

The Conceptual Lyrebird: Imitation as Lyric in the Poetry of Amanda Stewart

Michael Farrell

Abstract: The following article proposes a reading of the poetry of Amanda Stewart, through the notion of the ecological, conceptual lyric, as theorized through the song practice of the lyrebird. It argues for the significance of Stewart's work, but also for rethinking the figurative relation between birdsong and poetry, with specific reference to the lyrebird, and to Australia as lyric's conceptual origin.

Keywords: ecopoetics, lyric, voice, conceptual poetry, birds.

The following article proposes to read both the written and performed poetry of Sydney-based poet, Amanda Stewart, through the framework of an ecological and conceptual lyric. It means to make claims for a broader, more imaginative, and inclusive, notion of understanding Stewart's work. Because, despite being, as the Australian Poetry Library notes, "Australia's premier sound poet," and a "performance artist of international reputation," a claim based on her extensive performances in Europe, Stewart's work is not to be found in international anthologies of contemporary poetry ("Amanda Stewart"). Admittedly, the appearance of Australian poets is rare in such contexts, but to take just one example, the anthology of conceptual women's writing *I'll Drown My Book* (2012) by Bergvall et al. vaunts its internationalism as including "64 women from 10 countries," but it is very much a northern hemisphere affair, and the small number of Latin American and Asian poets included have strong US connections: it includes no Australian poets.

By ecological I mean a lyric explicitly produced in relation to other things, as an analogy to the social, as well as to the ecosystem, rather than a performatively enclosed or intimate address, expression of feeling. I do not mean, either, to imply the ecological merely by associating Stewart's poetics with birds: but, rather, that such implications are inevitable in such thoughtful, relational, work. It is, in short, less emphatically aligned with the ecological "coexistence" of Timothy Morton (4), than with Edward Brunner's broader, Surrealist inflection, of the ecological as a system to be "test[ed]" and "extend[ed]" (206).

If, as the example of *I'll Drown My Book* suggests—not to mention the early, pre-internet poetry of conceptual flag-bearer Kenneth Goldsmith—that conceptual poetry is not necessarily tied to social media, nor the internet more broadly. A reviewer of the anthology, Cecilia Corrigan, suggests that it is the anthology's framework of conceptual writing that makes the contributors' work conceptual, adding that she discerns a "questioning" "tone" in their statements "in which the writer asks whether her work actually fits under the heading of conceptualism" (Corrigan). By conceptual, in the case of this article, I mean critically deploying the concept of a lyric practice that arguably resembles that of an indigenous Australian songbird: called a lyrebird because of its lyre-resembling tail.¹ There is, then, something metapoetic about the conceptual, in that conceptual criticism begins by framing its subject through the conceptual. It distances itself from notions of semantic intention, as well

¹ There are two species: the superb, and the Albert's lyrebird, both of which are mimetic performers, yet only the male superb has the lyre-shaped tail.

as poetics as such, while at the same time claiming an overall intentional idea, as well as an idea of poetics, rather than praxis. Of course, these aspects are not so easily separated—rather, a shift occurs in what we think of as poetic practice.

The lyrebird's tail is a convenient, conceptual beginning. Known for its mimetic capacity, the bird's own song has been compared advantageously to the nightingale by David Attenborough, while American philosopher Charles Hartshorne wrote that it was "almost a Shakespeare among birds" (Low 75). In *Where Song Began: Australian Birds and How They Changed The World*, biologist Tim Low provides a precedent to this argument in referring to "lyrebird lyricism" (79). I don't wish to utilise the lyrebird as a sentimental figure for human—or settler—capacity however: but rather to propose the lyrebird as a poet in its own right, and to suggest that we start to think about birdsong as an aspect of an expanded poetic history: not just as metaphor.

Stewart's poetry might be considered lyric through using a different interpretative approach, but what I am interested in, is this possibility of first reading the lyric mode in terms of the lyrebird: that is, through considering the lyrebird as a kind of Australian lyric origin. In reading Stewart's performed poetry through the figure of the lyrebird, the form of lyric becomes public, and complicatedly social (social relations of the event as well as the performed text). Such a reading also recasts certain aspects of experimental writing (such as those involving imitation, repetition and collage) in a new relation with lyric; it refreshes the metaphor of poet-as-songbird; and brings these forms into new reading and listening spaces: spaces inhabited by animals and plants as much as humans, spaces where poetry is closer to being, where the distinction between poet and audience falls away. An argument can be made for the mimetic lyrebird as modern—or even postmodern in its copying of digital technology—but ultimately such a reading puts too much emphasis on human perspective, rather than thinking of the lyrebird as an exemplary agent (or 'actant,' Bennett 9). Like any interpretative framework, the ecological and the conceptual are, admittedly, both effects of critical practice, however: I don't want to determine the lyrebird or Stewart.

There are precedents for conceptualising (in the sense of contemporary poetics: reading poetry as conceptual) the lyric. On the occasion of Goldsmith's visit to the White House, Marjorie Perloff wrote an article entitled "Towards the Conceptual Lyric," in which she quotes Goldsmith's co-editor of *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, Craig Dworkin, as characterising writing in the digital age, in the following terms:

[P]art of the difference between 1980 and 2000 derives from the cultural changes brought about by an increasingly digitized culture. During those decades, appropriation-based practices in other arts spread from isolated experiments to become a hallmark of hip-hop music, global DJ culture, and a ubiquitous tactic for mainstream and corporate media. Concurrently, sampling, mash-up, and the montage of found footage went from novel methods of production to widespread activities of consumption Conceptual poetry, accordingly, often operates as an interface—returning the answer to a particular query; assembling, rearranging and displaying information; or sorting and selecting from files of accumulated language pursuant to a certain algorithm—rather than producing new material from scratch. Even if it does not involve electronics or computers, conceptual poetry is thus very much a part of its technological and cultural moment. (n.pag.)

This description neatly places Stewart and her work within a global context. Stewart verbally samples (and refigures) imperial and nationalist texts, for example, “Rule, Britannia” and Peter Allen’s “I Still Call Australia Home”—the latter not necessarily, in its original form, more than a personal update of Mackellar’s “My Country,” (yet, as in the case of the poem, repetition and co-opting, in the case of Allen’s song, by Qantas, make them what we might call conceptual anthems); further she also can then be said to sample performance styles, at times resembling the work of Australian peers such as Jas H. Duke (see Carruthers’ “Jas. H. Duke”). Yet this worldliness, and tandemic poetic localness—in a human sense—is not what I want to emphasise. Rather, I am interested in the relation between the textual (or sound) world and the earth. There is a relation, increasingly technologised, between mimic birds, such as the lyrebird and the sound worlds of humans (as well, of course, as those of other birds). Perloff further quotes Dworkin’s expanded reference to the practice of appropriation:

The great break with even the most artificial, ironic, or asemantic work of other avant-gardes is the realization that one does not need to generate new material to be a poet: the intelligent organization or reframing of already extant text is enough. Through the repurposing or *détournement* of language that is not their own (whatever that might mean), the writers here allow arbitrary rules to determine the chance and unpredictable disposition of that language; they let artificial systems trump organic forms; and they replace making with choosing, fabrication with arrangement, and production with transcription. (“Towards” n.pag.)

Dworkin’s term “break” is conventional in terms of new poetic movements, particularly modernist ones. But it is also important in thinking about modernity and epistemology. I discuss the break between that of Europe and Australia as poetic cultures below; but it is worth keeping in mind that all verse, especially lyric, depends on the line break, and its implied wrench or pathos, particularly in the case of enjambment. I’m not assuming anything about Stewart’s—or the lyrebird’s—rules, nor am I convinced by Dworkin’s proposed division between “artificial systems” and “organic forms” (isn’t there something anachronistic about the card game metaphor that represents the organic’s defeat?), yet both poet and bird do organise and reframe “extant material” (Perloff n.pag.)

Perloff goes on to cite Ezra Pound (“As regarding rhythm: to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome”) and the history of lyric, to justify an argument for lyric based on sound over expression. She explicitly refers to the lyre as the basis for the derivation of the term in its Greek form, but also to the “musical speech—speech to be sounded—[that] characterized a large body of poetry from the Hebrew and the Chinese to the Arabic lyric of the Middle Ages and Troubadour verse of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries” (n.pag.). This is quite a gathering, but I am suggesting that we go further in comparative lyricism: not just across cultures and centuries, but species. If contemporary poetry has become, according to Dworkin, “more graphic than semantic, more a physically material event than a disembodied or transparent medium for referential communication,” then, if we replace graphic with sonic, there is no reason to exclude “the physical material event” of actual birdsong from the acknowledged practice of poetry (xliii). The example of Goldsmith’s conceptual poetry that Perloff gives as the starting point for the recent history of conceptual poetry (though Dworkin and Goldsmith’s anthology incorporates the writings of John Cage and other precursors) is the work:

No. 111 2.7.92–10.20.96, a text generated, as the title tells us, between the dates February 7, 1992, and October 20, 1996, by recording all the phrases the author

happened to come across in his daily reading that ended in the sound linguists designate as *schwa*—the *er* or *uh* sound which is one of the most common in English. (Perloff n.pag.)

This selective recording by Goldsmith is not so different from the lyrebird's quotidian replication of sound (perhaps combined with a bower-bird's bricolage sense). This comparison also highlights the importance of listening to sound, rather than merely replicating it. Betty M. Bayer, writing of the concept of mantra in an article on the Occupy movement, writes of "an acute capacity for listening to the universe, to hear the [quoting Deepak Chopra] 'subtle vibrations produced by everything in nature—the sounds of the wind, thunder, butterflies, rushing rivers and all other creations'" (34).

The lyrebird is a composer, performer and noted mimic (called a "hoax bird" by Nicola Themistes, 32). Yet the lyrebird presents sound not just as redundant information or sonic history (for example, that a car or axe has been in the area at some time) but as performance, in the sense of courting (here we might consider that courting, with its associations of the royal court, and the courtly lyric, is not a metaphorical projection on a bird courting scene, but that, rather, the historical antecedent of regal courting—and human courting generally—begins here. In reading Stewart's poetry through this figure of the lyrebird, I am making comparisons between public, social, interspecies practices. To assert the possibility of such a reading puts certain aspects of experimental into a new relation with an alternative, earth-based tradition of lyric. Rather than seeing the contemporary mode of lyric in terms of the post-modern, of the "lyric voice giv[ing] way to multiple voices or voice fragments" or "the cry of the heart, as Yeats called it, [becoming] increasingly subjected to the play of the mind," to quote an earlier perspective of Perloff's (*Dance* 183, 197), I propose an alternative version of the conceptual lyric voice, one that is ecological in terms of its relation to other sounds and types of "sound-makers," as well as to the earth itself. The conceptual can still be a form of courting, but an intellectual, rather than a romantic one; as performance, Stewart's work suggests that of an audience's multiple listeners, rather than the printed poem's assemblage of solitary readers.

In Sharon Cameron's study of Emily Dickinson, *Lyric Time*, she describes lyric as "the least mimetic of all art forms." For the purposes of constructing my argument with regard to the lyrebird as conceptual poet I must oppose this, yet aspects of Cameron's discussion of lyric are pertinent to my argument. A description of lyric on the same page is suggestive:

the displacement of speech from a definitive context, the namelessness of the lyric speaker and the gratuitousness of her history, the lyric's travel backwards and forwards restlessly over the same ground—all these features that unhinge time from its fixtures and reduce it to a unity—are present in the earliest lyrics we can examine. (241)

All these features fit the case of the lyrebird, yet the possibilities of relating lyric to ground are of course more literal than Cameron intended. The figurative use of ground also applies, however, in the lyrebird's deployment of a repertoire. The reference to a "lyric speaker" of course signifies someone writing, in a language that is spoken, rather than the speaker as quoted sound-maker, where the sound-maker might be a machine. Yet it is exactly this kind of framing that Cameron describes, in the practice of the lyrebird, that makes the lyrebird a conceptual poet: an uncreative writer, one whose works are not required to be read, but rather perceived (Goldsmith 158).

Cameron also writes of the strength of lyric's "resistan[ce] to the interruption of its interior speech" (119). In the lyrebird's performance, this speech becomes exterior. However, it is not the literal opposition, of interiority and exteriority, that Cameron appears to intend. Her "interior" is that of the voice as metaphor, as structure of the mind's recomposed thought. That a lyrebird can't replicate a heard sound, without first interiorising it, complicates this notion. Writing of the seeming plurality of the lyric, Cameron distinguishes it from ordinary speech in terms of pitch: "we speak in a voice whose pitch always rises above or below" (208). The (conventional and continual) use of sounded voice metaphors that are used in writing of written poetry can only enhance the same formulae when applied to poetry spoken aloud. If we distinguish the lyrebird's speech from its lyric voice, then we might say that its original sounds are speech, and that its mimetic song is lyric. Cameron adopts Kant to explain that: "the lyric is not real as object but rather as the representation of 'myself' as object" (258). The arbitrary selection of quotation by the lyrebird emphasises the "object" of "myself" as the "myself" of the performing lyrebird, and the "object" of the "myself" of the imitated, original sound-maker, the non-lyrebird.

That these lyric sounds are the sounds of the non-lyrebird can also be compared to Theodor Adorno's statement on lyric, as phrased by Susan Stewart in her *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* "that in the greatest lyric works it is language itself that is speaking and changing" (89). Or, further, to his comment from *Notes on Literature*: "the lyric work is always the subjective expression of a social antagonism" (qtd. in Meltzer 189). If we substitute sound for language here, sound is "speaking and changing." Not perhaps changing in terms of the individual sounds themselves, but changing sound generally: the lyrebird integrates new sounds into the bush, into a changing soundscape or ecology. This practice is one that has presumably changed with European settlement, and accelerated with the introduction of technologised sound into the bush, yet this is only the latest phase of change: lyrebirds have existed for millions of years (in Low's words, "from the early to mid-Miocene," which stretches from 24-5 million years ago, 4, 72) so the arrivals of new species, including the relatively late arrival of the first humans in Australia, would have given new opportunities for mimesis. In terms of the latter quote, the lyrebird-as-poet's "social antagonism" is sonic, that is, towards other sound-makers, which are in some kind of competition, and in the case of other lyrebirds, direct competition.

A conceptual poet can reproduce text without interiorising it only if they don't actually read it: not the case with the Goldsmith work cited above. Besides, if it is the concept rather than the message that is important, this concept must have been thought, and therefore interiorised, by the poet. As a performer with more than one mic, Stewart can actually seem (sound) as if she is interrupting herself. This is also suggested in the text of "Trading Centres" with its litany of "It's". The written lyric, as described by Cameron, must take place in undisturbed, asocial space. Mashing Adorno with T.S. Eliot, "social antagonism ... recollected in tranquility". Cameron emphasises that "Most important, however, [the lyric] must attend to no more than one (its own) speaking voice" (119). Yet the poet's desire to communicate this speech means that connection with the social must be made: "For the lyric which seems to evade social reality must at some point acknowledge its attachment to the social world which, however denied by the illusion of the lyric's freedom, must nonetheless be assured by its desire for intelligibility" (119). The mimetic must be intelligible to be mimetic.

Stewart's work is textually and politically complex, and I won't address the range of her concerns in this article. In her CD and book *I/T* (1998), and elsewhere, she uses repetition,

tonal/accental shift, and conceptual splicing to critique language use. Her parodic, shifting, finger-pointing represents an endlessly deferred and desperate search for who or what's responsible for the state of neocolonial Australia. This search is parodied in "Trading Centres", which begins, "It's the Guns/ It's the Drugs/ It's Abuse" but goes on to insert the names of Australian celebrities: "It's Mel ... It's Elle ... It's Rolf Harris". Stewart's naming is not quite pointing, not quite deixis. Jean-Francois Lyotard theorises this distinction in a strategy against "revisionist historians" (i.e. revisionist in the context of Holocaust denial). As Lyotard's English translator, Georges Van Den Abbeele, points out (in synthesising an argument from *The Differend* that Lyotard derives from Saul Kripke):

deixis is only valid for the phrase in which it occurs (one's *here* is another's *there*; my *you* is your *I*, etc.), names, which are a "pure mark of the designative function," remain the same across phrases, from whose actualizations they accordingly remain "independent" [quotes from Lyotard]. They are, to use Kripke's phrase, "rigid designators," and as such, function as what Lyotard calls "quasi-deictics." (30)

Van Den Abbeele then quotes Lyotard on the name and the world:

Networks of quasi-deictics formed by names of "objects" and by names of relations designate "givens" and the relations between those givens, that is to say, a world. I call it a world because those names, being "rigid," each refer to something even when that something is not there. (qtd. in Van Den Abbeele 30-31)

In explicating the passage I have quoted from, Van Den Abbeele argues that, "The senses of a named referent refer us not to the *field* of perception but to the *world* of history" (31). Stewart names the names that her listeners know, that belong to a shared world. Names, like any words, are not just sounds; but the sounds of the lyrebird are not just sounds either. They are quotes from the immediate past, sounds that refer to a world, and a history of sound. They make a break with the song of the pre-contact past, when a lyrebird wasn't called a lyrebird, and there were no chopping axes to copy, let alone mobile phones. Recognition of the lyrebird's imitations leads to naming in Stewart-fashion: "it's a bird, it's a plane, it's a car alarm."

Stewart's worrying at the impersonal pronoun "it," and its correspondence to the "I" (encapsulated in the title *I/T*), further suggest a critique of object relations. In discussing such relations in a psychoanalytic context, Jay Greenberg and Stephen Mitchell note that the term object "has been used to describe both real people in the external world and the images of them that are established internally" (14). That an object may be internal and abstract means it "can be manipulated and modified. It can be reshaped, repainted, cut in two, repaired, even destroyed" (14). These possibilities suggest correspondences with the textual manipulation of Stewart. Yet, Stewart uses the object noun "it," as if the "IT"/object is formed from (its relation with) the "I"/self, rather than the I being formed through its relations with the "IT". This suggests a turn from therapeutic emphasis on the human individual, and towards an emphasis on social forces, and provides a more distant, exteriorised perspective of the human. In poetics terms, it abstracts the conceptual structures from the human (poet) mind into an undefined conceptual space. Owen Barfield defines objects as "anything to which a subject can attend ... whether a tea table, a mountain or an idea" (qtd. in Gutierrez 10). Stewart's objects are ideas, politics, people and places; the pertinent objects for the lyrebird are sounding objects that have come into sonic range and are recuperated for a sound event. These kinds of lists abound in theories of the thing, of matter. Among several such lists in

Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* is one that consists of "dead rats, bottle caps, gadgets, fire, electricity, berries, metal" (107). What is interesting about this list in particular is that she defines it as a list of nonhumans. Similarly, those things, whether bird or mobile phone, and potentially imitated by the lyrebird, might be defined as "non-lyrebird." The list poem of Stewart's, as varying possibilities of blame, are also, then, possibilities of non-Stewart, but also, implicitly, not-us, not-audience. Yet the inability of Stewart to "land" on one answer in her blaming list suggests infinite possibility, or, further, suggests the inadequacy of blaming itself. Is there a thing responsible? Or, more crucially, is there a thing non-responsible?

We might analogise the voicing (or grounding or airing) of Stewart's poems in terms other than their ostensible political critique: those of a conceptual relation to land, through the ecology of bush sound and the lyrebird, the exemplary song- (or sound-) bird. A songbird is a conventional metaphor for a poet: used, for example by European troubadour poets (Shapiro 619). The comparison suggests that the poet, too, has a song to sing—to express—and to court with—that is as natural as that of a bird. While poetry is not that simple (it is in a sense always copying to some extent—in terms of form, diction etc.) neither is birdsong. The lyrebird is particularly noted for its mimetic ability (as is another bird, the butcherbird). Although they compose original sounds, lyrebirds also borrow, to make a more complex, impressive courting song. They are repeating birds, pastiche birds: copying other birds and animals as part of what Hollis Taylor refers to as their "aesthetic practices," but also contemporary technology such as car alarms, chainsaws, cameras, etcetera (Taylor 9; see also BBC Earth "Attenborough"). David Campbell's poem "The Miracle of Mullion Hill" tells of a lyrebird that steals the sounds of a sheep's bell and a Catholic Mass "for his dance". A lyrebird's song is not only used for courting, either, but can be a means of defence, or expression of distress. Low elaborates:

As well as copying birdsongs, they have broadcast with uncanny accuracy the wing-beats of pigeons, the howling of dogs, the nocturnal honks of wandering swans, the pleading of young magpies, the coughing of a smoker, the siren of an ambulance, koalas grunting, trees creaking, parrot feathers rustling, kookaburra bills snapping, cockatoos tearing wood. A lyrebird chased up a tree by dogs barked for three weeks afterwards. Pet lyrebirds have imitated rattling chains, violins, pianos, saws, the creaking of a horse and dray, a child crying, and the screaming of slaughtered pigs. Albert lyrebirds, the most northerly of the two species, can sound like tractors starting up, frogs in chorus, a bird landing with a thump on a branch, and even garbled human conversation, with phrases such as 'Hey Bill' thrown in. Baby lyrebirds start calling when still inside the egg. Tests suggest that grey shrike-thrushes are fooled by simulations of their calls. (73-74)

Low describes an impressive assemblage, or ecology of sound. He depicts the lyrebird as an industrious performance artist, an improviser, a collagist. Low adds:

Lyrebirds do have their own calls as well, but imitation rules the repertoire, which increases with age. Males sing for hours each day to impress. Females mate with the most skilled male ... Lyrebirds learn largely from other lyrebirds, so their sounds survive past their life spans. Thirty years after lyrebirds were taken from Victoria and freed in Tasmania in 1934, their descendants were imitating whipbirds the island does not have, providing a compelling example of culture in birds, of one generation passing knowledge to another. (74)

The lyrebird is not a species of generic poets: the “females mate with the most skilled.” Low also notes that the rufous scrub-bird will imitate the lyrebird, indicating a further transpecies network of bird song and sound (74). Cameron writes, in the context of loss—including that of landscape—that “Lyrics are what we make out of the badness of our memory, the mirror we hold to our desire” (198). Such “badness” must be relative, with the mimesis of what might be called the cultural memory of the lyrebird at the opposite end from no memory, or amnesia. Nor can we know if, for example, the lyrebird’s memory of the whipbird call is felt as a loss, or a desire, by the lyrebird.

In *Religion and Cultural Memory*, Jan Assmann writes that “The Western horizon of memory is gradually beginning to expand to include its Oriental roots” (189). He is referring here to the remembering of Egyptian culture. His concept could be expanded to the non- or extra-human: that is, a cultural memory of living things, even a cultural memory of matter. (Assmann defines religion as “order as such ... order is sacred:” the term ‘order’ is not exclusively human, 34.) Assmann discusses the “counterfactual memory” of the Jews after they leave the Promised Land: “In short, they must recollect a way of life that is not confirmed by any ‘framework’ of their present reality. That is the exceptional situation of a counterfactual memory. It keeps present to the mind a yesterday that conflicts with every today” (53). This also describes the situation of lyrebirds in Tasmania.

Like a lyrebird, Stewart could be said to be practising mimicry, or mock caroling, rather than merely repeating; like a butcher-bird, she cuts up, kills, or “fractures” the ecology of public discourse. Stewart adds a dry human irony to the arguably more avant-garde (Cagean) practice of the lyrebird with its no-comment parodies of the sounds of its milieu, whether human (including humans using machines) or animal or other (such as Low’s “tree creaking,” for example). Stewart demonstrates a lexical relation between the I and the object in another poem from *I/T*, “on criticism,” where “The Author” subtitles a formula of

$$\frac{I}{IT} = \text{THIS}$$

followed by the ‘The Voices of the Object’ as

$$\frac{IT}{ITS} = \text{THIS}$$

While suggesting the substitutability and equivalence of these pronoun and quasi-deictic concepts, Stewart’s equation mode suggests that letters can be as mobile as numbers, where conceptual equivalences emerging through anagram. We can therefore also equate I/T, or information technology, with the “I” and the “IT” (or object). “THIS” points to this situation of equation, but also to a state of things, or situation. I/T is, then, also an abbreviation of identity. The “I” is an equivalence of “T:” a letter derived from X, a mark or inscription. “on criticism” concludes with “The Return of the Subject,” the final line of which is a hand-circled “QED” and a large handwritten capitalised “X”; “I” is equivalent to writing, or “I”=WRITER. Here language can be read as an ecology of letters, and as we discern this mobility in listening, an ecology of sound.

Stewart’s use of cut-up creates explicit and virtual repetition: she emphasises, stalls, satiates, empties, meta-critiques, producing what might be called an ecology of form, or perhaps lyric

ecology. Performed repetition stages these varieties of repetition. Stewart uses different kinds of repetition in her poems, for instance, the repetition of quotation: of, for example, fragments of public discourse; another variety is what might be called an “auto-textual” or even “self” repetition of abstract nouns like “it” and “love.” These approaches recur throughout her work. In the following, I focus on four of Stewart’s poems: “on criticism,” “It Becomes: 1981” and “.romance,” from *I/T*, and the poem “Trading Centres,” published in *Jacket* in 2005. The shifts and returns in delivery create what could be called inter-lexeme puns, further enhanced through shifts in vocal affect: one moment sounding angry, another excited.

Repetition has concerned a range of European theorists: repetition as generation in Kierkegaard; as debasement in Marx; Deleuze’s association of repetition with displacement and disguising. Gertrude Stein, cited by Stewart, is a notable poetic precedent, but also theorist of repetition. Stein discusses the effect of varying emphasis in repetition—which would seem to suggest a relatively active reader of her own writing. Stein writes: “A bird’s singing is perhaps the nearest thing to repetition but if you listen they too vary their insistence” (100). Her comment would seem to indicate that listening was a poor practice in 1930. Variation through emphasis is clearly present in Stewart’s performances, and page presentation: there is also a variation from Stein’s practice, in the speed of her performances (which may or may not guide reading her texts).

I would like to introduce a specifically Australian, Indigenous, precedent into the discussion of theories of repetition and their relation to poetics: we might, I think, more aptly extend (or revise) such theories through a reading of Indigenous writer David Unaipon’s theory of the “loo loo poon cold” (meaning something like break-connection), which refers to Aboriginal arrival in Australia, perhaps via an isthmus (5). With twentieth-century Unaipon, then, we can posit a hinge, or poetic isthmus between the millions of years of mimetic practices of the lyrebird and Stewart: that of the cultural memory (Unaipon’s “The traditions say”) of human arrival in Australia. The double word *loo loo*, like a number of Australian place names such as Wagga Wagga and Woy Woy, sounds and enacts repetition and surplus. The repetition of “Loo loo” suggests the breakings and brokenness associated with colonialism, but, thinking of the consequent development of cultures in the context of the modern, also the breaks associated with change: including the adaptations and appropriations of European culture by Aboriginal people, such as using English; and the breaks experienced by the Australian nonhuman, including the lyrebird. My aim is to make a connection with these connotations of the break and the postcolonial breaking and repeating in Stewart’s composition and performance practice. (An uncanny, further, connection can be made by extending the possibilities of *loo loo* in the direction of the French *lieu lieu* (or place place), written about by Derrida, following Plato. Derrida writes, referring to poets and sophists, “There is no room for them in the political place [*lieu*] where affairs are spoken of and dealt with” (109)). Stewart’s broken delivery enunciates the impossibilities of speaking, being heard, making a place for (her) critique of the colonial: yet she is also speaking this (broken) place, the “broken system” (Gibson 118) of Aboriginal Australia. Yet, as A. J. Carruthers avers, “Stewart’s work undoes, exposes, breaks language apart but also builds it” (“Lives”). (See Carruthers also for a reading of “The Liberated Showroom,” an explicit example of Stewart’s conceptual relation with Australian native birdsong, specifically that of the kurrabung, or currawong.)

Sharon Cameron also writes of brokenness: the “despair” of Whitman, the even more tragic vision of Hart Crane (226-27). Yet, for American settler poetics at least, the broken is not all negative:

The brokenness that Crane laments occasions Wallace Steven's celebration. The pleasures of merely circulating, the thirteen ways of looking at a blackbird, the jar that, set against the wilderness in Tennessee, orders it – these are jokes on the world, provocative ways of viewing its temporal-spatial qualities, and they are instigated by a more than marginal insistence that order is always both provisional and alternative. (233)

There is a comic aspect to the repetition of the broken record also, repeating like a lyrebird. The song of the lyrebird with its diversity records category breaks—and breaks in history, with the arrival of new beings, cultures, and technologies; its imitations, especially those that are most incongruous, might well be thought of as “jokes on the world.” It provokes “temporal-spatial” order with its imitations of birds that aren't present, like the whipbird in Tasmania, and also with its ventriloquism (Robin 126). There is a sense of both contingency and agency in its song, in that it could always be or have been a different sound that they cho(o)se to make.

“It Becomes: 1981” and “Trading Centres” can both be said to refer to the “state of things.” Both try to find the source of this state, rather than determine the state itself. Or rather, they mimic a kind of headless chook search. The “its” are to blame. The named humans are the three-headed monster “THATCHERFRAZERAEGUN” made from the three elected leaders of Britain, Australia and the U.S. in 1981. Stewart's spelling of Fraser with a z alludes to his being called “Fraser the razor” due to his cuts to public spending; “Raegun” misspells the pun on his name, which both avoids making his war-happiness cool, but, also, part-anagrammatises (and feminises) his name, suggesting he was a space cowboy from birth. Australia, as represented by former Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser could be seen to be equal to the other two, but equally could be seen to be sandwiched, or trapped, between them. Equally, Australia may be said to be represented by the diction of “ITS ... DISGUSTING” and “TYPICAL.” The dynamism of Stewart is not fluid; the “its” of her poems are the white chook version of lyrebird food: dry grains, scattering. Perhaps getting beyond the poetics of the backyard (think of Williams's “The Red Wheelbarrow”), without quite romancing the bush. Stewart parodies her title of I/T as I.T., or information technology: suggesting that the poems are information and the CD embodies technology; that the CD contains many of the same words, points to the notion of digital technology back at the printed texts. Her poem becomes a chorus of backyard newspapers (cf Goldsmith and his conceptual work *Day*, a transcription of the *New York Times*); the poem lays a philosophical, or paradoxically found, egg. “IT'S” becomes “IT IS” becomes “IT'S” again and then “IT.” The saying is the IT: “IT. IT. IT. IT.” The apostrophe of “IT'S” falls to the ground of the line as a stop, or a pellet. Backyard pastoral is one reading of Stewart's sound poetics. We might, however, analogue the voicing of Stewart's poems differently.

In Stewart's later poem “Trading Centres,” all the individual human figures listed are Australian: Mel [Gibson], Elle [McPherson], Pauline [Hanson], Kerry [Packer], Rupert [Murdoch], Rolf Harris. Blame and deferral are both parodied, as if blame itself were a punchline. The other possibilities the “it” refers to are things like guns, violence, drugs, Greeks and banks. All become a list of objects, or things (O'Keefe refers to Stewart's ability to enact what Heidegger calls “thinging”). Stewart isn't satisfied with any of the proposed terms, enunciating a displacement list comparable to Ned Kelly's cumulative, metaphorical swearing and blaming in *The Jerilderie Letter*.

From *I/T* and following “It Becomes” on the right-facing page, is the poem “.romance.” Reading “.romance” on the page the stop before the word “romance” gives it a connection to the preceding last “IT” of “It Becomes”, which is un-stopped. The first two lines of “.romance” read:

1st date 1st kiss 1st kiss 1st
fuck 1st/Ist/1st/ relived
to be roses/candles/

Reading across from “It Becomes,” “1st” functions as an anagram of its resembler, “Its;” this notion confirmed by Stewart’s writing of “1st” as “Ist”: “Ist” being German for “is.” Anagrams have a sound aspect as well as visual and conceptual ones, and are a kind of concrete—as opposed to semantic—pun. So while the poem begins with the beginning of romance (1st date etc.), it also suggests, via translation, the being (an anagram of begin) of romance, stretching the lyric I into ontology. 1 stands in for I, distancing the author and suggesting the generic nature of the lyric, while also enacting a process whereby the subject (“1”) becomes the date, the kiss, the fuck. Stewart, in a sense, undoes Barfield’s notion of the attending subject: in “.romance” the things attend and constitute the verb-object which is the date-subject. In “It Becomes: 1981,” “Trading Centres” and “.romance,” Stewart writes a lyric of objects, including names-as-objects, recalling William Carlos Williams’s “No ideas but in things” (7); “The Red Wheelbarrow” might be read as a lyric of and for objects, rather than of or for a perceiving subject.

Rather than follow a thing theory trail, however, I return to what Bayer, in an article titled “Enchantment in an age of occupy,” calls the “immersion” of “lyric ontology” and its relation to sound:

In or about spring 2011, ordinary worlds irrupted in revolutionary sounds. One steps into these tangled streams as a field-worker of sonic understories seeking to trace the lifespan of resonance, now to be found in mic check ... Hear in echoing scraps and streams, see in ‘splinters and mosaics’ a composer’s and a mosaicist’s art of using tension to attune our attention to relations among one and another part holding things together. Fine-tune one’s ear to distant signals carrying resonance today in the sounds of an age breaking up ... Marvel at how these resonances amplify concerns with lively matter and the force of things, and with how things talk and return to sing different. Tune in to rhythmic structures as measures of enchantment, of ontology as poetic immersion, as what one might call a lyric ontology for new temporal arrangements in a heard world. Lyric ontology: an enchanting wet-footed webwork; recombinant, resonating rhythms to tell of things, to remain in the medium of time, to sing different the world (45).

Mic check, a feature of Occupy, is initiated by the call of the words “mic check!” It is, as Bayer writes, a “people’s microphone”: “an amplification of voice carried out in echoing waves of short phrases (near Twitter length) by people themselves” (32). Compare David Lumsdaine’s description of the pied butcherbird, as quoted by Taylor:

The Pied Butcherbird is a virtuoso of composition and improvisation: the long solo develops like a mosaic, through the varied repetition of its phrases. In the course of the song, some elements remain constant, some elements transform through addition and elimination ... there is an extraordinary delicacy in the way it articulates the

harmonic course of its song with microtonal inflections, or places its cadences with a bird's equivalent of tremolandi and flutter-tonguing. (17)

As we extend the category of poetry to the conceptual, we might well extend the category of poet to the non-metaphorical songbird, starting with the lyrebird and butcherbird. As Stuart Cooke argues in an apposite article, citing Gerald Bruns, "Poetry 'ceases to be a genre distinction' and instead denotes a reformulation of forces, of what we thought was possible" (Cooke 6). Focusing on the male Albert's lyrebird, Cooke also makes claims for him as a poet (and the female as critic, 26), further noting his bricolaging ability, and pointing out that the bird's musical uniqueness in not relying on song, but also employing dance, and vines as instruments, for his courting performance (Cooke 25).

Returning to Stewart, the metalyrical nature of her ".romance" is (at least) two-fold. Read in relation to the two "Its" poems, "It Becomes: 1981" and "Trading Centres," we can readily imagine Stewart narrating "It's a date, it's a kiss, it's a kiss, it's a fuck" as if voicing a shifting mindless media commentary where romance displaces the display of politics. The "relieved" of the second line, while invoking relieved—perhaps as in relieved to have a date—is relieved of its middle "e" to be relieved, where the reliving refers to generic romantic gestures. The parodic nature of the poem, then, functions through the various practices of anagram, repetition, translation, but also through relieving the date from its expected sentimental affect. Stewart's poem is narrated like a love lyric, but also, in its emphasis on repetition and the generic, suggests the copying mode of the lyrebird. Stewart copies further, repeating the general mode of the lyric: as the poem continues it becomes explicitly a pastiche of E. E. Cummings. The poem concludes in a cut-up that manipulates clichés—some but not all, romantic—and enjambment to repeat the North American poet's mode:

'till death us do part
 ing is such sweet sor
 ry to s
 ay i
 love y
 ou are the way the truth and the l
 ight of the

 silvery moon rose is a rose is a rose is a way to s
 ay i
 love y
 ou are my love is love is love is love is love
 .is love

Stewart inserts Stein's repetitive rose tag in the midst of these morphing lines, which eventually lose their resemblance to Cummings in the repetition of the word "love." Though it may seem to interrupt the displacement of romantic sentiments, the quoting of "you are the way the truth and the light" (life in the Bible original) suggests a romantic affirmation and response via the doubting apostle Thomas to Jesus. Each cliché is revived by enjambment in that they are clipped and interrupted in cut-up fashion, but also because the lines as such, apart from the initial "'till death do us part" are no longer clichés, but read "ay i"/ "love y"/ "silvery moon rose is a rose is a rose is a way to s." Stewart breaks, and breaks from, cliché and North American poetics, through imitation, as a lyrebird might. Stewart's poem traces a trajectory from the "it" or object—or, subject as object—to affect via saying (or sayings): or,

from that of being to that of loving. Which is, after all, regardless of the borrowed content, the lyrebird's object.

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Michael Farrell (University of Melbourne) is the author of *Writing Australian Unsettlement: Modes of Poetic Invention 1796-1945*, published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2015. His poetry books include *Cocky's Joy* (Giramondo, 2015), *I Love Poetry* (Giramondo, 2017) and *A Lyrebird: Selected Poems* (Blazevox, 2017). He has four guest editing projects due out in 2018, for the Slovene journal *Literatura*, *Plumwood Mountain*, *rabbit* and a feature on 1980s-90s poetry for the *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature (JASAL)*. He also publishes the print poetry magazine, *Flash Cove* (flashcovemag@gmail.com). His most recent article, "'Deep Hanging Out': Native Species Images and Affective Labour" was published in *JASAL* in 2017.

Email: limecha@hotmail.com