

Charwei Tsai

Marco Chianchetti

Geraldine Barlow

Embassy of  
Transition /  
Roundtable  
Discussion

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The following conversation took place in an online chatroom, across three time zones, on 22 October 2015. Here Geraldine Barlow (Brisbane), Marco Chiandetti (Sydney) and Charwei Tsai (Ho Chi Minh City) discuss transition, death, ritual, seed as source of life, connection and oneness.



# A conversation between Geraldine Barlow, Marco Chiandetti and Charwei Tsai

GB — Geraldine Barlow  
MC — Marco Chiandetti  
CT — Charwei Tsai

20<sup>th</sup> Biennale of Sydney

**GB:** Marco and Charwei, hello. I was wondering if we could talk about the idea of transition first. Is this a concept you have been exploring over some time, or was it an interesting surprise when Stephanie proposed presenting your work as a part of the Embassy of Transition?

**MC:** I think, for me, Stephanie located this idea in some of the work I have made in the past. There is definitely a kind of movement in the work I make. Perhaps we could call it 'transition', or some kind of change of state over a period of time.

**CT:** Transition is a topic that I have always explored in my work, but when Stephanie invited me to create a work for the Mortuary Station, I started reading more specifically on death. Then, a couple of months later, my grandmother passed away, and it was my first experience of someone I am very close to dying. I felt that learning about this topic of death prepared me for the incident. It's an important transition in my life to learn about impermanence experientially. So, I guess I relate transition to death, given the site of the Mortuary Station.

**GB:** Did you have warning of your grandmother's death, Charwei?

**MC:** I have to agree that transition feels very closely related to death.

**CT:** She was 91 years old, but in relatively good health, so the death was not so expected.

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**GB:** It's sad to lose someone who has been with us so long, isn't it?

**CT:** It was witnessing the transition from a living being to a dying being that really affected me. Somehow it was less about the sadness, because she was old, and it was good in a way to see her relieved of all the bodily pains due to old age. It was just the first time to experience this process of transition that I find interesting.

**GB:** It is a very profound thing. Life seems to have even more meaning when we experience death.

**CT:** Yes, exactly.

**MC:** I think this was the change of state I was talking about. I lost my father many years ago. When you experience death, you have a very different relationship to life.

**GB:** Charwei, did the texts you have been working with help you in your experience? Did they seem different in relation to the experience?

**CT:** Yes, they helped me to understand that all these meanings and attachments we project on to people, things and events are all transitional.

**GB:** Marco, do you feel any connection to the experience of losing your father as you make your work for this site, and for the Biennale?

**MC:** Absolutely. It sits at the back of my mind when I make work. It's an interesting meditation for me.

**GB:** Marco, we spoke today about the process of making ... and Charwei, I know the meditative process of writing is central to your work ... do you think the physical process of making the work can create a kind of transitional state in itself?

**MC:** Only through making do you move through ideas. It's a transitional process.

Embassy of Transition



**CT:** Yes, I think ceremonies and rituals can support a certain transition in the mental state. I see the act of writing the sutra as a kind of ritual without it being necessarily religious.

**GB:** Sometimes I feel the mind can be very direct and logical, but when we busy ourselves, our hands, with a task, our minds can surprise us.

**MC:** Absolutely.

**GB:** What do you each think about the value of inherited structures and rituals versus those we create for ourselves? As artists you each invent, but you work from familiar languages of form or practice.

**MC:** That's complex to unpick. I inherited many structures from Christianity that have taken me a long time to deconstruct. As an artist, I have created my own rituals to deal with that.

**CT:** The inherited structures and rituals are useful to keep, if they are still relevant somehow. If not, they become empty shells.

**GB:** I think re-inventing what we inherit can be important in keeping things alive, but people have different views about what should change, don't they!

**MC:** This is true.

**GB:** Can I ask you each to give me a quick description of what you will be making for the Biennial?

**CT:** I am installing a work I started a year ago where I write the *Heart Sutra* on spiral incenses.

**GB:** I've seen pictures, Charwei. They are amazing, cone-like shapes, it seemed to me ... and they burn during the day?

**CT:**



**CT:** Yes. They are lit during the exhibition hours.

**GB:** Marco, you're working with birds, aren't you? Birds and incense ... both messengers, somehow.

**MC:** Ostensibly, the piece I am working on will consist of a series of aviaries. Each aviary will contain a sculptural environment that will focus on various themes centred around ideas of paradise, migration, asylum and sanctuary, and will use the 'body' or the 'corpus' as a vehicle to portray these ideas. I have been making sculptural forms that are cast directly from the body. Some of these sculptural forms will be made of seeds, so they will be actively consumed by the birds. The work is really based on an idea of the body going back into nature. I guess this links up with a Christian philosophy of the body going back to the earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust, but also with the funerary practice of the sky burial, where a body is left out to be consumed by birds. Birds are often seen as messengers of God.



**CT:** That sounds beautiful.

**MC:** Thank you, Charwei.

**GB:** That sounds quite amazing, Marco. A little bit spooky as well, with the 'bodies' being consumed. I feel excited to see it!

**MC:** Hopefully, it won't make people run away screaming.

**GB:** Charwei, are you still planning to make the element where people write on the seeds?

**CT:** These are seeds I found in Vietnam. Yes, I'm going to do that, still. I will do a residency at the Blue Mountains to find the seeds. I'm very much looking forward to that.

**CT:**



**MC:** This work is exquisite.

**GB:** Ah, beautiful... There are many interesting threads between both of your works!

**MC:** It seems so.

**CT:** Thank you~~

**MC:** How exciting. Charwei, maybe we should come together and make something small collaboratively?

**CT:** Yes, that would be so nice, since we still have some time.

**MC:** Absolutely.

**GB:** Seeds are interesting in relation to transition... They are kind of life in hiatus ... awaiting the next life ... or a carrier of life.

**MC:** It could be a lovely gesture to present a work together. I was thinking about how the seeds would germinate after they are passed through the birds.

**GB:** It is quite beautiful that just the two of you are at this special site. Have either of you visited it? How did you feel being in the space?

**CT:** Yes, I was there in July.

**MC:** I have visited a few times. It's also interesting that a lot of people don't know what it is.

**CT:** There's still a big space that I'm not sure what to do with on the unroofed part of the platform.

**GB:** It is quite a ceremonial building, isn't it?



**CT:**

**MC:** I am trying to work with the inside and outside area at the front of the building, and with how the spectator will navigate into the building. It's very imposing. I'm trying to make the work so it feels like a procession.

**GB:** Marco, for this project you plan to work with an introduced species, the Indian mynah. Is this the first time you have worked with an animal? A bird?

**MC:** I made a series of sculptures recently for birds to perch on.

**GB:** So the procession would be its own process of transition, or perhaps like a ceremonial procession in some way?

**MC:** Yes. But generally this is the first time I am working with birds, yes.

**GB:** An unexpected element!

**CT:** I was just flipping through 'The Conference of the Birds', a long Persian poem about a group of birds.

**GB:** What do they have to say to each other? It's just a fun story about all these different birds who gather to select their king.

**MC:** Ah, this is nice.

**GB:** I had a favourite book as a child about a birds' picnic, where the birthday bird, a budgie, loses all his feathers as the birds leap upon the cake made of seed. He gets lost in the forest and is very scared, but it all works out in the end.

**CT:** Yes, it's always fun to imagine what all the birds are chatting about.

**MC:** It's interesting that in a building which resonances death, we are both looking at life in the form of the seed. I like this a lot.

**GB:** It seems to me that you are balancing things out somehow.

**MC:** Absolutely. And that makes me think about this idea of transition again.

**GB:** Yes, the coiling form of the incense suggests that as well. The idea of the seed reminds me of a quote that came to mind when Stephanie first spoke to me about her interest in the in-between ... something that was meaningful to me in my teenage years! 'Perhaps that's what I feel, an outside and an inside and me in the middle, perhaps that's what I am, the thing that divides the world in two, on the one side the outside, on the other the inside, that can be as thin as foil, I'm neither one side nor the other, I'm in the middle, I'm the partition, I've two surfaces and no thickness, perhaps that's what I feel, myself vibrating, I'm the tympanum, on the one hand the mind, on the other the world, I don't belong to either.' It's from Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable*...



**MC:** I guess life is a transition between birth and death. But if you believe there is something before birth and something after death, then transition doesn't occur, does it? What you get is 'continuum'. Perhaps. I'm just playing around with this idea. I don't know if I have a definite fixed idea about it, to be fair. It's an interesting area to investigate.

**CT:** Yes. It reminds me of the concept of non-duality, talked a lot about in Buddhism and Sufism.

**GB:** Even if you believe in the before and after, there is still the material transition, isn't there...?

**MC:** I guess so, yes.

**GB:** Does the idea of non-duality emphasise this continuum, and perhaps try and discourage us from too binary a mindset?

**CT:** Yes. It's something some Buddhist communities are working on with scientists: the idea of the interdependence of all matter. Like, when we were growing up, we thought the atom was the smallest thing that existed, but now there are subatomic things..., etc.

**MC:** Right.

**GB:** Yes. Network modelling can be interesting in this regard, connecting so many different systems, and trying to understand these interconnections.

**CT:** Also, they are discovering that after a person is declared clinically dead, which means the brain and the heart have failed, sometimes there is still electron movements around the body.

**MC:** And that we are all interconnected on a subatomic level. The energy has to go somewhere.

**GB:** Do you think we can rewire energy, and perhaps thinking, through art ... making new connections?

**CT:** Yes. Maybe we don't exist as an independent and inseparable entity, as we often think of it.

**GB:** Marco, is the cage an interesting kind of boundary in your work?

**MC:** It's a nice thought to consider the boundaries of our life.

**GB:** The cage seems to contain the birds, but maybe it is also about home and habit ... or structure, somehow?

**MC:** Yes, I am thinking of them more like that. And also the body as a home and a structure. In a way, we inhabit spaces and our bodies.

**GB:** I suppose the body/cage can be home as well as a prison, or something more enabling, carrying us through the world.

**MC:** And there's a very thin layer, the skin, that separates the inside world from the outside world.

**GB:** Perhaps that takes us back to the Beckett quote ... the skin/surface ... but also to an awareness of an intense consciousness.

**MC:** Right. I am hoping the aviaries will have a very light, delicate feel, so you get the sense of seeing through them.

**GB:** Marco, yes, I saw a few images of your test cages. The massed group comes to form a larger body. How many birds will you include?



**MC:** I think it will depend on how many aviaries. Perhaps eight in each cage. And four aviaries.

**CT:** Where will you find the birds?

**MC:** Hopefully, we will borrow them.

**GB:** I hope they get on okay with each other!!

**MC:** They will be birds already in captivity, so they should be nicely settled. These are all things we are still working out.

**GB:** Great to hear the birds are hopefully settled. A friend of mine had canaries and then a new batch of babies were born and the teenagers fought the babies for the food! Charwei, do you have a core library you draw upon in your work? Or are the texts you work with always expanding - i.e. new ones, too?

**CT:** I think the main text I work with is the *Heart Sutra*.

**GB:** Has your understanding of the text deepened over time as you work with it?

**CT:** I'm reading mostly Buddhist texts and some poems.

**GB:** Do you think the process of writing changes our understanding?

**CT:** Yes. I think by practising art, I'm able to deepen my understanding.

**MC:** Charwei, how long does it take you to write on the coils?

**CT:** It takes a really long time - about a week for each one. And I might be writing a different text, a new text that I'm learning.

**MC:** Is it like a meditation for you?

**CT:** It's more like a spell.

**MC:** Wow.

**CT:** The words don't necessarily have meanings. They're more like sounds.

**MC:** Right.

**GB:** In some ways, then, burning the incense is like burning your time or breath even ... using up breaths... The new text isn't from the *Heart Sutra*, then?

**CT:** I'm trying to learn them in the Tibetan script.

**GB:** Wow!!

**CT:** I met a Tibetan teacher two years ago and I have been studying with him. It's all new for me.

**GB:** Do you then learn to read that script as well as write it, or is it a kind of copying exercise?

**CT:** It's more of a copying and reciting exercise. It's a spell for purification.

**GB:** Aha... So, is this a part of the long tradition of being a pupil?

**MC:** Is there purification in the burning?

**GB:** Is the purification focused on the self, or a wish to achieve this for the world?

**CT:** It's both. It's a funny thing, still very new to me, so I'm sort of making it up as I go.



**GB:** The world could do with it. It's a beautiful thing to search for.

**CT:** But sometimes I make up things, then I research later and find out some further links. Like I did this video work, Ah, where I recorded a bunch of people from different religions saying the syllable together and the form disintegrates. Then later I found out that in Tibetan the syllable 'ah' is related to oneness. It's nice when these coincidences happen.

**GB:** Marco, do you think there is something you are searching for as you develop your work? Is it a kind of poetic model of the world, in some way?

**MC:** I think of the reality that we all die and our bodies go back to nature. It's the idea of ashes to ashes and dust to dust in Christian philosophy.

**GB:** Oneness perhaps underlies this transition ... a movement between separate selves and an absolute interconnection.

**MC:** And that from the earth springs new life.

**CT:** Yes, exactly.

**MC:** We are all part of this cycle that will continue.

**CT:** Yes, some sort of cyclic existence.

**MC:** Absolutely.

**CT:** Instead of linear.

**MC:** We are nature, after all.

**GB:** Marco, what about the mynah bird in your work that displaces others? Something continues, but we don't always know what it will be...

**MC:** There's a lot of contention around the mynah bird and it's one of the reasons I chose this bird specifically. In some cultures they are seen almost as spiritual birds. Here in Australia they are classified as one of the most invasive species. I liked that tension.

**GB:** Yes, I suppose the invasive species here have their own spiritual traditions also!

**MC:** I guess the reality is that we are in an ever-changing ecosystem, and how do we deal with that?

**GB:** If we look back to the mass dinosaur extinction, there are precedents for these amazing periods of readjustment. You just don't want to be relying upon any one species to make it through.

**MC:** We are changing our environment, and various species are thriving with that change and others aren't.

**CT:** It's amazing how fast it's changing.

**MC:** I think humans are the invasive species. Haha. But we won't admit it.

**GB:** What do you think about transition in terms of different measures of time and human agency? The question of what our responsibilities are over long periods, over generations?

**MC:** We have such a responsibility to care for our environment.

**GB:** Do inherited traditions help us to carry responsibilities and values through time, or limit our capacity to invent and change?

**MC:** If you believe in interconnectedness, what we do to our environment, we are doing to ourselves.



**CT:** It's unbelievable how the environment is changing so much due to our human behaviour. It's happening in front of our eyes every day.

**MC:** Human beings have the capability to think our way out of this situation. We have a great ability to reinvent and change the world.

**CT:** It's a new phenomenon of our times.

**GB:** Yes, I like to think we'll create our way through, as well as draw upon inherited wisdom. I'm fearful, though, of the opposite!

**MC:** We are changing at a rapid rate through mass migration, and parts of the world are becoming unsustainable.

**GB:** You're looking at migration and the experience of refugees as well, aren't you, Marco?

**MC:** I am, yes.

**GB:** The refugee experience also seems to be one of transition. Moving from one place to another, between cultures. Are there any thoughts that either of you would like to share in conclusion? Or anything you wanted to say that hasn't come up?

**MC:** It was an interesting coincidence to use the Indian mynah and to learn recently that Australia's largest migrant population is from India.

**GB:** Yes, there's a big Indian community here ... Greek, Italian, Chinese. So many special communities. New folk, too! I feel that we've touched on so many things just by listening to and reacting to each other.

**MC:** It feels like we could carry on. Such a lot of ground has been covered.

**CT:** I am happy to have this conversation and to learn about Marco's work. I like how our works are very different, but that we both deal with humanity in some way. And having Geraldine to help put everything in context.

**MC:** Yes, it's wonderful. Diversity is key.

**GB:** Thank you both. I am really looking forward to seeing your projects. They will weave together in a wonderful way, I think!



An excerpt from

**Beast and Man in India:  
A Popular Sketch of Indian Animals,  
in Their Relations with the People**

John Lockwood Kipling

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**The Maina.**

—The Maina (*Acridotheres tristis*) is sacred to the Hindu God Ram Deo, and sits on his hand. In stories and talk the Maina is a popular favourite, which is natural enough, for the bird is one of the handsomest and most vivacious of the starlings; with an elegant tripping gait, like that of a neatly built ballet-girl, alert and brave in bright yellow boots. In flying a white bar on the Maina's wing produces a curious effect of rotation. Like crows and sparrows, these birds go to roost in great companies and make a prodigious fuss before they settle to rest, as if each bird were recounting the adventures of the day and all were talking at once.

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Kipling, John Lockwood, 'Maina', in  
*A Popular Sketch of Indian Animals,  
in their Relations with the People*,  
Macmillan, London, 1892, p.32



# On the Relationship between Birds and the Spirits of the Dead

Christopher M. Moreman

Christopher Moreman, 'On the relationship between Birds and Spirits of the Dead', *Society and Animals*, Volume 2014, pp. 1-22

## Abstract

Birds have an ambiguous symbolic significance across cultures throughout human history, ubiquitously relating to both life and death. Birds are routinely seen as portents of impending calamity and death, while they are also often thought to bear or steal spirits of the dead, sometimes even embodying those very spirits themselves. On the other hand, birds are also commonly associated with life, fertility, and longevity. As a form of Jungian archetype, birds reflect a fundamental aspect of human nature—the denial of death as finality through a desire for renewal, transformation, and rebirth.

## Introduction

In a wide range of cultures, birds are symbolically connected with death in a number of ways. They are often considered harbingers or omens of imminent death. Some birds are thought to steal souls from people who are dying or to act as psychopomps, carrying the souls of the dead to the “next world.”

The casual reader might be inclined to accept all three connections between birds and the dead (omens, carriers, and embodiments of the dead) as aspects of one overarching belief in a general bird–death connection. The various facets of the bird–death connection point to a more complex set of symbolic relationships. The symbolism of birds does not always focus on death, for instance, but just as often relates to fertility, longevity, and life itself.

Indeed, using Jung’s concept of the archetype, the bird symbolically encapsulates notions of transcendence and rebirth that are critical elements of the general human tendency to

ignore or deny one’s own mortality. Pointing to what might be taken as a problem for the application of Jungian theory to human–animal studies, “psychoanalytic theoreticians and practitioners directly study neither animals nor actual human–animal relationships. In psychoanalysis, an animal is not itself, but a symbol of human psychological processes—typically [...] the Unconscious”.<sup>1</sup> While it may be true that psychoanalysis does not deal directly with explicit human–animal relationships, it must be understood that, especially in Jungian psychoanalytic theory, the relationship is inherent in the archetype. Nothing is “itself” when perceived by any subject since all experience is subjectively mediated. The subject, thus, mediates its experience of the Other (whether human, nonhuman animal, or otherwise). With the archetypes, originating in inherited, instinctual areas of what Jung called the collective unconscious, common parameters for experience are established allowing for shared understanding across individuals. Our capacity to understand and evaluate such shared experience is limited by our ability to communicate, thereby we focus the phenomenological study of experience on the human, but there is no reason to exclude out-of-hand the possibility of extending such shared experience across species.

Jung explained, through the concept of the collective unconscious, that there are certain instinctual meaning structures (archetypes) common to all human beings. As unconscious contents of the mind, when these structures are recognized consciously they often evoke a noetic sense of having come from elsewhere, lending experiences of archetypes a numinous quality.



## Birds as Psychopomps

Birds are sometimes described as stealing or transporting the souls of the dead as psychopomps. The Romans, in apotheosis, released an eagle (itself associated with the god Jupiter) at the death of an emperor in order that it might “conduct his soul aloft”.<sup>2</sup> Hawaiian myth includes birds named Halulu, Kiwa’a, and Iwa, who carry souls to heaven.<sup>3</sup> Some Native American groups describe vultures as bearing the dead into the spirit world.<sup>4</sup> In Norfolk, swallows resting on a home predict death and are believed to snatch the soul away; if they are perched on a church, they are deliberating upon which soul to take.<sup>5</sup> Legends appear in both China and among certain Native Americans that owls snatch souls from the dying,<sup>6</sup> with some South-East Native American prayers intended to induce owls to steal the souls of enemies.<sup>7</sup>

In Jewish folklore, the owl is often linked to the legendary demoness, Lilith, who is sometimes blamed for infant death. A Jewish prescription to ward off the lethal effect of owls’ cries on children is to pour water in the courtyard as distraction.<sup>8</sup> The Jewish tradition is not unique; the Filipino *asuang*, a creature in the form of a bird, lurks beneath the house of a pregnant woman in order to snatch the baby at birth.<sup>9</sup>

Lilith, for her part, can be traced from Hebrew folklore into earlier Mesopotamia, related to the goddess Ishtar/Inanna.<sup>10</sup> The Mesopotamian goddess is herself linked to the owl, famously depicted in the eighteenth-century BC Babylonian bas relief (currently housed in the British Museum) with owls flanking her half-woman-half-bird form. Descending into the Underworld and returning therefrom mark her as a goddess of both death and rebirth, a cyclical pattern important to the overall symbolism of birds generally.

## Birds Embodying Spirits of the Dead

That birds are often believed to actually embody spirits of the dead themselves “is a widespread and extremely ancient belief”.<sup>11</sup> Buddhist rice offerings made to ancestral “house spirits” that are eaten by birds, while similar rites are performed for crows in parts of India.<sup>12</sup>

Similar beliefs can also be found in cultures not normally associated with reincarnation. Ezekiel 13:20 equates the *nephesh*—the soul or animating principle—with birds who are caught and released.<sup>13</sup>

## Discussion

### Explaining the Connection between Birds and Death

Many researchers have explained the bird–death relationship in naturalistic terms—an approach limited, however, to specific birds, thus ignoring the problem of the relationship’s near universality. Other birds are also related to death not only because they are active at night, but also because they have uncanny voices<sup>14</sup> suggests that the similarities of some bird calls to the human voice causes an even more uncanny sensation, and “a disturbing sense of affinity” between humans and birds is encouraged by their bipedalism and the fact that some birds might look a person “straight in the face with binocular vision”. I need not engage such naturalistic explanations any more than to point out that none of them apply universally to all birds. One could doubtless find individualized explanations designedly applicable to each and every bird, and certainly those who are interested in specific cultures will find such particulars useful, but they are unhelpful in determining a generalized explanation for the widespread death–bird association identified above.

An alternative “common sense” response would suggest that the connection is simple: birds, capable of flying, travel to heaven. Birds’ wings are a sufficient explanation for their connection to death.<sup>15</sup> That birds first drew “man’s eyes away from his immediate surroundings, and ultimately were the cause of the belief that the soul went to the heavens”.<sup>16</sup>

One might remain in the realm of avian travel by suggesting that the swiftness of bird flight indicates not only travel skyward, but also travel more generally over great distances, thereby pointing to an ability to move across worlds.

Jung (1969a) explains archetypes as inherent structures shared by all humans. Like the ability to construct language, or to make music, or even to smile, there are certain aspects of humanity that are instinctual. Jung suggests that there are symbolic structures that are also instinctually shared—these are archetypes. When one finds a common symbol being recognized across a wide range of cultural traditions, as in the relationship between birds and death, one might be dealing with such an archetype. This is not to say that the bird, specifically, is the archetype, but rather that something about birds manifests the archetype.

It is not as if there is an instinctual bird-image ingrained in the human psyche, but rather that particular instinctual unconscious contents are evoked most clearly by characteristics particular to



birds. We do not so much project meaning upon the animal, but instead we recognize the “voice” of the animal—what it “means”—on an unconscious level.

What, then, is the archetype evoked by birds? The question cannot be answered in terms of culturally specific beliefs or through naturalistic explanations, but by understanding the significance of the symbolic interactions in a generalized manner.

In flight “the bird is the most fitting symbol of transcendence”, relating it to the spiritual journeys of shaman-types the world over.<sup>17</sup> Experiences interpreted as “spiritual journeys,” “shamanic flight,” or “astral travel” are relatively common among across cultures. Even if not all cultures locate the world of the dead in a heaven, case studies on reports of out-of-body experiences (OBEs) describe, almost universally, the autoscopic witnessing of one’s body from above.<sup>18</sup> It is likely that this phenomenon accounts for what is termed “shamanic flight”.<sup>19</sup> The noetic quality inherent in such experience can be strong enough to convince the experient of its objectivity despite empirical evidence to the contrary. Certainly, a relatively common human experience of seeming to fly in a non-physical body draws a personal connection to birds.

The effortless with which a bird can ascend to such a view compared to the lengths a person must go to scale a mountain or climb a tree clearly gives the bird the edge. Further, while a bat can fly, it does not soar to the heights of a bird, and while insects might fly as high as birds, their size makes them unnoticeable at a distance, thus giving birds the apparent advantage in both height and distance. That certain birds also extend their range over water, and even below its surface, allows them even greater access to knowledge.

Birds emblemize access to locations and knowledge that is difficult if not impossible for humans to access—the mystery of death fits this description.

## On the Symbolic Connection between Birds and Life

Birds’ connection to birth, fertility, and life more generally.

The vibrancy of some birds’ colors, the forcefulness of their songs, and the swiftness of their flights are all strongly suggestive of life’s vim and vigor. The greatest sign of birds’ generative character, however, is their eggs. Eggs are often central to creation myths the world over.<sup>20</sup>

The Egyptian god, Seb, laid an egg that produced the sun; the Indian and Chinese creator-gods (Brahma and P’an lu, respectively) were born from cosmic eggs; and the African Dogon describe

how Amma, the creator god, fertilized himself in the form of a great egg. Eggs are also widely considered aphrodisiacs. By extension, birds also influence the language of sex and fertility with various bird-related words sharing a sexual double-meaning across cultures.<sup>21</sup> Birds clearly exemplify the vibrancy of life in many ways.

Birds combine a number of factors to embody the quintessential archetype for the transcendence of the fear of death and its resulting selfishness. In their winged swiftness and ability to reach places and see sights unavailable to land-locked humans, birds make the ideal messenger, whether between humans and gods or between the conscious self and the unconscious. Birds are associated with death not because some are black, eat carrion, or have nocturnal habits, but because they embody the fullness of life. Therefore, if one senses in a bird the presence of some departed loved one, one hears the voice of the unconscious calling upon the individual to live fully and unselfishly without fear for one’s own individual mortality.

<sup>1</sup> Shapiro, K. (2010). Psychology and human-animal studies: Roads not (yet) taken. In M. Demello (Ed.), *Teaching the animal: Human-animal studies across the disciplines* (pp. 254-280). New York, NY: Lantern. 260.

<sup>2</sup> Hare, C. (1962). *Bird lore*. London, UK: Country Life. 71-72; Ingersoll, E. (1923). *Birds in legend, fable, and folklore*. New York, NY: Longmans, Green and Co. 148.

<sup>3</sup> Beckwith, M. (1970). *Hawaiian mythology*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press. 91.

<sup>4</sup> Martin, L. (1993). *The folklore of birds*. Old Saybrook, CT: Globe Pequot. 210.

<sup>5</sup> Tate, P. (2007). *Flights of fancy*. New York, NY: Delacorte. 138.

<sup>6</sup> Martin (1993), 136.

<sup>7</sup> Krech, S. (2009). *Spirits of the air*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press. 162-163.

<sup>8</sup> Tate (2007), 94.

<sup>9</sup> Ratcliff, L. (1949). Filipino folklore. *Journal of American Folklore*, 62(245), 259-289.

<sup>10</sup> Baring, A., & Cashford, J. (1991). *The myth of the goddess*. London, UK: Penguin and Patai, R. (1964). Lilith. *Journal of American Folklore*, 77(306), 295-314.

<sup>11</sup> Rowland, B. (1978). *Birds with human souls*. Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press. xiii.

<sup>12</sup> Pandey, R. (1969). *Hindu Samskaras*. Delhi, India: Motilal Banarsidass. 255.

<sup>13</sup> Porter, J., & Russell, W. (Eds.). (1978). *Animals in folklore*. Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield. 82-83.

<sup>14</sup> Armstrong, E. (1958). *The folklore of birds: An enquiry into the origins & distribution of some magico-religious traditions*. New York, NY: Dover. 217-224; Tate (2007), 66,88; Rowland (1978), 9.

<sup>15</sup> Ingersoll (1923), 149.

<sup>16</sup> Waterbury, F. (1952). *Bird-deities in China*. Ascona, Switzerland: Artibus Asiae. 57.

<sup>17</sup> Jung, C., von Franz, M.-L., Henderson, J., Jacobi, J., & Jaffé, A. (1964). *Man and his symbols*. New York, NY: Doubleday. 151.

<sup>18</sup> Blackmore, S. (1982). *Beyond the body*. London, UK: William Heinemann; Green, C. (1968). *Out-of-the-body experiences*. Oxford, UK: Institute of Psychophysical Research.

<sup>19</sup> Eliade, M. (1968). *Le chamanisme et les techniques archaïques de l’extase*. Paris, France: Payot.

<sup>20</sup> Leeming, D. (2010). *Creation myths of the world* (2nd ed.). Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO. 313-314.

<sup>21</sup> Rowland (1978), xiv.