

Ethno Plunderphonics: On Some Mockingbird Transcriptions

Jonathan Skinner

Redlands Mockingbird

hurt hurt hurt
breach breach breach breach
heat heat heat
flight flight flight flight
glow glow glow
clip clip clip
tear tear tear
chip chip chip
chip chip chip
wheelwheelwheel
hit hit hit hit
flight alight flight
hurt hurt
fleet fleet fleet
high high shot shot highly highly
light light light
you you you
bleed bleed bleed
ooh ooh, ooh ooh
hurt hurt, hurt hurt
hulo helo, hulo helo
heat heat heat
seat seat seat
fight it it fight it it
flee he he
tied tight, tied tight
retreat, retreat
free treat free treat
teat teat teat teat
truly truly truly
fleet fleet fleet fleet flew
highlight highlight
shoot you, shoot you
hun stew . . . hun . . . stew
see you see you see you
truly truly truly truly

*Transcribed by JS at dawn
in Joel Bettridge's and Kim Evans's backyard
Redlands, CA, March 16, 2003*

A sound poet in the tradition of Kurt Schwitters might link such transcription with Walter Garstang's skylark song (1922)—“*Swee! Swee! Swee! Swee!/ Zwée-o! Zwée-o! Zwée-o! Zwée-o!/ [...] Joo! Joo! Joo! Joo!/ Jée-o! Jée-o! Síssy-sejóo*”—and its resemblance to the 1922-23 *Ursonate*: “*Ooobee tatta tuu/ Ooobee tatta tuu/ Ooobee tatta tuui Ee/ Ooobee tatta tuui Ee [...] Tilla lalla tilla lalla/ Tilla lalla tilla lalla*” (Rothenberg 47-49). Or with Velimir Khlebnikov's “transrational” *zaum*, which the poet (whose father was an ornithologist) sometimes described as “Language of the Birds.” Certainly the transcriber of bird song participates—joyously, one hopes—in the liberation of sound so variously celebrated by European modernists.

However, the fact of the matter is that the mockingbird whose speech begins this essay woke me up one morning, well before I was awake, and with nothing better to do, I simply grabbed my laptop and took dictation. That was five years ago, on the eve of a war that, with no end in sight, has awakened the world to an uncertain future. It was also the eve of my five-day retreat, an attempt to avoid the televised spectacle of “pre-emptive” invasion, in the wilderness of Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument in Southern Arizona. This desert had hooked me years before, with the explosive spectacle of a lush spring bloom, and my return surely involved some quest for healing, some preemptive balm for the coming hurt (“Things to Do Around Ocotillo”).

Little did I know how that hurt would settle in, and refuse to unhook, as sticky as the jumping cholla of the Sonoran desert. (Ironically, as I would learn, the U.S. military practiced its “shock and awe” on the desert range right next to Organ Pipe, and my “retreat” was marked by the regular training skirmishes of war jets.) Nor did I know I would publish a little book, *Political Cactus Poems*, channeling anger and history through the character of the cacti I encountered in that landscape. Nor, finally, could I foresee how involved I would get with the poetic traditions of the Upper Sonoran borderlands, devoting a quarter of my dissertation on ecopoetics, written over the following two years, to a handful of Tohono O’odham songs and speeches transcribed by ethnographers in the early part of the last century—in particular, to a bit of ritual language called the “Mockingbird Speech.”

Through it all, that bird who chose to wake me up five years ago has kept repeating, insisting, mocking, frightening, delighting me with its nonsense. A lot more than liberation of sound, something more particular than a mechanical transaction, a poetry beyond survival, had embedded itself in my transcription. The following words document my attempt at understanding, from various angles, some of the dimensions of this nonsense.

Bronislaw Malinowski thought a lot about the meaning of words without meaning (“spells”), in the context of his study of Trobriand gardening, and decided that such “magical verbiage shows a very considerable coefficient of weirdness, strangeness and unusualness” (*The Language of Magic and Gardening* 222). He explained this by the fact that “the magical word is coeval with that aspect of reality which it has to influence. But the word is always something to be uttered by man. The magical word, therefore, is really an attribute of the relation between man and thing” (229). (My assumption here is that the “magic” in something like a transcription of bird song is relational, and implies participation as much as imitation. It implies that the poet’s enactment of bird song might actually affect the bird.) This “coefficient of weirdness” is often cited without reference to its twin: “The two coefficients of weirdness and intelligibility co-exist

almost down to the minutest detail" (230). In other words, Trobriand gardening language intersects with ecological networks while maintaining its own "weirdness":

The weirdness consists very largely in artificial form, in the ungrammatical use of certain roots, in reduplications or couplings, in mythological references and concrete topographical allusions. There are magical pseudonyms for objects or animals. There are certain esoteric allusions. But on the whole it is its formal presentation in the spell which gives the magical imprint to the language. The coefficient of intelligibility is found in the fact that even the strangest verbal formations refer directly or indirectly to the matter with which the magic deals. It is found, further, in the fact that, associated with slightly distorted or modified keywords, a long list of ordinary expressions appears. (230)

"Weirdness" can be found in "untranslatable" phrases or words like *vatuvi*, "a magical form, that...has no grammatical setting and is a root never met with in common speech" (260). Malinowski notes that "its nearest counterparts in ordinary language are the verbs *vituvatu*, 'to put together', to 'give the finishing touches'; *vitawo*, or *vatowa*, to 'step', to 'erect'." But he also values associations with the word *vatu*, 'coral boulder', and with the root *tuvi*, 'to foment' (which with the causative prefix *va-* can mean 'to heal'), associations with ecological and homological value. The connection I will posit—quite speculatively—between "shuhthk," full, and "u'uwhig," bird, in the Tohono O'odham name for mockingbird, "su : g" may be an example of this kind of "weird" association (one intimately related to the presence of the mockingbird in the "rainhouse"). No etymological connection is necessary for these "phonetic and accidental" similarities to "also function in the essential magical significance of the word, which as we know...is its action on the minds of the natives.... It is the multifarious associations, the emotional fringe of the word which is believed by them to influence the course of nature, and which through this really influences their own psychology and the organisation of their work" (261). Without wanting to discount the value of "emotional fringes" we might ask what in the "fringes" of such an association makes it "emotional"?

Emotion, of course, partly rests in the rhythmic setting of the word, and the patterning of its repetitions. But there may be perceptions of ecological (and not just sociological and psychosexual) pattern, coefficients of intelligibility, in the association—of this word muttered over magical substances, plants and gardening implements—with erections, coral boulders and generative fomentation.¹ Malinowski himself indicates as much when he sums up the overall "meaning" of the word as conveying "a general benediction especially directed towards the depths of the earth; it also implies firmness and permanence of the crops and conveys the idea of going down and rising again" (262). (As a Trobriander, Emerson might have said that "language is coral poetry.") This is not to imply that weirdness should be subsumed in the false intelligibility of overly neat "ecological" explanations.

But "weirdness" just might be a place-holder for missing theories about the embodied and emplaced nature of language—whether via ideas about the latent meta-

¹ This gloss comes in the "Commentary" to Formula 2 of Malinowski's fascinating list of "Magical Formulae" in *Coral Gardens and Their Magic*, a formula he considers "undoubtedly the most important in all Omarakana garden magic" (257).

phoricity of even the most “literal” language, as in Lakoff’s and Johnson’s work on the role of “mapping” between neurological domains that ground meaning in bodily experience; via explorations of the role of homology (formal affinities in materials as diverse as words on breath, foliage in wind and dolphins in waves) in the dynamics of complex systems;² or via work on sound symbolism (“the non-arbitrary connection between the sound shape of a vocalization and its function,” Morton in Hinton 348) from Sapir and Jakobsen forward. These theories explore “expressive sound symbolism” and “motivational-structural” rules from an evolutionary-biological standpoint and go as far as proposing a “universal and innate cross-species ‘frequency code’” (Berlin in Hinton 91).

Hinton, Nichols and Ohala, in their very useful volume of essays, *Sound Symbolism*, a treasure trove of some of the latest work in linguistic and scientific theory on this subject, propose a “typology” of sound symbolism, including: “corporeal” sound symbolism, “the use of certain sounds or intonation patterns to express the internal state of the speaker, emotional or physical”; “imitative” sound symbolism, which “relates to onomatopoeic words and phrases representing environmental sounds”; “synesthetic” sound symbolism, the “acoustic symbolization of non-acoustic phenomena”; “conventional” sound symbolism, “the analogical association of certain phonemes and clusters with certain meanings”; and, cutting across all of these, “metalinguistic” and “metacommunicative” symbolism, where “segment choice and intonation patterns signal aspect of linguistic [and communicative] structure and function” (1-8). Hinton et al attempt a scientific approach (with essays grounded in bioacoustics, ethnology and ethology, for example), making confident subdivisions in the kinds of meanings sounds can have, to give some sense of continuity between human and non-human perception.

Other useful linguistic studies include Reuven Tsur’s work, in “cognitive poetics,” on a “poetic” mode in the semantic coding of acoustic signals, *What Makes Sound Patterns Expressive*, and Andrew Welsh’s study of “charm melos,” chant and rhythm in *Roots of Lyric: Primitive Poetry and Modern Poetics*. Tsur’s study complements the work of Hinton et al., with theories about the expressiveness and the psychology of a “Poetic Mode’ of speech perception in which some rich pre-categorical sensory information is subliminally perceived” (viii). Positing a parallelism of sonic and acoustic processes, Tsur purports to uncover a frontier between human (cognitive) and nonhuman (bodily) sound, a categorical switch—like Wittgenstein’s “duck rabbit”—that humans only get around unconsciously (“intuitively”), or via a kind of “parallel processing.” Welsh’s study is valuable primarily for its “Celtic” grounding in a particularly imbricated approach to sound symbolism (riddle, emblem, charm). My lack of phonological knowledge of Tohono O’odham prevents me from a more detailed analysis of possible sound symbolism in the O’odham transcriptions I will consider—in particular, to identify and

² In regards to Formula 27, through which a dolphin (*kuriyava*) repeatedly plays, Malinowski states that “the invocation of the dolphin—whose magical function is the same as that of the millipede, spider and so forth—transforms, by a daring simile, the Trobriand garden, with its foliage swaying and waving in the wind, into a seascape. The richer the foliage, the more the garden will resemble the undulations of following waves. Bagido’u explained to me by gesture and word that as among the waves the dolphin goes in and out, up and down, so throughout the gardens the rich garlands at harvest will wind over and under, in and out, of the supports” (*The Language of Magic and Gardening* 311).

correlate “weirdness” with possible environmental sounds. Otherwise, such work would be at the center of this essay.

A crude generalization would be to divide oral literature into speeches, tales and songs. Although this generic division rides roughshod over nuances both within and between particular traditions, it has the advantage of avoiding a distinction between prose and poetry that does more to project the concerns of alphabetic writing onto oral literature than to illuminate the latter (see Dennis Tedlock, “On the Translation of Style in Oral Narrative,” and “Learning to Listen: Oral History as Poetry,” in *The Spoken Word and the Work of Interpretation*). If songs (or at least curing songs) are private forms and tales are semi-private occasions restricted to certain times of year, speeches, on the other hand, are public events tied to political or ceremonial gatherings. In O’odham “ritual oratory,” Bahr has studied speeches that “are not at all tools for debate. In contrast to the [Iroquois] Longhouse speeches, they are memorized, word for word, or nearly so.... They are charms or spells rather than sermons” (Wiget 115). One such ritual oration is called the “Mockingbird Speech” and is given on the occasion of the cactus wine feast. The Mockingbird Speech closes the ceremony, after the two rounds of drinking separated by the singing of “sit and drink songs.”³ The speech discussed here was made and recorded by Jose Pancho of Santa Rosa village, and transcribed and translated by Donald Bahr (working from Ruth Underhill’s earlier version of the same speech; Jose Pancho may have worked from this as well). Pancho also checked the transcription and translation. The text is repeated four times, one for each direction (east, south, north, west); the feathers and clouds changing color with each direction (white, green, red, black) while something different happens at the end on the fourth, western repetition. Here is my minimal “working” adapted from Bahr’s (Underhill et al, *Rainhouse and Ocean* 32-35)⁴:

Ok, now it’s good friend, now you’ve downed
 The doctor’s beer, rain-maker’s beer, with your tears you downed it
 With your snot in it, you downed it
 Way over there, standing, the eastern rainhouse stands
 Where the white feathered mockingbird hangs
 Four times he bends upward and talks
 Jumps up and down and talks, bends downward and talks, moves back and forth
 and talks
 And the earth is wet.

.
 Out came the white-bottomed cloud
 Floated to the top of the sky and stayed there, all puffy

³ The ceremony involves elaborate preparation of the cactus wine, a ceremonial gathering of neighboring villages with speeches, made by designated officials, followed by ritual drinking (and regurgitation) of the cactus wine accompanied by individual songs on the part of the celebrants.

⁴ Though I adhere to the bibliographic labeling of this book, I must note that it is somewhat confusing, since Underhill’s contribution to the book is limited, as an editor’s note makes clear, to a two-and-a-half page introduction and a reproduction of one page from her notebook, as well as “to having supplied the original texts.” The note adds that Underhill “does not necessarily subscribe to the interpretations contained in the body of this book” (5).

And moved

With lots of dust, lots of lightning, lots of thunder, lots of clouds, lots of rainbows, it moved on

. . . .

From inside the wet mountains, more clouds came out
Plucking white from their breasts, coughing white from their breasts.
The earth seemed so far to its edge
But they went clear to the edge, beyond it and looked.

. . . .

The earth was laid out beautifully wet and finished.
Out came something seeded, of thick root, thick stalk, wide leaves, good silks,
good tassel, ripening well.
This was our last wish and it happened
As you will see.

. . . .

[Western variant]

Out came the black spring rain
The earth was spread out
It rained lightly up and down the ridge
Moved all the way east
Turned around and looked back
The earth was laid out beautifully wet and finished
Out came various seeded things, wild greens and every kind of cactus,
ripening well.
This was our last wish and it happened
As you will see.

The first three directions will bring the hard summer rains from the east, to be channeled into dry-farming fields, allowing the cultivation of corn and other domestic plants. The fourth direction invokes the gentle western spring rains that will nourish the growth of wild plants—including the variable “spring bloom” of the Sonoran desert: “wild flowers are counterparts to the wild greens, grasses, and cactuses of the westward mockingbird speech. Whenever a western rainhouse is referred to, the vegetation that results from its moisture is wild as opposed to cultivated plants” (Underhill, *Rainhouse and Ocean* 67). “Wild greens” translates *opon*, which is “patota,” or *Monolepsis nutalliana*, a winter plant used for edible greens (Saxton et al 48).

Bahr states that this “oratory is a special way of speaking, roughly midway between ordinary speech and song—‘chant’ in other words” (*Rainhouse and Ocean* 13). Underhill notes that the male ceremonialists had “at least three ways of speaking. First was the usual way in an everyday voice. This was for welcoming guests and telling the news. Then came a custom which was called ‘Throwing Words’. It meant that each word came out separately, with great emphasis and in a loud voice. It was meant for an audience on a special occasion, but not for the spirits.... The third manner of speaking...

concerned sacred subjects and was often meant to be heard not by an audience, but by the spirits who were thus reminded of their obligations" (2).

I have not been able to access a recording of the Mockingbird Speech to determine the nature of its 'chant' and its performative qualities: one would like to know whether the speech is delivered slowly or rapidly, one word at a time or in runs of phrases, evenly or with variations in loudness, stress and perhaps even pitch. In *Singing for Power*, Underhill includes under the category Mockingbird Speeches what Bahr (and others) categorize separately as Running and Seating Speeches (the first a speech exchanged with representatives of three nearby villages invited to the wine feast; the second made once all the parties are seated for the "sit and drink"): "This is the Mockingbird Speech, so called because the mockingbird is the most eloquent of birds and can 'stretch his words like ropes between the mountaintops'. The invited village has also its mockingbird speaker, who responds in a dignified antiphony, almost repeating the words of his host. Then he and his village march to the rendezvous" (31). According to Underhill the speech gets its name from a certain manner, whereas for Bahr it has a specific ceremonial function. Bahr's transcript does indicate an economy and repetitiveness that raises this speech above "ordinary speech" (here is the O'odham for the first excerpt):

Do:owai, na'as hemu am a s-ap'e ñ-nawoj, mapt *ab ba* :
 Ma:kai *wasib*, siwañ *wasib*, e-o'og we :nadk *ab ba* :
 Ha'akia e-so d 'igmadag we:nadk ab ba :
 K' wa:haj ñeid g si'aligc ed *ke :kam wa'aki mab ke : k*
 Mo g eda s-to : ta a'anam *su : g ab nagia*.
 O wa ip gi'ikho da 'imo'otk c *ñiok*
 Cd : khimac niok, kuawit hudugc *ñiok*, a'ai da 'iwanc *ñiok*

(*Rainhouse and Ocean* 32-33; my italics)

Here a certain parallelism is evident in the repetition of key words (in italics) like "ab ba" (swallowed), "wasib" (liquid), "ke:k" (to be standing) or "ñiok" (talks) (Saxton et al). In "Ma:kai wasib, siwañ wasib" ("Medicine man's beer, rain-maker's beer") we can recognize the kind of paradigmatic variation and the 'verbal polyphony' proper to the unfolding of an object's manifold properties that Dennis Tedlock has shown to be active at the heart of parallel verse (as discussed in the essays "Mayan Linguistic Ideology," and "Toward a Poetics of Polyphony and Translatability"). For a deeper analysis, more familiarity with the language is required. At the very least, knowledge of the phonology and orthographic conventions used to transcribe the sounds (in a system developed by Albert Alvarez and Kenneth Hale in 1970) would permit "homophonic" translation—or antiphonal repetition—that might be closer to the spirit of the original than either Bahr's literal version or my updated "working." Knowledge of O'odham grammar and hermeneutics would allow a translation engaging more structural considerations. In all cases, knowledge of the "speech" of the Northern mockingbird—the courtship song of *Mimus polyglottos*—is informative (as I will indicate below). Bahr himself acknowledges that "There is no journey by a human at all in this [Mockingbird Speech]. Rather, the speech concentrates on the motions set in train by the drinking of wine" (*Rainhouse and Ocean* 35).

What are these motions? Obviously, they are the motions of the rain clouds and of growing plants, but they are also the motions of the mockingbird, “bending upward,” jumping up and down, “bending downwards,” moving back and forth, and, above all, “talking.” (I have discovered no discussion of the significance of the inverted mockingbird—strung up by its feet? An allusion to a shamanic technique, an inversion of symbolic valences, or both? Echo of the Western vogue for caged mockingbirds, which nearly extinguished populations near large cities, in the 18th and 19th centuries?) The movements of the mockingbird even blend with those of the clouds, as the clouds “pluck” and “cough” white feathers (presumably) from their breasts. In a “Salt Pilgrimage” speech that Bahr also translates, “Blue Jay Shaman” and “Yellow Finch shaman” pull out feathers and let them fall, making the earth blue and yellow with flowers. Bahr considers these birds to be counterparts of the mockingbirds. Mockingbirds are recognized in flight, or during courtship and territorial displays, by their flashing, white wing patches—associated here with the shining white of cumulonimbus thunderheads.

But the most striking characteristic, for which the mockingbird is given both its scientific and its common names, is its vocalization. Indigenous peoples seem to emphasize the bird’s capacity for varied, liquid song: for the Zuñi the mockingbird’s song is *tso’ya* (clear, new, beautiful) in its “succession of clear rich notes and long phrases of great variety, often containing trills, buzzes, and other embellishments” (Barbara Tedlock 190).⁵ The O’odham name for the bird, “su : g” (see line five of the excerpt from the transcript of the Mockingbird Speech, above) appears to be a contraction (or ‘port-manteau’) of “shuhthk,” an adjective meaning full (of liquid, usually), and “u’uwhig,” bird. The English epithet, American nightingale, also seems to express admiration for this bird’s “full-throated ease”; but recent genetic analysis has shown that the mockingbird is, in fact, more closely related to other mimids like starlings and mynas than, as once was thought—on the basis of plumage—to the melodious thrush (Eaton).

Indeed, the song of the European nightingale is more like the “fast thick warble” of Coleridge’s ode than it is like the “plaintive anthem” of Keats’s nightingale—though presumably an ode describes the singer more than the object of the genre, in which case it would be pointless to quibble. John Clare’s transcription, at any rate, tells us just how much the European nightingale resembles the Northern mockingbird:

Chee chew chee chew chee
 chew—cheer cheer cheer
 chew chew chew chee
 —up cheer up cheer up
 tweet tweet tweet jug jug jug (cited in Rothenberg 25)

David Rothenberg notes how we can hear the Northern mockingbird’s repetitions by threes, fours and sixes in Whitman’s line “Out of the/ mocking-bird’s throat,/

⁵ Wilson Flagg, writer for the *Atlantic Monthly* in the 19th century has a different opinion, noting that the mockingbird is admired by thousands, “because, after pouring forth a continued stream of ridiculous and disagreeable sounds, or a series of two or three notes repeated more than a hundred times in uninterrupted and monotonous succession, he condescends to utter a single delightfully modulated strain. He often brings his tiresome extravaganzas to a magnificent climax of melody, and just as often concludes an inimitable chant with a most contemptible bathos” (“The Birds of Garden and Orchard” 599).

the musical shuttle" (27). In Persian culture, the nightingale is "the bird of a thousand stories, *hazar dastan*, singing turn by turn, *rad ba rad*, always changing its song. Calling a musician a nightingale is the highest form of praise" (133). Whitman's transcriptions, when I translated them, "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," carried rumors of war in the land of human nightingales:

Out of the Gatling

Fire! Fire! Fire!
Rain down your bombs, great guns!
While we fight, we two estranged.

Two estranged!
Sands blow south, or sands blow north,
Tanks come bright, or tanks roll back,
Whining in lines, mining the line,
While we two stay estranged.

Blow! blow! blow!
Blow up houses along Euphrates's shore;
I aim and I wait to blow you sky high

April 2003

"Mockingbird," of course, captures the bird's virtuosity as a vocal copyist; as a member of the family *mimidae* (which includes catbirds and thrashers), the mockingbird "mocks" or copies not only songs of other species (including non-avian species like insects and amphibians) but also mechanical sounds like slamming doors, ringing telephones or car alarms. A mockingbird's repertoire increases over its lifetime and a typical mockingbird can sing anywhere from 50 to 200 song/sound types. The mockingbird's notoriety may be due more to its ubiquity, loudness and propensity for singing at night, than to its repertoire, which is easily outdone by the Western marsh wren (capable of 210 song variations) and the Brown thrasher (with 1,100-3000 variations, the largest documented song repertoire of any North American bird). The Brown thrasher also is known for its ability to sing paired phrases into the low thousands without repeating a single pair, but its copying is not as various or generous from song to song—the shortness of its phrases and insistent pairing lead to a more mechanical effect.

The common English name for the Northern mockingbird may actually be more accurate than the Latin binomial, *Mimus polyglottos* (Many-tongued mimic), since the deceptive effects of mimicry are clearly not in force (as when praying mantises hide in foliage or nonpoisonous butterflies mimic monarchs' poisonous colors): even an untrained ear can distinguish a mockingbird from the species it is imitating, thanks to "characteristic tonal quality, temporal pattern, or context of use that serves to differentiate it from the model's vocalizations" ("Vocal Copying" 469). According to Peter O'Leary, avid birder, as well as scholar of post-Objectivist poetry, "the mockingbird is trying to attract a mate with the widest variety & most expert reproduction of ambient sound as it can. This is why I call the mockingbird an appropriator. The male

appropriates sounds to make himself seem more attractive" ("Mockingbird & Icon"). *The Birder's Handbook* notes that "selection has favored a large and diverse repertoire in some species.... Evidence from several studies indicates that an expanded repertoire may improve ability to attract a mate, intimidate rivals, and stimulate females" ("Vocal Copying" 469). Or, as Mae West put it, "I like a man with a big...vocabulary" (Eaton). In fact, both sexes of mockingbirds sing (females apparently sing more quietly), but unmated males will sing through the night, especially during the full moon. (M.M. Van de Pitte has discussed gender bias in ornithology, a subject obviously in need of much fuller exploration: see "'The Female is Somewhat Duller': The Construction of the Sexes in Ornithological Literature.")

In any case, the mockingbird I recorded beside a dark stretch of Route 185 between Gila Bend and Ajo, Arizona (the moon was behind clouds) on March 18, 2003 was undoubtedly an unmated male—click on MP3 link for the recording.

Arizona's Mockingbird

you thin wit
 phew
 drive twit oh
 relit lit lit
 trill hick hick hick
 trill spiral
 finch finch finch
 hearit hearit
 flutter spun twit
 chup chup chup chup
 you you
 feel it feel it
 rwitter blup blup blup
 arch hit hit hit
 tizz tizz
 phowee phowee
 tirit howeo tirit howeo
 whipit whipit
 twist twist
 hear it hear it
 flit flit flit flit flit
 ow ow ow twee twee
 hear hear hear hear
 chup twirl it
 phoweoo, filip phoweoo
 twin twin wehew wehew

*Transcribed by JS from a mockingbird
 recorded near midnight on Route 85
 between Gila Bend and Ajo, AZ
 March 18, 2003*

For this essay, I approach the meanings and mechanics of such a transcription indirectly. This is not an essay on the structure of mockingbird song, and on phonetic transcription as a means of access to that structure. The nuts and bolts of such transcription interest me a great deal, but I do not (yet) have access to the tools and knowledge necessary for such a discussion. For starters, it would help to know more of the bird song of Southern Arizona, to be able to identify the various birds “mocked” by this songster. (Finches appear, and my transcription puns on that fact.) I would have to look more closely at David Rothenberg’s fascinating, compositional analysis of forty seconds of mockingbird song, in *Why Birds Sing*, and consider his various use of phonetic, musical and machine-based (sonogram) transcription, as he studies the transition from the Carolina wren’s “Teakettle Teakettle Teakettle” to the ovenbird’s “Teacher Teacher Teacher” in the mockingbird’s linked phrases “*ipuchi ipuchi ipuchi ipu/ chiu chiu chiu.*” I would bring some of the theories mentioned in passing in this essay, on expressivity and symbolism in sound patterns, to bear on my own intuitive transcription. I would probably want to modify some of the claims I make for the mockingbird as a “plunderphonic” sampling artist, bearing in mind Rothenberg’s observation that,

The mockingbird is not a machine spewing back rote memorized ‘packages.’ He may have committed to memory between one hundred and two hundred syllables, but he puts them together a bit differently every time he sings.... What remains most remarkable about the mockingbird’s song is the way the composition almost seems to analyze itself. As it proceeds from *teakettle* and *teacher* to *peow* and *ke chiiiiir*, the mockingbird’s song consists of a reflection of all the bird sounds around and how they resemble one another. (177, 179)

Finally, I would take more time to consider the presence of machinery in the soundscape of my recording, and the mockingbird’s response to the roar of vans trafficking north and south through the night-time borderlands. (One listener even claimed he could hear the Doppler effect, in the mockingbird’s response to the sounds of the passing traffic.) What combustion age “coefficient of weirdness,” I would want to ask, is at work in this duet between Northern mockingbird and Dodge Ram?

Northern mockingbirds sing most of the year, from February to August, and again from late September to early November, when winter territories are being established. The rain which came from the west on the following day makes me wonder if the mockingbird’s role in the O’odham “rainhouse” might have something to do with the timing of its mating songs, around the time of the gentle, wildflower-inducing spring rains. If the ceremony to bring summer rains crucial to planting depends on a good cactus fruiting, then it also depends on the spring rain which, at least in part, must affect the quality of that fruiting. One could think of the spring rains as, in a sense, priming the phenological pumps of the wild desert plants (though no doubt temperature also plays a significant role).

Indeed, about the time of the equinox, some observers have noted an O’odham ceremony, accompanied by singing, performed to ensure a good saguaro harvest (Lumholtz as quoted in Crosswhite 15). The black-feathered mockingbird’s association with the “black drizzle” in what O’odham call the “green month” (*Chegidah Mashad*), promoting wild grasses, flowers and cacti, make it an especially suited messenger for the cactus wine ceremony (as, if we are to follow Underhill, a Running and Seating Speech). This equal but distinct treatment given cultivars and wild species, in the Mock-

ingbird Speech, signals a more complex understanding and practice for the O'odham, in the space between "wild" and "domestic," than the anthropological distinction between "hunter-gatherer" and "agricultural" societies would seem to account for. The nestling of the violent summer storms and floods inside of the gentler spring drizzle, of the human inside the flower world (recalling the Yaqui "Flower World"), of corn inside of cacti, or east inside of west, that is mediated by the Mockingbird Speech, understands the dependence of the domestic on the wild, without assimilating one to the other. (The occasion of this speech—an antiphonal exchange between villages to announce a rain-making ceremony—also marks the ecological codependence of neighboring communities, mutually invested in the health of the commons.) The success of human technology is tied to the well-being of the (wild) earth; this connection, rather than the quaintly romantic notion that the O'odham somehow lived off of cactus fruit, is likely to be a principal meaning of the Mockingbird Speech.

Bahr glosses the mockingbird's part in the speech: "Papagos know the bird as a species with no calls of its own. It merely imitates other birds. Although the speech doesn't say so in many words, a plausible reading of the story is: The people are now drunk and celebrating. The mockingbird hears them and passes the sounds on. Through him the wind hears of the event, and it 'understands and runs'. It is ambiguous whether the bird understood and meant what he said, or simply copied the sounds" (*Rainhouse and Ocean* 35). (Be careful of what you say in the presence of the mockingbird!)⁶

According to Bahr, the mockingbird is a poor translator, nothing but a *transcriber*: "One can learn a speech by simply getting its sounds—by memorizing it (as mocking bird does in one of the speeches given below). One has gotten the sounds, but what about the meaning?" (14). But the centrality of the mockingbird to the speech and the continuing effectiveness of the speech, regardless of whether or not reciters understand every word, makes Bahr's separation of meaning from sound suspect, to say the least. If one purpose of Bahr's work, as Underhill claimed it was the purpose of her work, is to preserve speeches against possible loss (in a time when the continuation of O'odham tradition is threatened) the scenario gets even more complicated.

In a talk for a "Poetics and Politics" seminar co-taught by Ofelia Zepeda and Larry Evers at the University of Arizona in 1992, transcribed and published on the department website, Tohono O'odham poet and ceremonial speaker Danny Lopez reveals just how useful Bahr's work ended up being for him, in a particularly tricky moment:

[T]his book here [*Singing for Power*] has a lot of songs in it.... I don't know if there were any recorders then, but I wonder how this song sounded. I know that today recording is very, very important for the people. I know a lot of people don't like it; sometimes I don't like it for people to stick a tape recorder in my face and say, 'Hey, sing me this song'.... But it is important, because I wish that I could hear lots of tapes today, especially in my area, so we could have this ceremony. That's what I want to do someday is have this ceremony on a small scale in my own community but where are the songs?... I was glad Ofelia gave [Donald Bahr]

⁶ David Rothenberg cites anthropologist H.R. Voth, claiming that for the Hopi, "It was the mockingbird who brought all the languages to different human tribes, saying, 'You shall be a Navajo, you shall be a Hopi, you shall be a Pueblo, you shall be a White Man'" (17).

some tapes, because I was listening to a speech but I couldn't really make it out. So what I did was I turned to a book, that book by Bahr, is it *Rainhouse and Ocean*? They asked me to give this speech at the ceremony in August, and I said, 'Golly'. There were just four days left. I said, 'Gee whiz, you mean I have to do a speech in four days?' They said, 'Well, we couldn't get anybody else, and we invited Harry Rios from Three Points but he doesn't know if he'll be here'. And I said, 'Gee whiz, can somebody help me at the village?' and that guy said, 'Well, we'll ask around and see if anybody knows it'. But...[t]hese guys when they're drunk they say they know this and they know that then all of a sudden nobody knows anything. So it was a good thing I had my book. I went to that page, and I was trying, you know, I began to study it.... I did memorize part of it. The big day came, and they led me out to the circle.... I said I tried to ask all these knowledgeable people and they gave all kinds of excuses. So, I said, along the way I expect I'll have to pull the book out and read the certain parts I don't remember. It changes. It repeats in certain areas, but the directions and the colors they mention are different. The endings change, especially the ending speech. The west was an entirely different ending. So anyway, I started off the speech, and I was coming to the part I didn't know, so I'd stuck the book under my belt and I pulled it out. I already had it marked, and I read the parts I didn't know, you know. I was glad that was written some years ago. Now, they're already talking about having the ceremony again.... But somebody should let me know today, so I could start thinking about it and go someplace and sit under the tree and hear the speech. (Lopez)

We have to ask ourselves what it means to listen for the meaning of a delivered speech memorized from a transcription of a magnetic recording (copy) of another speech learned from a mockingbird who copied it from somewhere else, a speech, furthermore, destined to be copied by yet another mockingbird. Underhill, in a way, caught it best when she referred to the image of the mockingbird's words stretched "like ropes between the mountaintops." The origin and the "rules" of this oratory are no more (nor less) important than the need to communicate the clouds from edge to visible edge of the earth (mountain top to mountain top) in enough time for the corn and beans to go into the ground. Repetition honors the different directions, and colors of directions, but it also sets language reverberating (else, why speak it) in the pattern of interfering sound ripples the mockingbird communicates.

Even if one's hermeneutical ethics bind one to look for the "meaning," one finds it only in the motions set in train by the drinking of wine, this very mockingbird singing in the night, drunk with sound not even its "own."⁷ A translation that verges on transcription will engage this reverberation/repercussion.⁸ The meaning of the Mock-

⁷ As ethnobiologist Gary Nabhan discovered: "I was handed a six-ounce Hormel frankfurter can of *nawait*. I downed most of it in two chugs, but left a little in my mouth to let the taste register. Marquita whispered, 'No, you can't just sip it, you gotta down it all'. A young Papago with waist-length hair and a goatee laughed, telling us, 'You gotta *really* drink, for the rain, you know', and put his index finger up in the air. Not a cloud in sight" (*The Desert Smells Like Rain* 33-34).

⁸ Poet Ronald Johnson might call these sonic ripples—or, more properly, the soundscape's *intersection* with the reverberations of language—a kind of repercussion (see my discussion of Ronald Johnson's "ARK 37, Spire Called Prospero's Songs to Ariel" in *Ronald Johnson: Life and*

ingbird Speech is not separate from that of the “sit and drink” songs, nor from any sound in the environment. The text as a “trot” for memorization and ceremonial performance (which in a sense extends the translation) is one thing—and for this one might argue that something like Bahr’s “literal” version is more serviceable than an opaque rendering—but to translate the poetics of the Mockingbird Speech onto the printed page involves textual attention to the extra-semantic (or “para-linguistic”) elements of the speech. (The “trot” only feeds a whole range of “speech making” poetics—a range whose extent the bulk of this chapter attempts to convey.)

What follows is a preliminary translation of the first (eastern) iteration of the Mockingbird Speech, with a more visually-inflected, concrete version of the western variant. This translation works from the Tohono O’odham text, printed in *Rainhouse and Ocean*, from Bahr’s translation of that text, from the mockingbird transcriptions (printed above) and from my knowledge of the Upper Sonoran desert landscapes. By no means is philological accuracy aimed at; rather, depending on Bahr for that, I have attempted to write lines that transcribe the characteristic melodies (rhythms and sounds) of the mockingbird vocalizations, as well as certain repetitions and prominent sounds (like *ñiok* in the stanza printed above) in the O’odham text. The western variant stanza is composed on a grid of k and g sounds from the O’odham text:

Works). Reuven Tsur’s exploration of the frontier between an acoustic and a speech function in hearing, in his study *What Makes Sound Patterns Expressive?*, also comes to mind.

Mockingbird Speech

you swallowed it

phials
of liquid cloud's
tears, your tears

snot's snorted
back

spies the hill
rainhouse hitch
's hanging

feathered mocker
what's up, 'tsup 'tsup

feathers
greenish feathers

knock knock
bends knees says please
bends please says knees
says sideways steps high

on shine on shine

hear hear hear hear
the wind coming
off the world's edge
shaking up water trees

blows trash at their feet
out out out the breeze

blows back where it's from
desert's wet clean wet

piled white white white
rounds to the big top

dust storms thunder
storms lighting the rain
lights storming the rain

clouds piling
out of wet mountains

moulting white
coughing white
scans a ways to the edge

went to it peered over it
little washes whirling swirling
drawing flowing off

the flood's unstopped
piled packrat's den's
ocotillo sticks sticking
in the arroyo's mouth

so the storm moves
turns home looks back

earth's here shines here
finished earth's wet ground

green stalks gleaming
thick root thick stalk
wide leaf, good silks
good tassels climb out

what we wanted
what we saw, now
what you will see

Western variant:

BLA	CK	DRIZ	ZLE
KIA	KA	KEG	GK
DESERT		STR	ETCHED
TAG		GE	K HIK
DRIZ			ZLED
KA			KA
BACK		WARDS	
KUT		DK	
	FOR		WARDS
	KAT		GT
DES	ERT	DEW	LOOKS
KIA	KA	KEG	GIDK
WET		WITH	GUM
TAG		GE	KO
	WILD	&	GREEN
	KAIK		GE
SEEDS	GREEN		GRASS
GE		PK	GK
GREEN		CACT	US
KE		KAM	GE
GROWS		OUT	FLOW ERS
KO		KO	KUG
DESERTS			DAG
TAG			

I have wanted to highlight some of the more “environmental” elements in the Mockingbird Speech and to suggest that a translator could do worse than begin her work by listening to the mockingbird. (Is this what Lopez means by “go someplace and sit under the tree and hear the speech”?) It is certain that any O’odham speech maker would be familiar with the mockingbird’s speech lessons. Although mockingbirds make themselves heard throughout the southern U.S. (and even as far north as Canada, these days), the lone mockingbird singing in a catclaw acacia through a spring night, on the full moon, will dominate the desert soundscape like nothing else, especially with no foliage to “baffle” the sound.⁹ Wrap the pillow round your head, sleepers!

Underhill certainly confirms that considerations of “weirdness” and magical language are appropriate to the Mockingbird Speech, when she categorizes it with a manner of speaking that “concerned sacred subjects and was often meant to be heard not by an audience, but by the spirits who were thus reminded of their obligations” (*Rainhouse and Ocean* 2). Here, presumably, the audience is (at least partly) the mockingbird and/or rain gods, and we come back to the question of poetry addressed to nonhumans.

Anthropologist Viveiros de Castro develops an “animic” model for consciousness in the essay “Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism” (1998). In animism “the space between nature and society is itself social”—whereas in naturalist ontology ‘nature’ is the unmarked pole, here ‘society’ is the unmarked pole. While in the rational-naturalistic view of things the human and social world is unstable against a backdrop of universal nature, with animism “the problem is how to administer the mixture of humanity and animality constituting animals...the point is to differentiate a ‘nature’ out of the universal sociality” (474).

Specificity of bodies offers difference to a soul categorically identical in all species—the difference, however, is not physiological so much as functional, one might even say ethological: “bundles of affects and sites of perspective, rather than material organisms...dispositions or capacities which render the body of every species unique: what it eats, how it communicates, where it lives, whether it is gregarious or solitary, and so forth...an assemblage of affects or ways of being that constitute a *habitus*” (481, 478). This is why the doctrine of animal clothing is not one of ‘concealing’ essence with appearance; rather, animal masks and clothing *are* bodies, sets of powers “akin to diving equipment, or space suits, and not carnival masks” (482). To don animal clothing—or, perhaps, to speak animal language—is to “activate the powers of a different body.” Thus, “animals see in the *same* way as we do *different* things because their bodies are different from ours,” though what they see is *our* nature, since “bodies are the way in which alterity is apprehended as such.... ‘Nature’ is the viewpoint which the subject takes of other body-affects; if Culture is the Subject’s nature, then *Nature is the form of the Other as body*” (478). To become animal is to see as animals, to see “*human nature*.”

One end result of Viveiros de Castro’s theorizing of Amerindian perspectivism is his useful coinage, “multinaturalism”:

⁹ “Birds, hummingbirds even, nest in the cactus scrub; woodpeckers befriend the demoniac yuccas; out of the stark, treeless waste rings the music of the night-singing mockingbird” (Austin, *The Land of Little Rain* 9).

(Multi)cultural relativism supposes a diversity of subjective and partial representations, each striving to grasp an external and unified nature, which remains perfectly indifferent to those representations. Amerindian thought proposes the opposite: a representational or phenomenological unity which is purely pronominal or deictic, indifferently applied to a radically objective diversity. One single 'culture', multiple 'natures'—perspectivism is multinaturalist, for a perspective is not a representation.... If Western multiculturalism is relativism as public policy, then Amerindian perspectivist shamanism is multinaturalism as cosmic politics. (478, 472)

If we agree with Viveiros de Castro's corollary thesis that "*Supernature is the form of the Other as Subject*," implying an objectification of the human I as a 'you' for this Other," then "weirdness" is the objectification of the human I in the body of language (or its plastic and acoustic dimensions). There is a danger in this desublimation (Robert Smithson might have called it "de-idealization") into a weird body:

These encounters can be lethal for the interlocutor who, overpowered by the non-human subjectivity, passes over to its side, transforming himself into a being of the same species as the speaker: dead, spirit or animal.... Only shamans, multinatural beings by definition and office, are always capable of transiting the various perspectives, calling and being called 'you' by the animal subjectivities and spirits without losing their condition as human subject. (483)

Ritual and "form" are obviously ways of managing these various transits for those who lack the "office" of shaman. Malinowski would understand the address, to mockingbird/rain gods, by considering the "magical" quality of its words as "an attribute of the relation between man and thing [here, a bird]." Ideas from cognitive science, systems theory, linguistics and bioacoustics can demystify this magic, or at least show how the "relation between man and thing" is both a generalization of more particular relations (between man and bird, woman and bird, man and woman, between humans of different cultures, etc.) and a particular part of a larger, ecological network of relations—less made up of "things" than of differential, trophic states.

Lacking such theories, Malinowski worked with a "functional" anthropology and pragmatic philosophy of meaning—asserting that "the main function of language is not to express thought, not to duplicate mental processes, but rather to play an active pragmatic part in human behavior.... Speech here is equivalent to gesture and motion.... [I]t compels us...to correlate the study of language with that of other activities, to interpret the meaning of each utterance within its actual context.... To us, the real linguistic fact is the full utterance within its context of situation" (*The Language of Magic and Gardening* 7-10). At one point, along with a "text" that transcribes an informant's explanation of the growth of the taro plant (yam), Malinowski provides a diagram, noting that, "This text is a good example of how necessary it is to reproduce the context of gesture as well as the full context of the situation. Half the meaning of each sentence was conveyed by pointing to different parts of the truncated root and leaves" (105). Malinowski's "Commentaries" would become the model for the recuperation of ethnographic translations in the "ethnopoetic" anthologies edited by Jerome Rothenberg, especially *Technicians of the Sacred* and *Shaking the Pumpkin*.

Malinowski's coinage, "coefficient of weirdness," appealed to Rothenberg and others working in "ethnopoetics" and it continues to be useful here. While studies of what Hinton, Nichols and Ohala call "expressive," "imitative" and "synesthetic" sound symbolism certainly may illuminate the obtrusion of environmental "weirdness" into the speech, their category of "conventional" sound symbolism ("the analogical association of certain phonemes and clusters with certain meanings; e.g. the 'gl' of glitter, glisten, glow, glimmer") keeps certain interesting possibilities in play. As Maurice Bloomfield put it:

Every word, in so far as it is semantically expressive, may establish, by haphazard favoritism, a union between its meaning and any of its sounds, and then send forth this sound (or sounds) upon predatory expeditions into domains where the sound is at first a stranger and parasite. A slight emphasis punctures the placid function of a certain sound-element, and the ripple extends, no-one can say how far....

The signification of any word is arbitrarily attached to some sound-element contained in it, and then cogeneric names are created by means of this infused, or we might say, irradiated, or inspired element. (qtd. in *Sound Symbolism* 5)

The reader will recognize here a proto-expression of semantic destabilizations familiar to postmodern literature (Serres's sonic "parasites," Burroughs's "virus," Deleuze and Guattari's "refrain" come to mind), but infected with the "predatory" scene of a Victorian Darwinism. Even "conventional" associations might express what Lakoff and Johnson call "cognitive blends." What the Malinowskian "primitive" hears as the "coeval" association between *vatu*, 'coral boulder', *tuvi*, 'to foment', *vituvatu*, 'to put together', and *vitawo*, to 'step', 'erect', the modern ear may hear as accidental, cross-semantic contamination. Such an ear for the arbitrary will temper an organic reading of the Tohono O'otham "su : g," mockingbird, as a blend of "shuhthk," full, and "u'uwhig," bird.

Postcolonial and ecological commentaries notwithstanding, a translator of the Mockingbird Speech would do well to keep open the horizon of "aesthetic function" (what the Russian formalists called *ostranenie* or estrangement), as a "formal" dimension in its own right, where the sonic transactions keep the text open to a certain accidental quality, the possibility, even, of nonsense. The invocation of the mockingbird—moving up and down, back and forth, endlessly talking—points to a medium less organically and sociologically constrained.

How does the mockingbird, that has no speech of its "own," "express" itself? By copying or, as the animist might say, clothing itself in the widest possible repertoire of sounds? Something else is happening here besides "symbol"-making—the bird is a combinatorial demon. A sense of "speech" lies not in the fact but the how of appropriation, how the calls lead into and unfold from one another, the nearly iconic overlapping rhythms, tempos and pitch lines, shifting gears partway up melodies—what one might call (in reference to Canadian audio collagist John Oswald) the drunken "plunderphonics" of the bird. The mockingbird does not exactly "talk" (or vocalize like a crow or parrot); it "names"/sings along with other birds, drunk enough to transfer bird qualities to inorganic sounds—to turn everything the mockingbird sings into bird,

and point bird into every sound. There's a descriptive aspect to the naming. Though one can probably read into the mockingbird's copying most of what our linguists call sound symbolism (expression, imitation, synesthesia), what's valued is its reverberating/repercussive speech or refrain (name and song in one), its uninhibited role as cosmological politician or "multinaturalist," cross-dressing the body sonic.

The (human) Mockingbird Speech, in this light, also has a double aspect, speech and refrain, public speech—but also address to the spirits in their mockingbird talk. The point being that the mockingbird itself doesn't have to understand the message it repeats, flips over, copies and maps onto the digital transcription of code. The message *is* the medium.

This is not to say that translation of the mockingbird's speech is the same as translating the O'odham Mockingbird Speech. Rather, that the translator stands in relation to the Mockingbird Speech as a mockingbird to humans. A divine speech intended for divine ears, the text puts its speakers and listeners in the object (non-human or bird's) position—in essence asking listeners to exchange positions with the bird. From this perspective, the words are heard doubly, as the body of another's culture (sound before meaning; "nature" as "the form of the Other as body") that can only be copied, and as spiritual language (meaning before sound; "supernature" as "the form of the Other as subject") that cannot be copied. A transcription treating the sounds of the Tohono O'odham speech the way the mockingbird treats sounds might have an interpretive, if not a healing, role to play here.

In his personal, cultural and environmental exploration of connections between his desert homeland in Southern Arizona and the homelands of his ancestors in the Middle East, *Arab/American: Landscape, Culture, and Cuisine in Two Great Deserts*, Gary Paul Nabhan notes that, "For too long we have pretended that confronting racism and social injustice is an altogether different issue from safeguarding land rights, practicing multigenerational land stewardship, and protecting cultural and biological diversity" (*Arab/American* 128). As an acute instance of what such compartmentalized thinking can lead to, Nabhan points to the fate of the Hia c-ed O'odham:

who used to have to drive past a sign in a national park in southern Arizona that warned tourists to 'Watch Out for Cattle, Deer, and Indians.' They were displaced from living near one of their sacred sites by preservationists who did not understand that the wildlife attracted to their desert oasis were lured there by the very habitats the O'odham themselves had stewarded for centuries.

Nabhan goes on to draw connections between the displacement of the O'odham and the displacement of indigenous peoples around the world, especially of "native hunters, herders, and peasant farmers of desert landscapes on every continent," and he asks whether "the media or we ever use this concept as a lens to see and understand what is happening in Palestine, Iraq, Israel, Lebanon, and Afghanistan? What if we begin to view the crises in the Middle East not merely as economic and political struggles, but as ecological, ethical, and cultural ones as well?" (129). David Rothenberg notes how the greatest Persian musicians "often have the word *bolbol* added to their names as an ultimate honor. In less fundamentalist days, when music was not chastised or banned, bird song was considered a form of *zikr*, or remembrance of God.... [T]he *bolbol* is the master bird who never repeats himself, always coming up with new names

for God" (134). (Or, according to the Hopi, who gives language to all the tribes.) Listen to this translation of Mahmoud Darwish-*bolbol* singing of his place:

I belong there.... I have a wave snatched by waterbirds, a panorama of my
own.
I have a saturated meadow. In the deep horizon of my word, I have a moon, a
bird's sustenance, and an immortal olive tree....
I have learned and dismantled all the words in order to draw from them a single
word: *Home*.

Transcription is distrustful of translation. It operates a dialectics of the natural and the supernatural, skipping over the commonplace of the human. It does not confront injustice with what we supposedly hold in common, but attunes listeners to "radically objective diversity." (Or to homogeneity, if we choose to plunder the daily chatter of our mass media environment—as in Kenneth Goldsmith's weather report transcriptions.) It holds out a formal kind of becoming-animal, one that guarantees our own dispossession in what would otherwise be an act of dispossessing others. We are dispossessed into "nonsense" and "weirdness"—this I embodied in the transcription. Rather than the skin-deep palaver of multiculturalism, transcription listens for multi-natural bodies, listens to the bird in the olive tree, the mockingbird listening to the O'odham person listening to the mockingbird listening to the transcription. Transcription is thus transcribed, listened to.

Perhaps ecology is too human a science to be arbiter here, or perhaps ecology can help substitute for "weirdness" an appropriate relation, with other species, with other humans, in these places we share. For transcription cannot but plunder, shade off into something else, an improvisation. Ecology then is the outer limit of transcription, its coefficient of intelligibility. A care and ethics of relation interpose themselves between the ethnos and the plunder. And that would mean another essay. Another kind of (eco) plunderphonics. Ecopoetics brings to a close my exploration of the extent to which sonic plunder in itself can contribute to—at least the beginning of—something like right relations.

It is clear that the music lessons of the Northern mockingbird might, in the end, have to do not only with relations between neighboring O'odham villages, but with those between O'odham and Euro Americans, as well as with those between North Americans and peoples of the Middle East. And that I am now implicated in all of this. The dawn serenade at the start of my journey, and the midnight concert on an Arizona roadside, might not have been detours on the path to some needed desert balm, but the balm itself:

Black drizzle
Desert stretched
Drizzled
Backwards
Forwards
Desert dew looks
Wet with gum
Wild & green
Seeds green grass

Green cactus sprouts
Grows out flowers
Deserts

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