CHAPTER THREE

THE CREATURELY VOICE

ONE OF THE MORE COMPELLING cult figures circulating in the popular imaginary at present has been described as "the loneliest whale in the world." This singular cetacean, of unidentified species, is so called because his call is registered at the unusual frequency of 52 Hz, which is much higher than that of all other types in this species. (We know the gender of this whale because only males make the distinct calling sound, presumably for amorous purposes, although probably for other social reasons as well.) Scientists have tracked this mournful creature for several years, intrigued by the melancholy songs that go unanswered. From a whimsical perspective, this whale is an outsider artist, offering personalized songs to the subaquatic world, only to be snubbed by the more "vocal" members of the whale community. Songs of the humpback, for instance, can "sweep across the Pacific in just a few years," as biologists from the University of Queensland explain. "In any given year, all the males in a population sing the same song, but the songs change from year to year. The changes are more than incremental; they represent whole new repertoires." Which is to say, "the level and rate of change is unparalleled in any other nonhuman animal and thus involves *culturally driven* change at a vast scale" (Keim, "Humpback Whale Songs That Swept the Pacific"; my emphasis). As

a consequence, we may technically be able to assemble a whale hit parade; and indeed, marine scientists are presumably engaged in doing exactly that, albeit under a different name or metaphor.

Lonely whales notwithstanding, the larger and more sonically expressive cetaceans could arguably be considered the first instance of global communication, many millions of years ago, since their calls could travel astonishing distances—up to five hundred miles underwater—long before our machines only recently created significant (and today inescapable) noise pollution. These days, whales have been forced into relatively tiny sonic boxes because of the din created by ship engines and various audio probings of the marine environment, by military and industry alike.[1] As Christopher Clark, a scientist of bioacoustics at Cornell University, suggests, this sudden assault and subsequent diminishment of the whale's soundscape must be extremely traumatic for the animal, whose overall *Umwelt* (environment) has shrunk from large swathes of the watery planet to barely a mile or so in any given direction.[2] The noisier the ocean becomes, thanks to the general dissonance of the Anthropocene,[3] the lonelier whales are likely to become, even if they sing in the frequency of the cetacean mainstream.

Can we really, however, speak of "singing" in such cases? Is this not a romantic projection, an unscientific anthropomorphism, or an instance of the pathetic fallacy? (As I write, scientists are reporting that gorillas sing, hum, and compose "little food songs" while they eat.)[4] Many would argue that simply using the organ of vocalization does not equate to singing, in the sense we apply to ourselves, since the operation, when attempted by a nonhuman, lacks the element of self-reflection necessary for true expression, for artistry. Conversely, others have argued that humans were likely taught to sing by other creatures, especially the birds.[5] According to this view, our songs are all the poorer for being filtered through human self-consciousness, thus diluting the purity of an unalienated ecological harmony. (Philip

Brophy, for instance, believes that "the voice is corrupted by being human.")[6] These contrasting perspectives on the question of the interspecies voice have a long and complex history, crisscrossing epochs as well as those divergent orientations to the natural world crudely divided into "East" and "West."[7] Some, such as Aristotle in ancient times and the third Earl of Shaftesbury in early modernity, argued that animals have voice but not speech.[8] Others, such as Descartes, would deny voice to nonhumans altogether, arguing instead that they merely emit sounds, as a bicycle horn might if stepped on.

Who or what can rightly claim to have a voice? Is it a property or capacity that belongs to a subject, even a nonhuman subject? Or might "the voice" be located somewhere between the sonic shadows of the world and the ear of the listener? Might we even consider voice to include nonsubjective expression of the elements themselves? Might the world itself, whatever such a grand phrase might denote, have a *vox mundi*—a voice of the planet? Such questions deserve long and careful consideration. But in this current context, we shall focus on the historically contested existence of a *creaturely* voice—one that describes a plurality of vocal expressions, distributed among those species blessed with the capacity to make sounds with their bodies. As Tobias Menely explains in *The Animal Claim*, the creaturely voice, like the human one, forms a vector of connection or *sympathy* and is thus suspended between the sound-producing subject and the auditory other.[9] It is the creaturely voice that insists that "we already inhabit a world in which we are subject to the claims of other expressive creatures" (3). By way of such incarnations of "the voice of nature" we hear, and thus at some level understand, our essential "creaturely entanglement" with other animals. This perspective pushes Dolar's statement that "the voice is the element which ties the subject and the Other together, without belonging to either" (103) beyond the inhuman discourse of Lacanian theory (which ultimately and rather ironically perpetuates anthropocentric narcissism) to include the non-

human experience of the animal realm. Menely writes that, for those sympathetically attuned to the creaturely voice, "community begins in, and remains symbolically organized around, a communicativity that is passionate before it is rational, passive before it is willed. The initial condition of social identity is a recognition of *creaturely substitutability*" (17; my emphasis). The claim that I would like to unpack, nestled within the very term "creaturely voice," is that many animals have the capacity for voice, which is not merely an evolutionary expedience to find mates, scare enemies, or communicate food sources but is also a sonic exploration of ontological conditions. It is a way of testing the world and one's location, role, and value in it. In other words, monkeys, birds, whales, and so on test their own existence and relationship with the world through vocalizations, sometimes in similar ways to ours, employing methods that are at once phatic, banal, and miraculous. They are the nonsymbolic equivalents of "I'm here." "Where are you?" "Are you really there?" "Who are you?" "*Fort-da*." "Marco." "Polo."[10] These are the unspoken—and yet at least partially communicated—messages woven into the ever-vanishing yet always returning medium of the voice.

Returning to marine mammals, the *Smithsonian* magazine recently uncovered a case in which a beluga whale, trained by the Navy in the 1980s and given the name Noc, was not only reported to have attempted to communicate directly with its human handlers, in imitation of speech, but recorded in its attempt. The thirty-second audio clip, if authentic, is quite astonishing and sounds "less like a person talking than a delirious drunk humming an atonal tune through a tissue-covered comb."[11] One wonders if these sounds were produced as greeting, questioning, playful mocking, or sincere protest, or some combination thereof (or indeed something else altogether). As the magazine article notes, this remarkable artifact originally appeared "as a mere supplement" to a research paper titled "Spontaneous Human Speech Mimicry by a Cetacean," by Sam Ridgway (co-founder of the

Navy Marine Mammal Program). Its implications are enormous, however, for the ongoing discussions and debates around vocal mimesis between different creatures, and both the limits and possibilities of interspecies "communication" (or at least attempts at such).

For Darwin, "language owes its origin to the imitation and modification, aided by signs and gestures, of various natural sounds, the voices of other animals, and man's own instinctive cries." Indeed, "when we treat of sexual selection we shall see that primeval man, or rather some early progenitor of man, probably used his voice largely, as does one of the gibbon-apes of the present day, in producing true musical cadences, that is, in singing. . . . The imitation by articulate sounds of musical cries might have given rise to words expressive of various complex emotions" (qtd. in Tomlinson, *A Million Years of Music*, 113). When it comes to our understanding of what it means to "sing," musicologist and long-view historian Gary Tomlinson warns us against what he calls "a feel-good anthropomorphism by which human capacities are extended willy-nilly beyond humans" (117). Instead Tomlinson advocates for a "careful dismantling and scrutiny of the differing notions of 'song' that pertain," lest we indulge in the folly of hearing the "mysteries of the phylogeny of acoustic information transmission" (117) as something shared and legible (hence his disdain for Darwin's faith in the "true musical cadences" of gibbons). Tomlinson's meticulous history of "a million years of music" relies on the sophisticated insights of recent archaeology and evolutionary biology to argue for human exceptionalism when it comes to the emergence of the specifically human voice and its allegedly unique capacity for "musicking." By his account (which I am certainly unqualified to dispute on technical or scientific grounds), the human voice emerged from a singular and complex matrix of factors, which he calls "the negotiated voicescape." Tomlinson's argument is difficult to distill, given all the moving parts, but at one point he summarizes his approach by asserting: "Ancient vocal messages entered into cultural feedback

loops of technology; feedback effects moved along new channels and recast the niche in new ways; constraints on innate vocalization were weakened; adaptive advantages of communicative flexibility were redoubled; and acoustical and cognitive features of vocalization came under pressure to create more effective communication" (128).

For Tomlinson, there was no quantum leap from grunting to singing and speaking, but instead a slow and staggered series of progressions from our early hominid evolutionary forebears to our near ancestors: a complex interplay between organism and environment, nature and culture, especially nurtured in the "taskscapes" of protohumans (which itself involved the necessary prelinguistic bridge of protodiscourse—vocal gestures and body language that he depicts as more than animal but as yet less than human). From this perspective, only humans—and the more hirsute neighbors on our family tree—exhibit the reflexive "theory of mind" that is necessary for true communication, which is in turn the foundation for the invention of music (vocal, instrumental, and rhythmic).[12] And yet Noc, the beluga whale, could only mimic human speech if there is a strong sense of self-awareness, together with a cognitive understanding of the ontological gulf between him and his handlers. The *Smithsonian* article on Noc, the "talking" beluga whale, quotes Lori Marino, from the psychology department at Emory University, who specializes in cetacean intelligence and brain evolution: "Vocal imitation, vocal learning, is a very sophisticated cognitive process. . . . For an animal to imitate another species takes a level of self-awareness, a level of understanding of their body and your body and the acoustics of it. Manipulating one's vocal tract to produce a desired effect is very, very sophisticated." To make such a point is not to flatten difference, for the brains/minds of cetaceans are indeed very different from ours. But there is certainly a keen intelligence behind the eyes of the animal (given how "cultural" and social whales are now known to be). What insight about cross-species sympathy or quasi communication is lost, then, if we in-

sist that humans are the *only* animal that can "sing" rather than merely produce an acoustic signal? Is a metaphysics of human exceptionalism being perhaps even unconsciously smuggled into rigorous scientific accounts of the long (pre)historical emergence of vocal musicking? Is it possible to acknowledge that humans are the only animal we know that has fashioned a flute from organic materials and learned to play a melody upon it, while appreciating that dogs are now pounding on their domestic pianos and howling in increasingly uncanny mimetic expression? Might some overlap occur that would shed light on these evolutions, at once different, parallel, and intertwined, involving some kind of cross-species call-and-response?

Deleuze believes that the barking of a dog is "the most stupid cry ever . . . the shame of the animal kingdom" (*L'abécédaire*), and few would deny how irritating it can be; this insistent clamor that often sounds like a failed attempt to communicate with us, either in protest or pleading, and becomes all the more intense in the animal's frustration at not being understood or responded to. And yet the exasperation that leads Deleuze to describe the canine bark as "stupid" is not far from saying the same of the shrieking baby. It is recognition of the (proto?)subjectivity ingrained in the sound that makes it "bête," since we would be far less willing to describe a car alarm as "stupid" and thus imply blame or reasons for shame. By the same token, we must be careful not to simply reinvent a naive metaphysics of presence for the animal kingdom—the kind of thinking so deftly deconstructed by Derrida, in which the voice is traditionally understood to be the ur-sign of the facticity and singularity of (this or that) being. What we symptomatically describe in the transcendent singular—"*the* voice"—is in fact too slippery and complex to be the foundation of logocentric authority (which is to say, the sovereign decanting of incantations from the larynx into the book, via the ink pot). Not *the* voice, then, but a global choir of interwoven *voices*, with no neo-Platonic sonic model. Derrida's late work (*The Animal That Therefore*

I Am, as well as *The Beast and the Sovereign*, among others) exposes Western culture's blinkered thinking about creatures other than ourselves by coining a new term, *animot* (a hybrid of *animal* [*animal*] and *mot* [word], aurally implying an appreciation of the plural nature of, well, *nature*). We might do something similar here and coin a punning phrase: *voix-la* (a quasi-deictic term that underscores the always provisional "here it is" aspect of the voice). Now you hear it, now you don't. You can never be sure of the true source, and you can be never sure of what it signifies, even as you may feel you understand the signal within the noise. (As Dolar and others have suggested, there is something acousmatic about *all* voices.) Indeed, the voice (or rather, *voices*) complicate the cybernetic distinction between signal and noise, going beyond diagrammable sender/receiver models of communication and into more obscure modes of existential exchange (or a mutual refusal to exchange). The medium is absolutely the message when it comes to asymbolic forms of sympathy.

Take, for instance, the parrot or cockatoo. We humans have been fascinated by these birds, largely because of their perceived organic capacity to "record" our own voices and throw them back at us, like trickster ventriloquists, long before the invention of the phonograph. Certainly this can create an uncanny effect in the human listener: hearing our own voice echoed back from the larynx of a creature so different from ourselves—a creature that may or may not have its own mind or soul. Historically speaking, many people who have had their figurative feathers ruffled by the impertinence of parrots deflected the discomfort they felt upon hearing their own words screeched back at them, either through laughter or with dismissive reference to the rather dumb mechanics of mimesis. Parrots are like children, they would claim, squawking back syllables they do not comprehend. One might as well yell into a cave, they might further opine, and be astonished that the words return: "Such a phenomenon is simply nature in action—one physics, the other biology."

But what if a mimetic screech *is* a type of speech rather than just a sonic reflex? (And here we are indeed slipping from voice to speech, from sonic event to vocal expression.) The Marco/Polo dynamic often found between beings may indeed be a kind of worlding refrain—a transductive reconnaissance mission—that brings a relationship into being and thus counts as a type of ontological experimentation (which in turn signifies the presence of a monad worthy of respect). Consider how the child or the lover playfully imitates the speech of the other. In doing so, she asserts her own identity while also putting such an identity under erasure. Many animals (including humans) may thus be creatures who continue to flesh themselves out in(to) the world, long after the first fall into "identity" (or at least a sense of self) through vocal back-and-forths with others—and with the environment. We might consider this process as something akin to an acoustic version of an ongoing mirror stage, experienced with and through contingent yet essential avatars of alterity, even for animals that "fail" the so-called mirror test (with all its anthropocentric assumptions): "Here I am, where I am not, where you are . . . not?"

Deleuze and Guattari call such mimetic exchanges between beings a "refrain": a mode of expression that draws a territory (in some sense always virtual). Birdsongs, according to this concept, create a refrain that in turn generates a territory through the act of sonically diagramming it. This operation is not limited to the natural world, however, since we may say the same about television sets or saxophones: "We call a refrain any aggregate of matters of expression that draws a territory and develops into territorial motifs and landscapes (there are optical, gestural, motors, etc., refrains)" (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 323). Thus, the refrain "may assume other functions [than boundary marking], amorous, professional or social, liturgical or cosmic: it always carries the earth with it" (312). Moreover, in a striking observation that would appall many art historians, Deleuze and Guattari write: "Not only does art not wait for human beings to begin, but we may ask if art ever

appears among human beings, except under artificial and belated conditions" (320). (I myself am tempted to simply replace the word "art" here with "voice.")[13]

In order to get a better grasp on the concept of creaturely voice and its nonhumanist import, let us look briefly at two viral videos, both found on the popular video-sharing site YouTube. The first is called "A Parrot Who Has Seen a Porn Movie!" and features a pet lovebird who has clearly been in the room on more than one occasion while its owner was watching X-rated material.[14] The instant mirth and/or discomfort that this clip produces is a function of human (mis)recognition. (And it is precisely this amusing discomfort that made the video such a viral hit, as we tend to find the frisson of "affective dissonance" addictive in its disorienting force.) The chances are high, in fact, that this clip is faked—there is something too perfect about the audio, suggesting overdubbing. Nevertheless, the visuals of the parrot matched with the audio track of exaggerated orgasms obliges us to endure the semiotic violence of self-recontextualization. Salacious sounds—which by all rights should be coming out of our aroused selves or an enthusiastic lover—are being "rebroadcast" back to us by an entity that has no sense of irony or decorum. It is literally obscene. It is as if the world were engaged in objective parody of the planet's most arrogant animal, revealing one of our most sacred activities ("making love") to be little more than a kind of crude ventriloquial trick. Seeing orgasmic pleasure unconsciously simulated in this way reminds us of the porn star, who—when viewed through the un-Vaselined lens—is little more than a caricatured reflection of our own erotic desires. The creaturely voice that is already found in the overly exuberant porn star (or woefully inadequate orgasm-faker) becomes all the more insulting (and/or amusing) when made explicit, as it were, in the guise of a small bird. This parrot is not deliberately lampooning us, as a college roommate might do, trying to shame his co-tenant for the latter's active sex life by imitating the beastly noises it creates on the other side of the wall. And yet the refrain created by the

bird's mimetic tendencies means that we are lampooned nevertheless. There is no escaping or denying the parodic power of the animal, no matter how mediated or manipulated.

Our second example, titled "Peaches, the Cockatoo, Mimicking a Couple Arguing," is certainly not faked and—as the title suggests—concerns a pet bird that was given to a new couple after a bitter divorce obliged it to find a new home. The details of the break-up remain obscure to the second owners. However, the overwhelmingly negative affective climate of the life that led up to this separation has been preserved in the (probably traumatized) mind of the bird. In short, this cockatoo reenacts the tone, pitch, and vehemence of the arguments that it was obliged to witness in its previous life.[15] While only some of the "words" the cockatoo screeches are clear enough to be understood ("Shut the fuck up! . . . for God's sake!"), the emotions that initially launched them are obvious to all within hearing distance. Curse words pour out of the poor bird, in the tenor of an embittered middle-aged person filled to the brim with resentment.[16] The cockatoo even bobs its head, and spreads its wings, in imitation of the angry body language of a spouse scorned, spurned, or otherwise so aggrieved that he or she can only incessantly shriek at the person who made him or her so miserable. The viewer is caught off-guard by this virtuoso performance, in which there is no room for artistic "interpretation," only another rebroadcasting of this (violent, domestic) refrain. Once again, a lurching oscillation between laughter and discomfort is the human response to the aural portrait of "humanity" exposed in this voice—somehow both acousmatic and not. We do not see "the source" of this voice, and yet we can imagine the scene and its protagonists, vividly. And yet the voice is also the bird's voice, whom we *can* see. Whose voice is this, then? As Dolar claims, it belongs to neither subject nor object but is suspended between.

Whether we call this modest but highly charged sonic event an instance of the refrain, the aural *punctum*, the voice of nature, the

voix-là, or the ecological voice, it creates a troubling frisson in the viewer because it deconstructs the cherished metaphysics of (humanist) presence, far more economically and effectively than Derrida does in his writings. This parrot and this cockatoo are "trapped" in their own mimetic inhibitors, held captive by the seduction of the sound that reterritorialized their bodies, organs, instincts. But such a process only serves to strongly imply that we ourselves are similarly trapped when we are in the ecstatic, agonistic throes of *jouissance* or fury.[17] The creaturely voice democratizes the ontological condition of all beings, slicing through the pretentions of human culture (*logos*) to be the exception that matters when it comes to the expression of suffering (or of pleasure, which as we know can sound very similar).[18]

As a final example, consider one famous instance of simulated human suffering, "devolving" into a creaturely register: namely, the old literature professor, Dr. Immanuel Rath, who experiences a nervous breakdown when he succumbs to intense jealousy and a broken heart, at the climax of Josef von Sternberg's classic film *The Blue Angel* (1930).[19] Just as the full weight of his rejection, at the hands of Lola Lola (Marlene Dietrich), is being registered in his psyche, the professor—who has quit teaching to follow his beloved in the cabaret world—is ushered out onto the theatrical stage, dressed as a clown. The audience wait in skeptical anticipation of an amusing performance, but the haunted ex-professor can only unleash a torrent of repressed anguish at his broken heart and his humiliation at the hands of the vulgar mob. The horrible sound he releases, silencing the crowd, is part spurned lover, part rooster, and wholly abject. (This sound would truly be one of the worst ringtones imaginable.) The professor seems to lose almost all of his humanity, once verifiable in his composed and authoritative teaching voice but now some kind of demonic bird, screeching in misery, fury, and defeat.[20] As this seemingly mindless force of vengeance tries to strangle his romantic obsession backstage, and as he continues to struggle against those who restrain him, the ex-

professor has become creaturely: a supposedly subhuman status signified more by his inhuman voice than by anything else.

And yet, as we have seen, the creaturely voice of an actual cockatoo can be mimicking the animalistic affect of a human being. There is no simple hierarchy here, where the human occasionally—in times of great distress—finds himself reduced to being "an animal." The creaturely voice can be sweet, like the nightingale. Or it can be harsh, like the traumatized cockatoo or the green-eyed professor-clown. As such, it is the actual manifestation of what some heretical scholastic philosophers called "the univocity of being" ("univocity" describing the shared, immanent ontology of all existents, so that Being is "sung" through all beings equally and in a single—yet distributed—voice).[21] We might call this the *vox mundi*—the voice of the world—anticipating an intimate link between the voices of animals and those of humans that cannot be reduced to a concept such as "communication" but nevertheless impacts and influences all those within hearing distance. (That is, unless one happens to be a whale, singing at 52 Hz. In which case, we are likely to keep singing into the inky darkness, without any reply whatsoever.)

CHAPTER FOUR

THE ECOLOGICAL VOICE (*VOX MUNDI*)

"You are lisssssstening to Los Angeles."
Soul Coughing, "Screenwriter's Blues"

LISTENING INTENTLY to the sounds of "nature," or indeed the city, in Pierre Schaeffer's sense of the "acousmatic," is a way of attuning ourselves to a more radical alterity than the gender distinction within our own species. Schaeffer borrows this term in order to encourage a new type of relationship to the ear, whereby "we listen to the sonorous forms, without any aim other than that of hearing them better, in order to be able to describe them through an analysis of the content of our perceptions" ("Acousmatics," 78). Acousmatic listening, in short, "brings the sonorous object to the fore as a perception worthy of being observed for itself" (78). (Here we could also cite the futurist Luigi Russolo, who stated in 1913 that "our ear is not satisfied and calls for ever greater acoustical emotions"; and so, "let us cross a large modern capital with our ears more sensitive than our eyes" ["The Art of Noises," 11–12].) Attending to the environment is a highly ambiguous experience when ecology and industry are so intertwined. The temptation might be to escape all human-made sounds, in order to hear the increasingly feeble voice of Mother Nature herself, drowned out—like the call of the whales—by electromagnetic frequencies and heavy machinery. Indeed, there is a tendency in both the journalistic and scientific vernacular to ascribe

a voice to the material world itself. One typical example comes from an article found on a popular meteorology website that asserts: "The Earth sings every day, with an electric chorus. With the right tuning, radios can eavesdrop on this sizzling symphony of crackles, pops and whistles—the melody of millions of lightning bolts. A listener in New Zealand can even hear a volcano in Alaska erupt, a new study reports."[1] A more scientifically focused instance of "attending" to the voice of nature has been critically examined by Margret Grebowicz, who writes of the Extreme Ice Survey project, sponsored by The WILD Foundation: "a long term photography project that merges art and science to give a 'visual voice' to the planet's changing ecosystems'" ("Glacial Time and Lonely Crowds," 1). This environmental initiative records the visible sources of the creaking and groaning of melting ice caps and glaciers, which are then presented to the world as "a voice for landscapes that would have no voice unless we humans give them one." The well-meaning but rather paternalistic rhetoric of "giving voices" to those who cannot represent themselves (traditionally children, women, the poor, the colonized, the disabled, animals, and other figures of marginalization[2]) is thus extended to inanimate natural objects such as glaciers and forests. It is certainly necessary to complicate and critique people or projects who seek to give voice to representatives of "nature" in order to advocate in the interests of preservation, restoration, and so forth (as Grebowicz does so deftly in the case of the Extreme Ice Survey project[3]). And yet there is something to be said for entertaining the *possibility* of a nonmetaphoric ecological voice—the *vox mundi*—at least in terms of a potentially productive thought experiment in this age of the Anthropocene. But this immediately leads to a difficult question: at what point does voice become merely sound (according to the traditional metaphysical presumption that voice = sound + soul)? Conversely, and more importantly, at what point does sound become voice (beyond lazy, romantic conflations or projections)?

To help address these questions, let us turn to a canonical ecological text, Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, especially the section simply called "Sounds." Here, Thoreau makes a rather curious universalizing sonic claim, namely, that "all sound heard at the greatest possible distance produces one and the same effect, a vibration of the universal lyre" (110). The occasion for such an observation in this case is the sound of church bells, which on Sundays blessed with favorable winds can be heard from at least four different villages (Lincoln, Acton, Bedford, Concord): "a faint, sweet, and, as it were, natural melody, worth importing into the wilderness" (109–110). The distant peal of church bells, for the poetic hermit, does not represent culture so much as an organic human integration with the environment, so that "at a sufficient distance over the woods this sound acquires a certain vibratory hum, as if the pine needles in the horizon were the strings of a harp which it swept" (110). Thus, the echo, he writes, "is, to some extent, an original sound, and therein is the magic and charm of it. It is not merely a repetition of what was worth repeating in the bell, but partly the voice of the wood."[4] Thoreau is describing a polyphonic refrain between bronze and timber, a harmonic duet that dissolves the traditional boundary markers between human artifice and nature.[5]

At one point, Thoreau compares the singing of passing minstrels—of which apparently there were several back then in bucolic New England—and the lowing of a cow, noting "they were at length one articulation of Nature." Indeed, for Thoreau, the whistles of a train, church bells, minstrels, cows, and birds all make up the sonic tapestry of a greater natural order—or "that nature which is our common dwelling." The refrain passes back and forth, between the lute player and the bovine, between the owl and the human sobs that it invokes. "I rejoice that there are owls," he writes. "Let them do the idiotic and maniacal hooting for men." Once again, it turns out that Mother Nature is an expert ventriloquist.

"Can you ever be sure that you have heard the very first wood frog in the township croak?" Thoreau asks in a journal entry of March 24, 1859.

> Ah! how weather-wise must he be! There is no guessing at the weather with him. He makes the weather in his degree; he encourages it to be mild. The weather, what is it but the temperament of the earth? and he is wholly of the earth, sensitive as its skin in which he lives and of which he is a part. His life relaxes with the thawing ground. He pitches and tunes his voice to chord with the rustling leaves which the March wind has dried. Long before the frost is quite out, he feels the influence of the spring rains and the warmer days. His is the very voice of the weather. He rises and falls like quicksilver in the thermometer. (229–230)

Another journal entry, from nearly twenty years earlier (March 3, 1841), underscores the extent to which Thoreau had long cherished the sonic surround and its capacity to affect and re-sound his own being:

> And now I see the beauty and full meaning of that word "sound." Nature always possesses a certain sonorousness, as in the hum of insects, the booming of ice, the crowing of cocks in the morning, and the barking of dogs in the night, which indicate her sound state. God's voice is but a clear bell sound. I drink in a wonderful health, a cordial, in sound. The effect of the slightest tinkling in the horizon measures my own soundness. (48)[6]

Given the sensitivity of Thoreau's ears, we should not be surprised, then, that the hermit of Walden pond was a primary inspiration for R. Murray Schafer's highly influential (and highly romantic) notion of "the soundscape." For Schafer, writing in the 1970s, "the general acoustic environment of a society can be read as an indicator of social conditions which produce it and may tell us much about the trending and evolution of that society" (*The Soundscape*, 7). His project could be considered a negative one, in the sense of creating tools to fight

noise pollution and "the dangers of an indiscriminate and imperialistic spread of more and larger sounds into every corner of man's life" (3). But he is insistent that it is in fact a "*positive* study program," in the sense of enhancing our capacities to appreciate, preserve, and create more nourishing and enabling sonic environments for ourselves and other creatures. Such a new and interdisciplinary program he called "acoustic design."

One of Schafer's key questions is the following: "Is the soundscape of the world an indeterminate composition over which we have no control, or are *we* its composers and performers, responsible for giving it form and beauty?" (5). The "we" here is cosmically expansive, given that Schafer himself is highly attuned to nonhuman voices. Indeed, he writes: "Today all sounds belong to a continuous field of possibilities lying *within the comprehensive dominion of music*. Behold the new orchestra: the sonic universe! And the musicians: anyone and anything that sounds!"[7] Schafer is no agnostic when it comes to the sonic universe, since for him there are "sounds that matter" and those that don't. The former are those with life-affirming qualities, especially relating to beauty and meaning and not classifiable as "distracting." Given that we have only been able to capture or record sounds for the past century or so, Schafer is obliged to turn to silent sources for evidence of "ear-witnesses," most notably literature, which is rich in examples of soundscapes from other places and different epochs. His book begins, however, with what he calls "the natural soundscape" itself, including those produced by water, wind, climate, creatures, and other ecological "keynotes."

Schafer's own voice, concerning the actual (as opposed to the figural) voice of nature, wavers throughout his discussion. While he refers to "the voices of the sea" and "the voices of the wind," he also describes the latter as "an aural illusion" (22). He never clarifies whether the ecological voices that he refers to are really to be considered as voices or simply as sounds that sound like voices. By the end of the book,

the reader suspects the former, given how romantic his narrative is, from mythical integrity through decadence to the almost absolute disenchantment of modernity (which includes the cosmic shift from a God or gods experienced primarily as voice, through the ear, to more pictorial understandings of divinity that arrive with the so-called Enlightenment). Such an Edenic orientation allows Schafer to indulge in rather eccentric observations, such as his claim that when a tree falls in the forest and there is no one nearby to hear it, then "it sounds like anything it wishes—a hurricane, a cuckoo, a wolf, the voice of Immanuel Kant or Charles Kingsley, the overture to *Don Giovanni* or a delicate air blown on a Maori nose flute. Anything it wishes, from past or distant future. It is even free to produce those secret sounds which man will never hear because they belong to other worlds" (24).

These flights of fancy disqualify Schafer from being taken seriously by a mainstream scientific audience and instead promote a friendly reception from those with more "hippy" tendencies (or at least those who prefer poetry to prose, to use his own aesthetic and ethical categorical divisions). Ultimately Schafer does not give us any clear criteria for assessing whether we are listening to a natural voice or a natural sound with voice-like qualities. The question of subjectivity or presence, even of life (as in the case of the booming eruption of Krakatoa in 1883), is secondary to questions of sonic utility and beauty. And yet the voice is a natural phenomenon, by Schafer's account, inspired and nurtured in us by the wider environment, including and especially birds and the wind.[8] "Shepherds may," he writes, "as Lucretius suggests, have got the hint of singing and whistling from the wind" (44).[9] In such a case, our voice is merely borrowed from the elements and returned to it. We could not express ourselves vocally without the wind we first inhale from the atmosphere and then exhale over the cords of the larynx—in which case, perhaps we flatter ourselves that our voices belong to us and us alone. We could also expand the understanding just a little to include the sounds of a wind harp.

Vilém Flusser is another thinker who deftly combines analysis with a poetic sensibility. In his book *Natural:Mind*, Flusser makes the following distinction: "Vision is the sense that separates us from things, and hearing is the sense that submerges us in them. The seen world is circumstance; the world we hear, is a participated world. The things of nature that are audible but invisible, such as a hurricane and the breeze, penetrate through our noses, mouths and pores. They are 'verbal,' not 'substantive.' They are voices that call us" (99). For Flusser, the wind is more than just the movement of air when it becomes audible to the human ear, that is, when it howls, whispers, speaks. The wind is not an impersonal physical force but "a someone to whom I must respond." Indeed, the relationship is transductive, with the wind and ourselves engaged in an act of co-creation through ontological recognition: "If I do not allow it to be the wind, it will lose its voice." (As Jimi Hendrix not only sang but evoked through his guitar, "the wind cries Mary.")[10] The wind—the air, the ether—is the medium that allows the *vox mundi* to be heard in the first place. Flusser's wind-voice in the breath of the human being.[11]

Given the rather subjective ascriptions of voice and its privileged status as an index of ontological value (only people or things with voice "count"), we will always be in gray territory when it comes to our attempts to verify or identify the world's voice. It is not something we can prove, given that it is perhaps more than metaphoric (given its materiality and measurability) but less than literal (given the elusiveness of the subject of such a voice). Aristotle writes, "Nothing that is without soul utters voice, it being only by a metaphor that we speak of the voice of the flute or the lyre" (qtd. in Butler, *The Ancient Phonograph*, 45). My closing gambit, however, is that our mediamatic or technical condition has patently reached so saturated a state that we can now finally appreciate the fact that voice can exist *sans* soul (a dubious substance or condition in the first place) and that the flute or the lyre can indeed "have" or "channel" or "conjure" voice. If, as

Steven Connor suggests, the history of the voice is largely a history of ventriloquism (*Dumbstruck*, 43), then it is less interesting to find and fix voices to bodies and entities, thereby reinscribing stubborn ontological myths, than to follow their promiscuous circulation from lung to tongue to instrument to wax to vinyl to magnetic tape or alloy, and back to speakers, mimics, and new voices joining the fray. We can point to a multitude of sources of natural sounds, but it is a leap to then claim these as voices, since this is to cross the mysterious threshold between the physical and the metaphysical. That, however, is precisely the point. To posit a *vox mundi* is to do two important things: first, force us to reflect on what it is about our own voices that make us so confident in their exceptional status as bearer or vector of subjecthood or "humanity"; and second, oblige us to listen to the sound of the surround differently, more sympathetically and with greater nuance of attention (which itself may encourage a far more inclusive notion of what counts as having that form of existential enfranchisement known as "presence").

To clarify, then: this notion of "vox mundi" is *not* to offer a quasi-theological understanding of the "voice of (mother) nature." It is an attempt to grasp the slippery distinction between "univocity" and "equivocity," that is to say, between shared and distributed being. As Eugene Thacker explains in his book *After Life*, these obscure and heretical medieval doctrines still have relevance today. And they do so regarding our attitude to the ever-confounding Aristotelian distinction we make between "life" (as an abstract concept) and "the living" (as an actual population of material entities). As I have glossed Thacker's distinction elsewhere:

> For univocalists, life manifests itself with equal intensity and value amongst all living things. Thus there is no ontological *difference* between a donkey or a plant or a Man or a Woman, other than intuitive ones of shape or texture—they all partake equally in what Manuel DeLanda would later call a "flat ontology" (clearly a danger-

> ous position to take in such aggressively pious times, dedicated to the exultation of verticality). For the equivocalists, there is no ontological *basis* for ranking one creature above another, for each individual is so radically distinct as to be incommensurable. . . . For Deleuze, equivocity meant that "being is said in several senses." In other words, "the different senses of the word 'being' were without common measure." This was a sinful position because it alienated God from his creations, suggesting that He had no control over them; indeed no *access* to them. The living withdraw from the swooping search-light of Life. Univocity, by way of contrast, meant "being has only one sense and is said in one and the same sense of everything of which it is said." This is also a sinful position because of the flattening effect whereby all of God's creatures are ascribed equal ontological status. The univocalists saw the living as a form of animated commonwealth, all sharing an essential substance, albeit expressing itself in different shapes, sizes, and orientations. Equivocalists saw the world's enigmatic population as something closer to Agamben's "coming community" (that is, an inessential commonality; or community of those that have nothing in common). Where univocity will find its most eloquent expression in Spinoza's monism, equivocal creatures anticipate Leibniz's radically singular monads, created perhaps in the alchemical movement of "extrinsic vectors." (*Look at the Bunny*, 74–75)

My own conception of the *vox mundi* attempts to steer a middle path between univocity and equivocity, or better yet, provide a red thread to help stitch them closer together. There is no transcendent "Nature" from which all beings spring. And yet there is a common reservoir of end and origin, in terms of biology, chemistry, and physics. Ecological voices are all singular. A lion is not a human, who is not a train whistle, which is not a wind chime. And yet this immanent equivocity is so intertwined, through mimesis and other forms of sonic proximity, that it forces the metaphysical issue of at least provisional overlaps, sympathies, concords, and harmonies. Again, there is no Voice

of the World, in a holistic sense. But that shouldn't stop us from listening to the multitude of vocal avatars that do, in some sense, represent the world, by sheer virtue of emerging from it and belonging to it—at least for the duration of their ability for expression. This is the way we prepare for the lesson of echoes, imitation, conversations, duets, and other types of shared refrain. It is not to advocate recovering the organic in a romantic salvage operation. Nor is it to reinforce the always dubious distinction between nature (*physis*) and culture (*nomos*). The lyrebird, for instance—mimicking perfectly the sound of chainsaws, camera shutters, or car alarms—need not be quite as depressing as it initially seems. For this creature is engaging with the *Umwelt* of another species in creative, potentially dialogic ways (over and above arguments about conscious artistic production).[12] The lyrebird offers a specific "acousmatic mirror" in which it may just be possible to see a very different reflection than we are used to (one that should disturb us beyond mere bad faith and automatic hand-wringing over humanity's impact on the surround). Were we capable of reciprocating in turn—were we able to conduct such close listening, and performative attunement—then the whole concept of "nature" or "environment" could be radically revised. Playing a serious game of Marco/Polo with our fellow nonhuman earthlings may be one way forward, to lessen the violence we wreak, directly or not, on all terrestrial creatures.[13] Once more: the medium is the message. And the medium is stubbornly precarious life, echoed through technics. This is a call, in other words, for an ethical resonance theory: one that would explore and affirm what Shane Butler calls "this very homophony between voice and world" (*The Ancient Phonograph*, 28).[14]

Whether it is a mother listening to her daughter's voice on the telephone, a dog listening to His Master's Voice on a gramophone, a lamp listening for the clap of a hand, or a microphone listening for specific shapes determined by an algorithm, there is a subjectively inflected object or operation "paying heed" to its environment. This listening thing is Möbius minded. And to emphasize its subjective or objective nature

is to play the duck/rabbit game for rhetorically strategic reasons. Where Heidegger would tell us that an animal is poor in hearing, von Uexküll would insist that each mode of attunement to the world creates its own *Umwelt*, all of which are largely incommensurable. The aural *punctum* has the potential to pop or connect these ontological bubbles. Human eardrums of the twenty-first century have become both stimulated and benumbed by the digital acousmatic voice, which has (helpfully) confused not only gender distinctions but species ones as well. Pavlov's dogs were trained to respond to the sound of a bell, whether food was served or not. Steve Jobs's pod people have been trained to respond to the ironically named Lady Gaga—today's more cynical incarnation of Eva Tanguay. The question of nourishment, or lack thereof, is an ongoing one. As the previous chapter suggested, in all these years parrots may not have been merely parroting but also prompting and provoking. And hopefully we can—sooner rather than later—conceptualize and conjure technologies that are harbingers not of the soundscape of colonization, deracination, and displacement but of a planetary cohabitation, curiosity, hospitality, and/or heterogeneous solidarity. Perhaps (and admittedly it is a very big "perhaps"), we can finally hear echoes without casting ourselves in the self-absorbed role of Narcissus.

Let us remember that for Barthes the concept of the "grain" of the voice contains "a dual posture" or "dual production" between language and music. According to this definition, the grain is "the body of the voice as it sings"—although some singers have grain and some do not. (Barthes is not clear, unfortunately, on any objective criteria for making such an evaluation.) Given that language is an important aspect of Barthes's understanding of his own term, we might suspect that he would not believe that an animal can possess or demonstrate a vocal grain: "The 'grain' is . . . the materiality of the body, speaking its mother tongue" (182). And yet other creatures with tongues—donkeys, monkeys, parrots, dogs, dolphins, and so forth—have a mother tongue of sorts, taught to express themselves vocally. Barthes

points in a direction that might eventually have led to this possibility, should he have decided to follow his own suggestive assertions (such as his claim that the "relation is erotic—but in no way 'subjective' . . . developing beyond the subject" [188]). Both Barthes and Dolar, to different degrees, complicate the traditional Western equation of voice with a metaphysics of human presence. But neither goes so far as to explicitly consider the creaturely voice of the nonhuman. One wonders, then, what they would think of attributing a grain, or uncanny agency, to the voice of nature more generally—the ecological refrain as a vector of worlding: the voice, so to speak, is one key way in which the world worlds itself into being (remembering that there is no such thing as *the* voice—only a tapestry of voices, which nevertheless share a great deal). Might the voice of the world, wherever we find it (whispering in a seashell, nestled in a bird's nest, or rumbling in the giant blades of a wind farm), exhibit traces of the aural *punctum*? Can it elicit connection or sympathy—a sense of co-belonging? One might object that any such sense would not be mutual, for the shell or the bird or the turbine do not share the same concerns or perceptions as ourselves. Inevitably, we bump up against the windshield installed so sturdily by Kant, the same one that reminds us on a daily basis that we can only speculate about the character and "experience" of things that are not us. (Despite the best efforts of recent philosophers, who claim to be able to drive through the world with the top down, only to arrive with insects in their eyes and mouth.)

Barthes himself asked, rhetorically, "Isn't the entire space of the voice an infinite one?" and even considered the grain of the voice as possibly located on the fingertips of a piano player.[15] The grain of the voice thus becomes more about the singular prosthetic apparatus of sonic expression than a personalized aural signature of the larynx or lungs. To ventriloquize the grain of Barthes's pen:

> I love these mechanical sounds in an almost voluptuous way, as if, in the Photograph, they were the very thing—and the only thing—

> to which my desire clings, their abrupt click breaking through the mortiferous layer of the Pose. For me the noise of Time is not sad: I love bells, clocks, watches—and I recall that at first photographic implements were related to techniques of cabinetmaking and the machinery of precision: cameras, in short, were clocks for seeing, and perhaps in me someone very old still hears in the photographic mechanism the living sound of the wood. (*Camera Lucida*, 15)

The living sound of wood. As with Thoreau, not necessarily a voice, but certainly a timbre within timber, which can resonate with the environment.