

## Audial and Visual Conversation in Mary Oliver's Dog Songs: Language as a Trans-Species Faculty

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DOI: [HTTPS://DOI.ORG/10.37536/ECOZONA.2021.12.1.3677](https://doi.org/10.37536/ECOZONA.2021.12.1.3677)



And it's his eyes, not yours,  
that are clear and bright.  
(Oliver, "Holding on to Benjamin")

### Abstract

The essay investigates Mary Oliver's reflection upon, and questioning of, language as a marker of human/nonhuman divide as it unfolds in her second, 2013 "species collection" on dogs, *Dog Songs* (her first one being *Owls and Other Fantasies*, her 2006 similar collection, portraying her ways of communicating with birds). Through an exploration of both the visual and audial modes of Oliver's conversations with the dogs she lived with in her life, and treated as companions, this study demonstrates that the poet held an attitude toward the nonhuman which in contemporary theoretical terms would be defined as an "indistinction approach" to the animal question (Calarco 2015). In *Dog Songs*, Oliver portrays a proximity between humans and animals that ultimately preserves an unavoidable distance. Her writing exploits both her intuition of animals' capacity for agency and creativity—which accompanies the de-emphasizing of human uniqueness—and her consciousness that we need tropes from human experience to convey our perception of nonhuman ways of life. Moreover, through her representation of the animal's gaze, of a powerfully ironic reversal of the aims (and effects) of the pathetic fallacy, and of narrative empathy, she proves that a "zoopoetics", i.e., an imaginative use of language in poetry, can make it a distinct space for our efforts to envisage an ecosystem that animals may inhabit as our equals.

*Keywords:* literary animal studies, animal language, narrative empathy, literary soundscapes, Mary Oliver, *Dog Songs*.

### Resumen

Este ensayo investiga cómo Mary Oliver reflexiona sobre, y cuestiona, el lenguaje como un marcador de la división humano/no humano a medida que se desarrolla en su segunda «colección sobre especies» de 2013, esta vez sobre perros, llamada *Dog Songs* (la primera colección, *Owls and Other Fantasies*, de 2006 y similar, retrata sus formas de comunicarse con los pájaros). Por medio de una exploración de los modos tanto auditivos como visuales de las conversaciones de Oliver con los perros que tuvo en su vida, y a los que trató como acompañantes, este estudio demuestra que la poeta mantuvo una actitud hacia lo no humano que en términos teóricos actuales se definiría como un «enfoque de indistinción» hacia la cuestión animal (Calarco 2015). En *Dog Songs*, Oliver retrata una proximidad entre los humanos y los animales que básicamente conserva una distancia inevitable. Su escritura explota tanto su intuición de la capacidad de los animales para la agencialidad y la creatividad—que acompaña el restar importancia a la singularidad humana—y su consciencia de que necesitamos motivos de la experiencia humana para expresar nuestra percepción de las formas de vida no humanas. Además, a través de sus representaciones de la mirada del animal, de una inversión poderosamente irónica de los objetivos (y efectos) de la falacia patética, y de la narrativa empática, demuestra que un uso imaginativo del lenguaje hace de la poesía un espacio distinto para nuestros esfuerzos de cara a concebir un ecosistema que los animales habiten como nuestros iguales.

*Palabras clave:* estudios de los animales, lenguaje animal, empatía narrativa, Mary Oliver, *Dog Songs*.

## Mary Oliver and the Animal Question

Animal studies have put at the center of the philosophical consideration of animal rights the paradox of language (Beer 313). Language is one of the tools with which humans try to faithfully represent nonhuman experience, yet at the same time it is the obstacle that hinders their efforts; in its unavoidably human—i.e., verbally articulated—form it inherently carries “a danger of misinterpretation and consequent misrepresentation” (Torricelli 70). Margo De Mello has shown how the “longstanding tradition [...] of human-animal ventriloquism” established by our habit of speaking for (and sometimes through) animals—and of trying to put it to words (De Mello 1)—is originally tainted by a “power differential between human and animal” which resides precisely in language, determining humans’ position of superiority: we “can either choose to ignore what animals are saying, making them silent, or can interpret for them, which runs the risk of doing so from the human point of view” (De Mello 4-5). We, as humans, may feel ready to embrace an “indistinction” approach to the animal question, among the three theoretical and philosophical trends Matthew Calarco lists as central in current animal studies; we could be willing to “de-emphasize the importance of human uniqueness and the human/animal distinction” in order to explore “the surprising ways in which human beings find themselves to be like animals,” and the forms of animal agency and creativity they might learn to acknowledge (Calarco 5). The boundary with the nonhuman, though, will be kept by our insufficiency or inability to talk otherwise (at least within a scholarly discourse) than through a complexly codified and abstract language. No matter how conscious we may become of our not being *that* different from animals, our sole medium for representing our comprehension of them will be language, the depository of an anthropomorphic experience. My contention here is that US ecopoet Mary Oliver, before her death on January 17, 2019, had been carrying on a sustained reflection upon the animal question, which developed from her awareness of language as the site of the power differential between human and animal, and was construed as a position within Calarco’s “indistinction approach.” Oliver portrays a proximity between humans and animals that ultimately preserves an unavoidable distance. Her writing alternates between the contiguity of metonymy and the distanced analogy of metaphor, which, according to anthropologist Roy Willis, is our special way of thinking about animals, who are both akin to us—i.e., contiguous and conterminous—and not-us—i.e., separate and analyzable (Willis 128). In other words, she wrote using both her intuition of animals’ capacity of agency, creativity, and potential, which accompanies the de-emphasizing of human uniqueness (Calarco 5), and her consciousness that we need tropes from human experience to convey our perception of nonhuman ways of life. She performed what Aaron Moe has conceived as a “zoopoetics,” in which animals are represented not only as having the faculty of their kind of language, but as being conscious of it and using it intentionally (Moe 9). Thus, she proved that humans’ imaginative use of

language in poetry can make it a distinct space for their efforts to envisage ecological systems which animals may inhabit as their equals.

### Oliver's "Species" Collections and Nonhuman Vocalizations

Oliver began questioning our long-standing Cartesian idea of language in a first, "species" collection on birds, *Owls and Other Fantasies* (2006), and went on reconceptualizing it in a second—and unfortunately last—"species" collection on dogs, *Dog Songs* (2013). Whereas in the first book she listens to actual birds' songs (and the other sounds birds make) in order to present the reader with the reality that they *are* a form of language (Loreto), in the later one the "songs" in the title are a trope for the poems that stage an ongoing conversation with the dogs she spent her life with and treated as companions. (I counted Bear, Luke, Benjamin—or Benny, and, likely, Ben—Bazougey, Sammy, Percy—"named for the beloved poet," 47—, Ricky, and Henry.) These poems are songs by the dogs, in the double sense that dogs talk in them and brought them forth, as modern, participatory actants. Oliver herself stated the heart of the book's matter quite simply in an interview with Dana Jennings: "they remind us that we're animals, too" (n.p.). The irony, though, with which she treats her subject increases dramatically from the first to the second volume, in a multiplying of projections that becomes in itself the most conspicuous commentary on the undecidable issue. One of her distancing moves, for example, is to make Ricky protest that she demands too much of a complicated day, given that "Like/ you I'm not perfect, I'm only human" (Oliver, *Dog Songs* 93). This self-conscious irony becomes even humorous in a following poem, where Ricky comments to her, about a new friend, that "He's not very good with/ words, is he" (Oliver, *Dog Songs* 98).

Notwithstanding their distancing effect, though, there is a sense in which Oliver's representation of dogs' "speech" can be taken seriously, and this is in Moe's idea of zoopoetics. Zoopoetics would perfectly fit as an instance of Calarco's indistinction approach, because it defines another, neat, "zone of indistinction," i.e., the common human/nonhuman faculty of *poiesis*, which Moe conceives as "makings through their innumerable nuances of bodily movement, symbolic gesture, and in many cases, symbolic vocalization," but also as imitation (Moe 7). Animal (both human and nonhuman) rhetoric has developed through "innovative imitations of gestures," shaping "the evolution of poetry and poetics in the Euro-American tradition" (Moe 7). Moe retraces George A. Kennedy's description of the development of general rhetoric (1992), which identifies this animal rhetoric as the rhetorical energy from which—as from a common "genus"—all the various historical meanings of rhetoric have stemmed as different "species." Produced by the materiality of bodies, "physical actions, facial expressions, gestures," in the fifth canon of classical rhetoric (body language), it precedes speech (Moe 8). As Moe notes, though, Kennedy stops short of solving the issue of animal language, but shifts it from the question of whether animals are capable of speech to that of whether they have agency: "the intentionality and consciousness of sending and receiving messages," and the resulting "sense of self and of mental individuality" (Moe 9). I'll try to demonstrate that

Oliver's poetry completely solves the issue by answering this latter question, too, in the affirmative. Her "zoopoetics" emerges from the various literary techniques she honed to produce the effect of narrative empathy, ranging from a self-aware use of anthropomorphism to literary soundscapes, from the dogs' body language to their vocalizations, including the iconicity with which, according to Moe, form mimes meaning, encouraging "an attentiveness to the spatial, temporal, visual, and auditory dynamics of a poem" (Moe 7). In Oliver's poems this is carried out by the human/nonhuman dialogues, for example, which are signaled both by inverted commas and the visual arrangement of lines.

What has also been honed, in the book on dogs, as compared to the previous book on birds, is the consciousness with which Oliver employs ideas that would be theorized by material ecocriticism, namely the suggestion that material forms, including biological entities, interact with the human and produce "configurations of meanings and discourses that we can interpret as stories" (Iovino and Oppermann 7). Because these stories are shared, self-narratives have to be reconceived as collective, and apt to "situate the self within wider webs of creatural life," locating "the human agent in a transspecies constellation of selves" (Herman 131). This interpreting activity, Oliver carried on in both books, but especially in the latter one, where she consistently translates animals' language into human words, voicing the nonhuman through her poetic writing. Her consciousness combines with her irony and peaks in her paradoxical use of the romantic, anthropocentric device of the pathetic fallacy, here intentionally and strikingly employed to serve an ecocentric purpose by attributing to dogs the "human" faculty *par excellence*, talk.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, a potent self-reflexivity sweeps her whole discourse, making her irony reveal and at the same time protect her consciousness, as when she makes Percy keenly evaluate her interpretation or story-making out of the "configurations of meaning" he's been weaving with his behavior: "And now you'll be telling stories of my coming back/ and they won't be false, and they won't be true,/ but they'll be real" (Oliver, *Dog Songs* 77). Oliver's answer to the critical issue at the center of animal studies thus proves as powerful as the problem, and clarifies that it posits itself as an ethics that answers ontology, and a freedom to liberate us from necessity. If, as human beings, we are bound to use human tropes to represent the nonhuman, whose absolute truthfulness we cannot prove, we may choose to believe in the stories we tell and make them real. In addition, we may choose *what* stories to tell, according to what values they will make real. This epistemological move has been explicated by new materialists such as Hannes Bergthaller as a reenvisioning of the world as no longer dominated by "the singular figure of the human subject, distinguished by unique properties (soul, reason, mind, free will, intentionality)," but by a "dense web of material relations in which all beings are enmeshed" ("Limits of Agency: Notes on the Material Turn from a Systems-Theoretical Perspective," in Iovino

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<sup>1</sup> Of course Oliver is not the first nor the only poet (let alone writer) to have included talking dogs in literature; in her introduction alone, DeMello swiftly recalls, in the past, William Cowper, and in the contemporary scene, the 1995 collection *Unleashed: Poems by Writers' Dogs*; among other novelists, Paul Auster's *Timbuktu* (1999), John Berger's *King: A Street Story* (1999), Virginia Woolf's *Flush* (1933, DeMello 2-3, 8).

and Oppermann 37). Any Oliver reader would immediately think, here, of her famous “Some Questions You Might Ask,” in which she questions the western belief that nonhuman entities do not have souls (Oliver, *House of Light* 1).

Oliver's method for granting animals their agency has been to embrace the use of the only cognitive tool we have at our disposition as humans—the possibility to interpret the world in the terms of our experience—*ethically*, thus turning its action to opposite results. She has fictionally given dogs a voice in order to let them express their point of view, as accurately as her disinterested eyes and ears may have learnt to read it through a devoted lifelong observation. According to Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, in Amerindian ontology, subjectivity and selfhood are posited by point of view—a belief Oliver would very likely have shared.<sup>2</sup>

### The Phenomenology of Nonhuman Talk

The greatest, ironical, paradox with *Dog Songs* is the fact that a book admittedly written as an answer to the suggestion of Oliver's agent to assemble a collection on dogs led to such a profound research into the relation between the human and the nonhuman.<sup>3</sup> The book did become a poetry bestseller, but at the same time produced a sustained meditation on what it means to be human, and what it means to be other-than-human, or more-than-human, through the close observation of the interaction between human beings and animals. The easy appeal of the little stories about dogs ironically serves the purpose of a very effective representation of our dealing with them and of their dealing with us. Oliver patiently compiles a detailed phenomenology of human-dog talk, which overpasses the boundaries between fiction and reality. Her “reported” dialogues are based on her life-long accurate observation of dogs, and the study of her behavior toward them, and aim at affecting the readers' awareness of both their apprehension of and relation to the nonhuman. The effectiveness of literary representations as a means for raising (environmental) consciousness is well known, and it has been confirmed as a contribution to the “greening” of postcolonial studies in recent times. “Practices and ideas,” Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin have rightly remarked, are “inseparable from issues of representation,” thus making the need to move from the metaphorical to the material explicit (Huggan and Tiffin 6-7). Consequently, the phenomenology of Oliver's zoopoetics comprises a variety of manifestations, which cover the whole expanse from reality to fiction, and are both visual—dogs' facial expressions, their body gestures or movements, their behaviors, the traces they leave in this world—and audial, or acoustic: not only their barks and snorts, but also, of course, their fictional “words,” that is, the human language into which Oliver translates them. Oliver turns the sensual data of both

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<sup>2</sup> “the point of view creates the subject; whatever is activated or ‘agented’ by the point of view will be a subject” (Viveiros de Castro 476-77).

<sup>3</sup> As Ruth Franklin noted in a 2017 issue of *The New Yorker*, a *Times* profile of Oliver of a few years before had been occasioned by “the release of a book of Oliver's poems about dogs, which, naturally, endeared her further to her loyal readers while generating a new round of guffaws from her critics.” The *Times* profile said that Oliver liked to present herself as “the kind of old-fashioned poet who walks the woods most days, accompanied by dog and notepad.”

seeing and hearing into a literary soundscape that resonates with reciprocal interrelations, or intra-actions.<sup>4</sup>

The human-nonhuman dialogues of this literary soundscape come alive through a variety of techniques: Oliver makes dogs talk, interprets their talk (and sometimes translates it from written language), makes dogs listen, hear and comprehend human talk, translates dogs' "expressive sounds" (barks & snorts) into human meanings, defines dogs' behaviors (body movements, attitudes and gazes) as forms of expression, likens the "signs" they inscribe in the world (such as traces in the snow) to "words," presents dogs' talk as the agent of human behaviors. Yet, in her hermeneutic *oeuvre*, she invests dogs' *nonverbal* language (as she had done with birds' soundscapes) with the better value. The farther animals keep from the verbal, the more they seem to be able to teach us the indistinction between the human and the nonhuman through a transspecies language—and the origin of culture in nature, the forerunning idea of John Elder (1985) that would nowadays be defined, in material ecocriticism, as *natureculture* (Haraway 2003). In a way, Oliver's insouciant use of the apparently anthropocentric trope of talking animals seems to alternate between Paul Ricoeur's ideas of symbol and of metaphor as he expounded them in his *Interpretation Theory* (1976). Symbols, for Ricoeur, bring together two dimensions—almost two universes—of discourse, one linguistic and the other of a non-linguistic order (Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory* 53-54), whereas metaphors are linguistic inventions within which the symbolic power is only ultimately deposited (Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory* 69). Ricoeur applies to metaphors Max Black's theory that if we describe an object of reality in terms of an imagined theoretical model, we may change the way we see it through our use of a modified language (Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory* 67).<sup>5</sup> Thus, when Oliver comes closer to a symbolic mode of envisaging dog's "language," she seems to be able to preserve the "roots" of her own poetic language "into the durable constellations of life, feeling, and the universe" (Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory* 64), and the "shadowy experience of power" that symbols carry with them (Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory* 69). At the same time, though, when she comes closer to a metaphoric thinking, her poetic language has "the power to bring two separate domains into cognitive and emotional relation by using language directly appropriate for the one as a lens for seeing the other" (Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory* 67). Moreover, as Brenda Deen Schildgen recalls in her study on animals in Dante's *Comedy*, Ricoeur attributes to metaphor the power to transfer feelings, that is, to stretch the effect of the double sense it conveys from the cognitive to the affective, thus offering, Deen Schildgen rightly concludes, "this

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<sup>4</sup> I am here using Karen Barad's new materialist idea of "intra-action" (2007), and Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann's development of the concept in their Introduction to *Material Ecocriticism* (2014). Barad substitutes "intra-action" for interaction in order to foreground agency, and its dynamics, as a property of all matter instead of the privilege of individual human beings (Barad 141). Iovino and Oppermann stress how intra-actions are relations producing the already mentioned "configurations of meanings and discourses that we may interpret as stories" (Iovino and Oppermann 7). By intra-acting, *all* material forms (including the human and the nonhuman) co-produce meaning and become "storied matter," or material textuality.

<sup>5</sup> The exact words by Black reported by Ricoeur are: "to describe a domain of reality in terms of an imaginary theoretical model is a way of seeing things differently by changing our language about the subject of our investigation" (Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory* 67).

'insight'—to perceive, think, feel, even perhaps be or become like another" (Ricoeur, *La métaphore vive*, 1975, qtd. in Deen Schildgen "Animals, Poetry, Philosophy" 28). "If metaphor consists in speaking of a thing in the terms of another," writes Ricoeur, "does it not consist also in perceiving, thinking or feeling about one thing in the terms of the other?" (qtd. in Deen Schildgen, "Animals, Poetry, Philosophy" 27). "Poetic language," Deen Schildgen reminds us in a further study of animals in literature, "particularly metaphor, can make us 'feel', the precise capability that modern philosophers have suggested aligns humans with animals" (Deen Schildgen, "No Bounds to the Sympathetic Imagination" 331).<sup>6</sup> All Oliver's metaphors can accordingly be seen as transformations of a metonymic perception of contiguity with animals that needs to be expressed in a human language through the analogy of a metaphor, which will necessarily preserve the uniqueness of each individual in the midst of an affective participation.

### Oliver's Zoopoetics: the Audiovisual Techniques of Narrative Empathy

Oliver starts her fiction of talking dogs in the book with the poem "Every Dog's Story." The title is in itself a reminder of human stories about Everyman: the way we built our own mythologies. Here a dog talks for every dog, in the first person, about his/her everyday and "universal" experience, in which his/her dependence on human presences is foregrounded. The poem's opening is an example of how Oliver uses the device of the pathetic fallacy with great, self-conscious skill: her personification and anthropomorphization of the animal is revealed only by the paratext (it's a book on dogs and the title says that it's a dog's story), and, later on, by the subsequent speaker's apostrophe to the human—which introduces the relation—and the (now revealed) dog's *climbing* to her bed:

I have a bed, my very own.  
It's just my size.  
And sometimes I like to sleep alone  
with dreams inside my eyes.

But sometimes dreams are dark and wild and creepy  
and I wake and am afraid, though I don't know why.  
But I'm no longer sleepy  
and too slowly the hours go by.

So I climb on the bed where the light of the moon  
is shining on your face  
and I know it will be morning soon.

Everybody needs a safe place. (Oliver, *Dog Songs* 7)

At a first reading, Oliver's device of attributing to dogs not merely feelings or emotions, but the human intellectual faculty of language looks like a flagrant exploitation of the pathetic fallacy. In fact, it reverses the anthropocentric perspective that the device has traditionally embodied, in that she employs anthropomorphism to overturn the *aim*,

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<sup>6</sup> She is here referring to Martha Nussbaum's chapter "Humans and Other Animals: The Neo-Stoic View Revised" (2001).

which would go with it, of expressing some human need. It is, indeed, the dog's gaze on the human that lets the human recognize herself, in this poem, as a human being on whom *the dog* needs to rely. Thus, the poem manages to convey the animal's particular experience of the world—what the Estonian biologist Jakob von Uexküll has called the *Umwelt*, every creature's world of subjective perceptions and effectors, which are the tools through which it processes reality (von Uexküll 319).

One way, then, in which Oliver manages to induce in the reader the experience of “passing over” to the nonhuman (Copeland 94),<sup>7</sup> or “the ability to see the world from another creature's viewpoint” that comes from a “positional thinking” (Nussbaum, *Not for Profit* 36) is through the representation of an empathetic understanding of an animal. Because Oliver's dog songs are mainly dramatized or narrated stories, narrative empathy becomes a powerful tool in the hands of the poet, with all its potential for the “sharing of feeling and perspective-taking induced by reading, viewing, hearing, or imagining narratives of another's situation and condition” (Keen, “Narrative Empathy” §1).<sup>8</sup> More precisely, Oliver narrates “the whole range of contemporary definitions of empathy” that Steven Pinker has covered in his *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (2011): projection, or the “ability to put oneself in the position of some other person, animal, or object, and imagine that sensation of being in that situation”; perspective-taking, or “visualizing what the world looks like from another's vantage point”; “empathic accuracy”, or “the ability to figure out what someone is thinking or feeling from their expressions, behavior, or circumstances” (Pinker 860-61). In *Dog Songs*, Oliver represents her practice of all these empathetic acts, including Pinker's “empathic accuracy,” which is particularly apt to justify our hopes that literature may become the space where the divide between human and nonhuman may be bridged: “For his sadness,” she writes about Percy, “though without words was understandable” (Oliver, *Dog Songs* 73). And with the recurrent self-reflexive irony, “A dog can never tell you what she knows from the smells of the world, but you know, watching her, that you know/ almost nothing” (Oliver, *Dog Songs* 27). What literature (and particularly poetry, through metaphor) *can* do—and Oliver does in this book—is allow humans to reach out to animals through a use of their imagination that is led by the serious attempt to include them as equal inhabitants

<sup>7</sup> In fact, Marion W. Copeland borrows the expression from Maryanne Wolf, who had in her turn borrowed it from theologian John Dunn to indicate “the process through which reading enables us to try on, identify with, and ultimately enter for a brief time the wholly different perspective of another person's consciousness,” which she broadened to include the nonhuman.

<sup>8</sup> I will not go into the very complicated matter of establishing the actual relation between literary empathy and altruism, which has been widely treated by Suzanne Keen in her 2007 study of empathy in the novel. I rest satisfied with her conclusion that the possibility of neurosciences to study empathy at the cellular level has demonstrated not only that our mirror neuron activity can be altered by exposure to art and literature, but also that it “encourages speculation about human empathy's positive consequences” (viii). Martha Nussbaum has contributed important ideas on the issue in her already quoted *Not for Profit* (Nussbaum, *Not for Profit* 95-120). In addition, the editors of the very recent *Reconfiguring Human, Nonhuman and Posthuman in Literature and Culture* (2019) have pointed out how stable the acquisition can now be held that the humanities (i.e., literature, the arts and philosophy of mind) can tackle the examination of nonhuman experience on “a more concrete, embodied, contextualized and/or personal” than the traditional methods of natural sciences; and that this, “increasing our understanding of nonhuman creatures, [...] is likely to have notable epistemological and ethical repercussions” (Karkulehto, Sanna, Aino-Kaisa Koistinen, and Essi Varis, eds. 5).



of their ecosystems. In "Little Dog's Rhapsody in the Night," Oliver translates a dog's expressions and behaviors—his visual language—into metaphorically "acoustic" language. Moreover, her response to it reveals how ready she is to receive the dog's gaze in her own eyes and let herself be defined by it. In John Berger's terms, to see the animal see her and see herself being seen by the animal, conscious that only we, as humans, can be aware of being seen by the animal; in the well-known Derridean terms, to allow the animal to return our gaze, and thus become the source of an objectifying address that broadens our idea of language (2008). This is another way in which animal studies may solve the linguistic *aporia* they have identified within their theoretical field:

He puts his cheek against mine  
and makes small, expressive sounds.  
And when I'm awake, or awake enough

he turns upside down, his four paws  
in the air  
and his eyes dark and fervent.

Tell me you love me, he says.

Tell me again.

Could there be a sweeter arrangement? Over and over  
he gets to ask it.  
I get to tell. (Oliver, *Dog Songs* 51)

The poem becomes the space in which the poet's interpretation of the dog's visual and acoustic language triggers a conversation and a human behavior. Oliver's extreme form of contemporary pathetic fallacy, then, constitutes a third, formal device through which in literature we can "give voice to an animal," or "lend our language" to the nonhuman so that they can "speak" to us about themselves. The proof of its efficacy is that the conversation parties come to an agreement in which the human complies with the nonhuman's request; or agrees with the way she sees the animal see the human, as she does—even more patently—in "Show Time," where Oliver makes Ricky exclaim, in front of television: "What on earth have they done to them! [...] They're half shaved. And /wearing pillows on their heads. And/ where are their tails?" (Oliver, *Dog Songs* 89). The whole book consistently performs these three acts of representation: a deep comprehension of the animal's phenomenal world; allowing the animal to return our gaze, thus defining our identity as humans exactly in the same way as our gaze has always been defining the animal's identity (or our lack of it has been effacing it, according to Berger); and an anthropomorphization that is functional to an ethical representation of the animal's point of view. The continuum between our real world and the fictitious dialogues of *Dog Songs* adds a concrete, effectual basis to Oliver's poetic construction: she has been able to imagine so accurately a dog's *Umwelt* because she had long been observing dogs, with a keen, disinterested, and equal interest; her fictional, faithful representation of the

actual dogs of her life hopes, in its turn, to affect the readers' attitude toward dogs in the real world.<sup>9</sup>

More than reciprocal acknowledgement as peers in an ecosystem seems to pervade Oliver's representation of dogs' visual language. "The Storm (Bear)" is one of the many poems in which Oliver presents the body movements of a dog as a form of kinetic language. In this case, Bear leaps and spins in the white snow until this is "written upon/ in large, exuberant letters,/ a long sentence, expressing/ the pleasures of the body in this world" (Oliver, *Dog Songs* 9): the dog leaves traces, i.e. signs in the snow that are interpreted by the poet as his self-expression. What is noteworthy, in this, is not merely the assumption that when humans focus an empathetic gaze on animals they can read their visual "language," but that the poet's final comment in the poem declares this visual, i.e., nonverbal, body language *superior* to our human, more complexly articulated code of words: "Oh," she concludes, "I could not have said it better/ myself" (Oliver, *Dog Songs* 9). Why? Because Oliver thinks that the visual language we read in animals' facial expressions and body movements is language that is *felt*. It is language that expresses a radically different logic from the one that is supposed to distinguish us from them: not a rational human logic but the logic of emotions and affections; not the logic of thought but the logic of instincts; not the logic of self-destruction, but the logic of an immediate appreciation of life (see "For I Will Consider My dog Percy," Oliver, *Dog Songs* 71). They are the happy, wild, and loving creatures "in the heaven of earth" (21). They love the world, richly (Oliver, *Dog Songs* 61). They pray by liking things, and their lives, and the world (Oliver, *Dog Songs* 105). In "Percy (2002-2009)," Oliver clarifies (to the dog!) a distinction between humans—whose prerogative, and privileged activity, is to *think*—and dogs, who *live* simply and quietly, satisfied and happy: they kiss and sleep in peace because they are "children of the earth," which seems to signify: of Eden (Oliver, *Dog Songs* 67). "How would it be to be Percy," she asks herself in another poem, "not talking, not weighing anything, just running forward" (Oliver, *Dog Songs* 65). Dogs, says Oliver in the essay that closes the book, "Dog Talk," may teach us our way back to the wilderness from which we *both*—humans and nonhumans—have come. We humans have become tame, but they belong to both worlds: the world of the wild and the world of domesticity. So when they express the joy of *being* a body, they remind us of our physicality, of the gift of our senses (Oliver, *Dog Songs* 117, 119): they teach us a form of participation in the ecosystem which is—as the word says—our real home, or actual place of interrelated (or intra-related, in Barad's coinage) habitation.

In *Dog Songs*, dogs end up teaching a lot to human beings through a nonverbal language that offers itself to their interpretation in both acoustic and visual forms. In "Luke's Junkyard Song," a junkyard puppy tells us that whatever we *see* and *love* (that is, we manage to see and are able to grow attached to, to take part in) makes us something

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<sup>9</sup> Oliver seems to have spontaneously and intuitively followed the course of current studies in animal phenomenology, such as those of Timothy Hodgetts, Jamie Lorimer, Maan Barua, Jeffrey Bussolini, Dominique Lestel, and Matthew Chrulew.

which is more, and better, than simply “human”: it makes us *what we are*, through our attachment to *where* we are, regardless of our/their species. Sight, perception, and the capability to belong to and even care for one’s environment are the factors that determine the ontology of a living being, human or nonhuman (Oliver, *Dog Songs* 17). Oliver’s final paradoxical construction is that dogs teach humans how to lead *real* conversations. “Ricky Talks about Talking” (Oliver, *Dog Songs* 79) is a highly and bemused self-reflexive meditation on language as an “effector” of species divide. It opens with the speaker addressing a candid—yet loaded—question to the dog, which she trusts with all the wisdom in the world:

Ricky, can you explain how it is that  
Anne and I can talk with you, as we did  
with Percy too, and we all understand  
each other? is it a kind of a miracle? (Oliver, *Dog Songs* 79)

Oliver lends her voice to the dog in the poem, who proves to be the finest observer and to know the (ideal) rules of conversation better than humans. Oliver’s “magic realism,” which casually presents a fantastic scene within an otherwise realistic scenario, features Ricky having a conversation with the speaker that may take place as such—that is, an authentic conversation—because they both listen (or “*really* listen,” as Ricky points out) to each other, while what is supposedly called a “conversation” between or among humans is just a projection of each individual’s need to vent out their thoughts or even worse to feign interest (while they’re actually engrossed in their cell phones, for example). Real conversation happens when there is attention, when all the “people” who are engaged in it become compassionate agents of a receptive attitude, and listen to each other because they care for each other.

In conclusion, in *Dog Songs*, dogs can talk, and they talk in a language that is both visual and audial. The visual and auditory quality of dogs’ language in the real world is translated in the book into verbal language by the poet, who assumes the role of reliable interpreter on the basis of her empathetic attitude of listening to animals in a manifestly ethical attempt to understand them. Oliver’s main tool for representing animal language is a post-romantic, radically posthuman version of the pathetic fallacy, which flips the human/animal perspective in order to create a world where dogs and humans may interact on the basis of equal relations. In this frame, worded, or verbal, language *cannot* be held as a marker of a species divide. It becomes, instead, the means by which the writer may hope to bridge that divide by fostering an imagination that hopes to operate in the reader’s mind, too. In fact, Oliver’s reconceptualization of language subsumes both its verbal and nonverbal traits, both its concrete origin and abstract development. In her study of the Buddhist mindfulness in Oliver’s poetry, Gisela Ulliyatt reminds us of the double concrete and abstract nature of Oliver’s images (Ulliyatt 120), which Douglas Burton-Christie had already noted and explained according to Paul Sherman’s distinction between two opposite literary procedures—*adequation* and *correspondence*—that either keep close to things and let them be what they are in their concrete particularity, or follow the impulse to make imaginative connections between the elusive worlds of self and nature (Burton-Christie 79). In *Dog Songs*, Oliver confirms a practice of using both the

antisymbolic and the symbolic impulses, ebbing back and forth between them as Burton-Christie has clearly made out (Burton-Christie 79), and integrating them without confusing them, to the result I have described with the help of Ricoeur's hermeneutics of shaping a poetic language that may be the key to a passing over to the nonhuman phenomenological world within—and by means of—our distinctive means of representation.

Finally, in Oliver's portrayal of human-nonhuman conversations animals seem to be able to *really* "talk" better than human beings, who do not seem to be capable of listening, let alone *hearing* the other (and are unable to even become conscious of their shortcomings). Oliver's brand of "magic realism" seems to have been crafted from the actual world of her attentive observation of animals in order to fictionalize an imagined world, and an animal language, whose assumptions (the equality of human and nonhuman beings in a shared ecosystem) may affect our behavior back in the actual world. Poetry, for Oliver, is a space for the cultivation of a narrative empathy that may recount our acceptance of the gaze of the nonhuman, and re-posit our agency as one that fosters the agency of nonhuman entities inhabiting our world. "There is only one world," she wrote in *Owls* (Oliver, *Owls* 16). In "Conversations," Bear's audial and visual language elicits an immediate behavioral response from the speaker Oliver, which is one of a gentle yielding to the ready understanding of a request for love, and care:

I had to go away for a few days so I called  
the kennel and made an appointment. I guess  
Bear overheard the conversation.  
"Love and company," said Bear, "are the adornments  
that change everything. I know they'll be  
nice to me, but I'll be sad, sad, sad."  
And pitifully he wrung his paws.

I cancelled the trip. (Oliver, *Dog Songs* 13)

Submission received 9 April 2020

Revised version accepted 11 December 2020

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