to restore native species entirely, and in the end, nothing is ever pure), others have, and the yard is now a chemical-free haven for birds, with a gurgling pond to attract them, and solar panels on the roof to power the house. Along with sparrows, nut-hatches, chickadees, downy wood-peckers, northern flickers, and occasionally mourning doves, we host robins.

Robins were my mother's favorite bird, too, and my sister Barbara and I bought her a small, octagonal concrete bird bath, which always attracted them in spring. We were with

my mother when she died of pancreatic cancer in winter 2006. Afterwards, I brought the bath to Regina, and installed it near the pond in our garden the next spring. I stood waiting, and the first bird to light was a robin. Wishful thinking? A mere coincidence? Or a Jungian synchronicity—a *meaningful coincidence* activated between psyche, its archetypes, and physical matter?³

Christopher Moreman tells a story related to him by a woman at a dinner party who had a “strange experience after her father’s death”:

While swimming in her pool, a tiny bird landed nearby. She and the bird exchanged what seemed to her a moment of meaningful eye contact, which prompted the woman to ask aloud: “Dad?” In response, the bird flew away, leaving her with the distinct impression that she had been visited by her deceased father. (482)

To her question, whether there is life after death, Moreman bluntly answered “No.” But he immediately regretted his insensitivity, which brought her to tears. “I left the conversation,” he says, “wondering about a peculiar question: why would anyone recognize the spirit of a deceased human in a creature so different as a bird?” (482). Moreman’s curiosity led him to investigate the question through a Jungian lens, uncovering complex relationships between “bird” and “man” that repeat across cultures and throughout history. In Jungian psychology, birds are “soul images” (492), figures of transformation capturing the way the dying shift from material embodiment to infinite energy. Birds are considered “harbingers” of immanent death; psychopomps who guide dead souls to the next world; and actual embodiments, or “visible spirits” of the dead—such as crows, ravens, owls, nighthawks, vultures (482-6). Yet, birds are an ambiguous symbol, as they also connote “fertility, longevity and life itself”—such as doves, bluebirds, robins (482-6)—as well as re-birth, in their association with eggs and angels’ wings. With their ability to transcend realms—the depths of the ocean; terra firma; the heavens beyond the clouds—birds have acquired for humans a noetic, numinous, transcendent quality. Thus, Moreman explains, birds profoundly touch our instinctual craving to know, and our fears, about death and mortality and the unknown, as well as our desires for “renewal, transformation and rebirth” (481) in an imagined afterlife. They function as powerful Jungian archetypes—interstitial kinship animals that help us illuminate inherent shared structures of the unconscious through our superstitions, traditions, folklore, myths, dreams, stories, music and art (483).

For these reasons, Moreman writes, Jungian psychologist James Hillman advocates for letting the birds *speak*, and for *listening* (492). Hillman suggests that we do not so much project meanings onto animals as *recognize* the voice and being of the (other) animal, and in doing so we share *what it means to be an animal* on an unconscious level (*Dream Animals* 28). In this way, we could understand animals as the “first psychoanalysts” in making us aware of ourselves, and others (16). As for charges of anthropomorphism, Hillman says that

attributing human characteristics to animals can “liberate” them “from the condition we have long called ‘dumb’ (because of *our* deafness) and free us from the prison of our subjectivity. Anthropomorphism recognizes that humans and animals participate in a common world of significations” (22). For Moreman, in the “adaptive interplay of conscious observation and unconscious content,” a “matrix of cross-species consciousness” (497) is clearly manifest.

So, it seems to me, like the woman’s encounter with her grief and the bird, I am contemplating and visualizing cross-species consciousness as a connective tissue mediating myself, my own mother’s life and death, and the robin’s increasing vulnerability as a more-than-human being in the Critical Zone in the Anthropocene. Thus, my practice is a manifestation of what Suzanne Keen calls “strategic empathy” (82)—a gesture of sympathy and care in Jane Bennett’s “system of affinities” (239) between human and more-than-human nature. In “Who Is This One?” I attempt to answer Young’s interest in what the robin *knows* and his study of “deep bird language” immanently, from the archetypal unconscious, with the rhetorical questions, asked in visual language: What might the dying robin *feel* in passing? And how might the other *answer* in allowing grief to speak by taking aesthetic and ethical form?

Adrift in History: Who Is This One?

“Who Is This One?” was shown in February 2020 as part of the ecocritical exhibition *House on Fire* at the 5th Parallel Gallery at the University of Regina (Saskatchewan, Canada). Like all of the projects in “Adrift in History,” it features the archetype of the bird as a metaphor to represent human and more-than-human beings as psycho-geological forces adrift in the Anthropocene as a “grand tale about humanity and its place in the world” (Rickards 280). I paint and draw dead birds I have found, and taxidermied skins,⁴ as a gesture in feeling and visualizing the caretaking role we will increasingly be called upon to play with others—human and animal—in the Anthropocene. I have worked in various ways with several bird species, whether placing them on small serving dishes, as in “Red-wing Aura”; allowing them to float in space, neither here nor there, as in “Bardo”; or set on a bier and juxtaposed to the equally iconic symbol of the egg as it’s associated with our passage *into* existence—the ‘before life’ that is as thought-provoking and mysterious as what comes after—as in “Three for Saint Mungo.” I think that birds are part of the “stuff” that helps make up the earth in the Critical Zone, but they do so *with* us rather than “for” us (Latour 94). As Haraway, Young, Franzen, Kimmerer and Bou insist, they are our kin, our ki: absolutely unique and irreplaceable. And, as Bakhtin puts it, while we all owe God a death, our death is not actually ours to consciously know or experience: Our death, all deaths, are for the *other* to “consummate” (*Toward a Philosophy of the Act* 12; 15-16)—they

belong to those left behind, to the witnesses who are answerable to our lives together and who will miss us and mourn us and grieve us and remember us after we're gone, as we each leave a hole in existence, all souls (*Art and Answerability* 121, 131).

Figure 5: Christine Ramsay, "Red-wing Aura" (2012), Oil on canvas, 8"x8" each.

Figure 6: Christine Ramsay, "Bardo" (2015), Oil on board, 18"x24."

Figure 7: Christine Ramsay, "Three for Saint Mungo" (2015), Oil on board, 24"x30."

In "Who Is this One?" the life and death of the North American robin takes centre stage. In observing and cherishing the robins that come to our garden to eat, drink, bathe and sing, I have learned a lot about their leadership qualities, egalitarianism, industriousness, neighbourliness, and companionable natures. As one of the first birds to herald spring, they are also one of the first to breed and lay eggs. Males are as active as females in protecting and feeding the young. They are typically the first to sing their cheery songs at dawn. They are vigilant in watching for threats from predators. And many of us who dig in gardens will have helped robins hunting worms. However, as Tennyson famously said, nature is "red in tooth and claw" (208) and David Lack and Stephen Moss remind us that the robin's capacity for bloody-minded territorialism and violence cannot go unnoted.

In terms of stories and representations of the robin as an archetype, they go back centuries and across cultures. For example, in Sechelt First Nation mythology, Raven created the robin to please people with its song, and the robin got its red breast by fanning the flames of a dying campfire to save a man and his son (Sechelt Nation). In Scots history, Saint Mungo, the founder and patron saint of the City of Glasgow, performed four miracles, one of which included restoring to life the pet robin of his friend, Saint Serf, and images of the European robin—*Erithacus rubecula*—abound at Saint Mungo Museum, on a famous mural a short walk down Castle Street from the museum, and in a stunning mosaic on the floor of City Hall nearby.

The robins who return year after year to my garden, as they did to my mother's, have invited a rich association for me between mourning and remembering her, and attending to the robin as a being under threat, like all of us, in the Anthropocene. In "Who Is This One?" I take the particular individual preserved in my freezer—*this one*, like B 95—and set him up in my studio as a memento mori, cradled and at rest in my mother's bird bath. While I myself cannot know, cannot perceive, cannot consciously experience *my own death*, I can activate Young's "adaptive unconscious," along with Jung's "collective unconscious" and the archetypal symbolic power of the bird, to symbolize, witness, mourn and grieve *the others' deaths*—my mother's, and that robin's over there—after they're gone.

Figure 8: Christine Ramsay, "Who Is This One?" (2019), Pastel on Arches Paper, 24"x30."

Moreover, in "Who Is this One?" I am interested in capturing the bird as an iconic form as it passes *out* of existence by juxtaposing it to the equally iconic symbol of the moon—another complex and ambiguous Jungian archetype traversing the forces of conscious and unconscious, birth and death. The moon, with its gravitational pull on the planet and the heart, connotes the mother, fertility, the mystery of origins, inner knowledge, and the cyclical phases of our existence on earth. Controlling the tides, the rains and the seasons, its waxing and waning symbolizes being born, developing, maturing in the fullness of one's allotted time, and declining into sleep, death, the unknown—Levi's long cosmic history of matter and particles and carbon and trees and feathers and skin and brains and hearts and

feelings and dots on a page and the world of things that change. When it's full, the moon also brightly illuminates for earth the middle ground between the bright light of day in the Critical Zone and the dark of universal night. For this reason, I am led to challenge Latour and his claim that everything that concerns us resides in the Critical Zone. Without the weight of Great Time, the immensity of the geo-physical universe, the boiling center of the planet, its magnetism, the living forces of the sun and moon, and those fearful yet sublime infinite spaces beyond and beneath and before and after consciousness, the Critical Zone itself—our living shared territory—would simply not exist.

In making this art work, I have come to feel and know that the robins who live in my garden embody a deep presence that fills and stands in for my mother's absence (Moreman 498). They are *ki* in Kimmerer's sense, formal experiments and emotional gestures reminding me both whom I'm the child of, and who are my avian ancestors. They enable me to share what it means to be an animal. Who is *this* one, *any* one, *qui*, in the long chain of being born, living and dying? For Jung, the bird archetype is to be valued as a helper in the psyche, a phenomenon of cross-species consciousness, with the transcendent function of locating ourselves in nature and the world, mediating between life and death, assimilating unconscious and natural material into consciousness, activating what he calls one's own unique psychic growth, or the power of *individuation* (Jung, *Man and His Symbols* 161). As Susan Rowland writes in her book on psyche and the arts:

Individuation is Jung's term for the process whereby the ego is brought into a relationship with the archetypal dynamics of the unconscious. In individuation the ego is constantly made, unmade and re-made by the goal-directed forces of the unconscious. Even "meaning" in the ego is subject to dissolution and re-constitution by the Jungian other. For Jung, the making of art or the appreciation of art was a form of individuation because it was a confrontation with the other in the imagination. (186)

Jung's sense of the other, like Levi's, encompasses psycho-geographic infinity, while his own artistic vision famously involved calligraphy and the drawing of mandalas and other archetypal figures collected in *The Red Book*, as well as the carving of rocks and the creation of the small stone castle Bollingen Tower, built in 1923, after the death of his mother, where he lived and worked for several months each year until his own death in 1961.⁵

For Francesco Donfrancesco, soul is "the place of origin" (12), and the mother is indeed profoundly connected to psyche and the work of soul-making. As "the source of personal life," he writes

the mother who gave birth to us and suckled us, whom we have loved and sought, she who was there before we existed and desired our birth, who knew of us before we knew...; she who knows and remembers, who seduces us, and for whom our

hearts are consumed with yearning, herself becomes mythical and metaphorical—a metaphor for the soul... (32)

Rowland goes on to describe the “transforming energies” of the Jungian psyche on the “creative works of the cultural imagination” (1). She sees Jungian theory as a means of “*telling a story* about being; a story that is indivisible from historical and cultural context, yet never reducible to it” (2). Jungian concepts—the structures that make up the self and the collective unconscious, such as repeated archetypes, like bird; sun and moon; earth and sky; fire and water; rock and wind; ego and its shadow; the male and female principles of animus and anima; father and son; mother and daughter—are foundational to creativity, understanding it and interpreting its results. To do art reflexively, while thinking critically and contextually about it, as I am attempting to do here, Rowland argues, is to “dwell” (7) in the space of transcendence and immanence, touching both the universal and the particular (4), enacting the connection of the maker’s psychic unconscious and imagination to what exists in and is made from the physical world (2).

For Rowland, between the world and the art work, nature and human, non-human and human, matter and psyche, other and self, there is a transcendent frame through which the artist works (5). Being inside and being outside can never be securely marked—they are always dancing what Rowland calls an erotic “union” (6), or experienced in a Jungian alchemy, between mind, matter, body and soul. And, as Jung says of the soul:

If the human soul is anything, it must be of unimaginable complexity and diversity... I can only gaze with wonder and awe at the depths and heights of our psychic nature. Its non-spatial universe conceals an untold abundance of images which have accumulated over millions of years of living development and become fixed in the organism. My consciousness is like an eye that penetrates to the most distant spaces, yet it is the psychic non-ego that fills them with non spatial images. And these images are not pale shadows, but tremendously powerful psychic factors... Beside this picture I would like to place the spectacle of the starry heavens at night, for the only equivalent of the universe within is the universe without; and just as I reach this world through the medium of the body, so I reach that world through the medium of the soul. (Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, 387)

Soul, for Jung, is psyche, our third reality. Mary Stampler writes that in addition to the reality of body (the seat of sense and perception) and the reality of the mind (the seat of ideas and conception) is the reality of the soul (the seat of the transformative, creative energy of life experienced subjectively in symbols). Body, mind and soul are all distinct points of view in reality, where soul does not really operate physically or verbally, but rather imaginatively. It is the “symbol for the place from which meaning grows” (Stampler). The imagination is the soul’s native language, experienced emotionally in art, images, poetry, stories,

Figure 9: Christine Ramsay, "Who Is This One?" (2019), Pastel on Arches Paper, 24"x30."

metaphors, speculation, fantasy, dreams and nightmares. Moreover, as the seat of psychic experience, soul is liminal, touching on the cessation of such experience: the reality of death. Indeed, soul puts us in tune with the parts of transformational reality where embodied consciousness (mind/body) stops: the unconscious, where one thing becomes another, such as in sleep, where the body is stilled and the mind becomes alive with dreams and visions; or the imagination, where creativity arises, such as in art, where a bird becomes a timeless flight-trace, or one's deceased mother. Soul works, for Hillman, by putting "naïve realism" and "literal understanding" to sleep (*Archetypal Psychology* 30); or, as Levi describes it, in the immortal transformative energy of carbon atoms in the wind.

Don Hill relates how the Blackfoot cosmology understands psyche, this transformative spirit of creation, as "sopo." Hill learned by walking the land with Leroy Little Bear, Blackfoot elder, physicist, and former director of Native Studies at Harvard University. While Little Bear acknowledges the power of Western science, he says that our mis-use of scientific information without feeling for all of animate nature is what has put us in our current crisis in the Anthropocene. He concurs with Todd and Absolon. Everything is in relationship, which we can see and hear—and feel:

We pause to listen. "The wind is an important part of our ecological picture," he says. Wind is understood in Blackfoot as *sopo*, "which literally means something," Little Bear says. "We don't call it wind, but something that actually goes through everything." Picture the wind animating the trees, he says. I think of Tibetan prayer flags flapping with every gust, the "wind horses" that are said to broadcast stories to those that can hear. It reminds me of another story. (Hill)

Soul, sopo, wind, the sacred energy between all things, the realm where birds soar: Writing about the prairie meadowlark, Trevor Herriot relates a story told in the late nineteenth century to ethnologist Melvin Gilmore by a young Dakota girl about its role for her people as a “bird of promise”:

She said that it was their friend. She said the meadowlark takes delight in being near their camps and flies all around the prairie world observing the people and other creatures. It spirals upward into the sky when the sun rises and gives its light to the grass and prairie flowers. From this height it tells the Creator what each living thing needs on that particular day... Its “promise” is in its role as an agent of the holy, which for the Siouan people (Lakota, Dakota, Nakota) is the air flowing within and around all living things. As masters of the realm that is the source of spirit and the medium of all spiritual transactions, all birds are spiritual teachers and messengers... (*Grass, Sky, Song*, 38)

Like the prairie meadowlark for the Dakota people, or Red Knot B 95 for the scientists who followed him, the robin is also a special companion, a living symbol tracing the bond between myself and my mother, from here in the Critical Zone to beyond the moon.

As Jon Young asks, what do the robins have to say, if we listen? My mother, for one, listened and waited each spring. As a woman of her era—a wife in 1950s North America who gave up her career as a primary teacher to care for her children and husband—she had a deep commitment to a life lived very close to home, to her small place in the Critical Zone, which suited her solitary temperament. While she never boarded an airplane, I think she probably had an unexpressed admiration for the robins’ freedom—their ability to come and go on a whim, and travel far and wide, unlike her—but I also know she deeply appreciated their loyalty, suggesting with a wink and a laugh that she recognized them, and who was who, as they were returning. And as a child of her era, she also learned to tap dance like Shirley Temple, the darling of 1930s America, and many times I saw her greet the spring and her robins with a quick soft-shoe, and the robins cock their heads jauntily from side to side, greeting her in turn.

In living with the birds, as beings of the earth, adrift in history, we can clearly see, know, experience and feel how they exist in our energy cycle, and we exist in theirs. “Poverty kept me from thinking all was well under the sun and in history,” said Albert Camus, while “the sun taught me that history was not everything” (54). For me, the death of a robin is on continuum with the death of my mother, offering an intermedial environmental narrative of the cross-species system of affinities and empathies among terrestrials—kindred spirits—within and beyond the Critical Zone, in Great Time. Who came before? Where are they from? Where do they live now? Who lives there with them? What might come next?

Is there life after one’s death? Yes—someone else’s: the life of the other left behind, who holds us in their mind, and their heart, after we’re gone. As Jungian analyst Marie Louise

von Franz writes: “All of the dreams of people who are facing death indicate that the unconscious, that is, our instinct world, prepares consciousness not for a definite end but for a profound transformation and for a kind of continuation of the life process, which, however, is unimaginable to everyday consciousness” (156). I see birds as messengers who can bring us a powerful dispatch in the Anthropocene, and in art, as mediators of and metaphors for our relationality to all of earth and its life-forms, and what it means for the mind to confront its mortality (Moreman 498). Perhaps the hardships coming with the Anthropocene, and the insights coming from respect for the wisdom of Indigenous ways of knowing, based in love for and protection of nature and the land, can actually bring us a new humility, teaching us in the West that humans are something of a force, but not everything. As birds of all kinds are increasingly threatened in the Anthropocene, my drawings in “Who Is This One?” offer their lives and deaths, and hopes and fears, for contemplation.

End Notes

1. Weik von Mossner and Estok were keynote speakers at Intermedial Ecocriticism: The Anthropocene Condition across Media and the Arts (Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania, August 30-31, 2019, at which the first draft of this paper was delivered. I thank the organizers and participants for comments on that earlier draft.
2. Work from the series “Adrift in History” has been curated in five group exhibitions in Regina, Canada. The most recent project is: “Still Songs to Sing,” a found object and sound piece in *Imaginary Exhibition: Green & Gold*, curated by Sandee Moore, Art Gallery of Regina (June 1-21, 2020). “Who Is This One?,” a suite of drawings in *House on Fire*, was curated by Amy Snider, 5th Parallel Gallery, University of Regina, (February 3-14, 2020). For a review of the exhibition, see: Ashley Martin, “House on Fire has cheese puffs, Planet B tourism and much more,” *Regina Leader-Post* 7 February 2020. Earlier exhibitions include: “Bardo,” paintings in *Bird Is the Word*, curated by Marsha Kennedy, Mata Gallery, Regina (May 20-July 4, 2015); “Three for Saint Mungo,” paintings in *Hope*, curated by Holly Fay, Art Gallery of Regina (December 10, 2014-January 23, 2015); and “Red-wing Aura,” paintings in *AfterLife*, curated by Jack Anderson, Art Gallery of Regina (December 15, 2011-January 27, 2012).
3. See Carl Jung, *Man and His Symbols* (New York: Doubleday, 1964). In the concept of synchronicity, Jung was attempting to explicate “the inter-relation of psyche and matter” (211; 306), which he elaborated through study of the *I Ching* and in conversations and experiments with Nobel-Prize winning physicist Wolfgang Pauli: “It is based on the assumption of an inner unconscious knowledge that links a physical event and a psychic condition, so that a certain event that appears ‘accidental’ or ‘coincidental’ can in fact be psychically meaningful; and its meaning is often symbolically indicated through dreams that coincide with the event” (291). See also Jung’s “Synchronicity: An Acausal Connecting Principal” and “Spirit in Man, Art and Literature,” in *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966); and Maria

- Popova, “Atom, Archetype, and the Invention of Synchronicity: How Iconic Psychiatrist Carl Jung and Nobel-Winning Physicist Wolfgang Pauli Bridged Mind and Matter,” in *Brain Pickings*, 9 March, 2017.
4. I have a cache of frozen birds in my freezer that I have collected after they have hit a window, or that I have occasionally found on walks, or been given by friends and neighbours who know I collect them. Over the years, I have also been given access to the extraordinary collection of taxidermied skins in the archives of Regina’s Royal Saskatchewan Museum, for which I sincerely thank Glenn Sutter, Curator of Human Ecology.
 5. See: Carl Jung, *The Red Book*, Translated by Mark Kyburz *et al.* (New York: Philemon Foundation and W.W. Norton, 2009).

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