

Feathers of resistance: avian networks and interspecies agency in Tamora Pierce's Trickster Duology

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(Received: 1st February 2026; Revised: 27th March 2026; Accepted: 31st March 2026)

Abstract

This paper examines how Tamora Pierce's Trickster duology reimagines avian agency, arguing that crows function not as magical familiars or symbolic figures but as political and cultural agents within a multispecies world shaped by colonial power. Drawing on multispecies studies, feminist fantasy criticism, and young adult scholarship, the paper develops an explicit distinction between agency and instrumentality — defining agency as the capacity to alter political conditions through species-specific practices rather than through approximation of human intention. Where much YA fantasy treats animals as metaphors or instruments, Pierce's crows choose whom to report to, define the terms of their own participation, and sustain the emotional infrastructure of rebellion.

Focusing on crows aligned with the trickster god Kyprioth, the paper demonstrates how avian networks operate as infrastructural systems of communication, mobility, and care, extending the political reach of protagonist Alianne ("Aly") Cooper. The duology inverts traditional power dynamics: Kyprioth does not compel the crows but relies on their voluntary participation, positioning avian agency as the condition for divine power — not its product. The novels further differentiate crow actors by location, access, and relational history, embedding them in distinct spatial and political contexts that shape their risk exposure and proximity to power.

The paper also complicates this account by tracing how avian capacities are reshaped under imperial conditions of surveillance and administrative governance. Through the concept of enrollment, it shows how the same capacities that enable insurgent coordination can be redirected within systems of control, demonstrating that multispecies agency is politically consequential without being inherently liberatory. By attending to how crows traverse restricted spaces, relay intelligence, and sustain emotional endurance, the paper argues that resistance in the Trickster duology is a collaborative, multispecies achievement — and that YA fantasy is a productive site for theorizing distributed political life.

Keywords: Tamora Pierce; avian agency; multispecies studies; YA fantasy; colonial power; interspecies resistance

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Introduction: Animals in Motion, Agency in Young Adult (YA) Fantasy

Animals have long been active participants in human history, yet literary criticism often reduces them to metaphors/symbols or instruments—tools for reflecting human concerns rather than agents whose actions reshape political landscapes. As Erica Fudge argues, animals are treated "as if they were inanimate...objects" within human meaning systems (2002, p. 8), reinforcing a humanist asymmetry that reserves agency for human subjects alone. Kari Weil further argues that ethical relating has been "grounded in a humanism that gives permission to act unethically toward animals," sustained by defining the human through capacities — thought, reason, agency — from which animals are excluded (2012, p. 21). This erasure is especially consequential in young adult (YA) fantasy, where nonhuman figures typically serve as emotional auxiliaries or symbolic extensions of protagonists—rarely as actors with their own political capacities. As Susan McHugh observes, the aesthetic structures of metaphor, though "precariously supporting the human subject, seem unable to bear animal agency" (2011, p. 7). Yet YA fantasy, with its speculative worldbuilding, renders political structures visible as contested fields of power rather than naturalized backdrops. Farah Mendlesohn observes that in immersive fantasy, "the relationship of the characters to their world is itself depicted as political" (2008, p. 67), with power operating through infrastructures of surveillance, alliance, and constraint. If this is so, then YA fantasy offers a vital archive for examining how animals participate in political struggles—provided we bring the right conceptual tools to the reading.

Multispecies scholarship provides those tools by reconceptualizing agency as relational and political—not a property of individual subjects but an effect of embodied, world-making practices such as mobility, communication, and labor. As Donna Haraway argues, beings are constituted through "becoming with" one another (2008, p. 17); agency, in this view, is not a prior attribute but an emergent effect of relational practice, producing consequential actions that exceed human intention. Eben Kirksey and Stefan Helmreich further emphasize that multispecies research traces how "multispecies ethnography centers on how a multitude of organisms' livelihoods shape and are shaped by political, economic, and cultural forces" (2010, p. 545). For this paper, I define agency as the capacity to participate in such practices in ways that alter political conditions—whether by enabling, disrupting, or sustaining collective action. Crucially, this definition distinguishes agency from mere symbolism or instrumentality: animals act not by approximating human goals but through species-specific capacities that materially transform political realities. A crow that relays intelligence across a surveillance perimeter is not serving a metaphorical function; it is performing labor that restructures the conditions of resistance.

Tamora Pierce's *Trickster* duology—*Trickster's Choice* (2003) and *Trickster's Queen* (2004)—offers a particularly productive case study for this inquiry. Set in the Copper Isles after the Luarin¹ conquest, the novels depict a colonial regime maintained through violence,

¹ In Pierce's fictional racial system, Luarin characters are consistently described as light-skinned and positioned as the colonizing elite, while Raka characters are dark-skinned and structurally subordinated through enslavement, labor control, and legal exclusion. The Copper Isles were originally governed by the Raka House of Haiming under a tradition of female-only succession. The Luarin Rittevon dynasty displaced the Haimings, making the restoration of a Raka queen — not merely Raka governance — the rebellion's central objective. Although the novels are set in a secondary fantasy world, the racial hierarchy functions as an explicit analogue to colonial racial regimes and underpins the political and ethical conflict of the duology. Rittevon of Lenman, a Luarin conqueror, displaced the Haimings and systematically attempted to eliminate those with Haiming blood. A cadet branch survived through the Temaida family, whose bloodline merged with the Rittevons through the marriage of Mequen Balitang (a Rittevon duke) and Sarugani Temaida (a Haiming descendant). The rebellion's

enslavement, and elite consolidation. The protagonist, Alianne ("Aly") Cooper²—daughter of Tortall's spymaster, George Cooper—is captured by pirates and sold into slavery in the Copper Isles. There, she is recruited by the trickster god Kyprioth into a long-term political project to destabilize colonial rule. Aly becomes spymaster to the Balitang household, whose daughters carry the ancient Raka royal bloodline, and works alongside Raka rebels, resistance mages, and a network of crows³ sacred to Kyprioth. Her role is not to lead a dramatic revolution but to coordinate a slow, distributed accumulation of intelligence, sabotage, and care—all under conditions of surveillance and repression. Across both novels, rebellion emerges as a collaborative, interspecies effort, in which crows are not mere allies but central political actors.

What distinguishes Pierce's duology from other YA fantasy treatments of nonhuman actors is its explicit focus on nonhuman labor as politically consequential. Where Pullman's dæmons in *His Dark Materials* externalize human psychology, Rowling's owls in the Harry Potter series perform logistical functions without narrative consequence, and Le Guin's hawks in the *Earthsea* cycle serve as vehicles for human transformation, Pierce's crows operate as politically embedded actors whose species-specific capacities materially shape the outcome of resistance. Their agency is neither symbolic nor instrumental but relational and distributed, emerging through embodied practices of communication, mobility, and care. The novels invert traditional power dynamics: Kyprioth, the trickster god, does not compel the crows⁴ but negotiates with them as autonomous agents. In *Trickster's Choice*, he proposes a negotiated wager: If the crows keep Aly alive until the autumn equinox, he will reward each with a necklace of sparkling gems and colored beads—prizes that appeal to species-specific corvid desires (e.g., shiny objects) rather than human political values. The crows' decision to accept the wager is also framed as an act of solidarity with the Raka, whom the novels cast as their mythic 'cousins'—a kinship that aligns avian participation with the rebellion's goal of restoring Raka rule (Pierce, 2003, p. 173). The crows are not compelled; they debate the offer collectively, with some expressing skepticism before a senior female declares, "We want the wager" (Pierce, 2003, p. 66). Their participation is voluntary, governed not by loyalty to Kyprioth or Aly but by a contract between independent parties—one that respects the crows' autonomy and species-specific desires. Kyprioth himself admits that "we gods draw strength from the success of our worshippers" (Pierce, 2004, p. 15), positioning the crows not as instruments of divine will but as the very source of his power. Their independent actions—

central objective is therefore not simply the restoration of Raka governance but the enthronement of a "twice royal" queen — one carrying both Haiming and Rittevon blood — in fulfilment of the Kyprioth Prophecy. Although the novels are set in a secondary fantasy world, the racial hierarchy functions as an explicit analogue to colonial racial regimes and underpins the political and ethical conflict of the duology.

² Aly (Alianne Cooper) is the daughter of Sir Alanna of Trebond, the King's Champion of Tortall, and George Cooper, retired "King of the Thieves," now spymaster to King Jonathan. Raised within both courtly and intelligence networks, Aly learns the practical work of spying, observation, and information management "at her Da's knee" from childhood. Kyprioth, the trickster god and long-standing patron of George Cooper, recruits her into his project to destabilise colonial rule in the Copper Isles.

³ In *Trickster's Choice* and *Trickster's Queen*, the crows of the Copper Isles are sacred to the local patron god Kyprioth. In 462 HE, they enter into a wager with Kyprioth to keep Alianne of Pirate's Swoop alive in exchange for a promised collective reward. To fulfil this bargain, the crows teach Aly to understand their language and assist her through surveillance and message-carrying. The crows are figured as ancestral "cousins" of the Raka, "hatched out of the great crow nest" (Pierce, 2003, p. 173).

⁴ Raka custom holds it "bad luck to the house to hold a crow against its will" (Pierce, 2003, p. 81), reflecting a cosmological principle in which crow freedom is theologically necessary — trickster gods require the voluntary participation of their sacred birds, and cannot function through compulsion. In Raka cosmology, humans and crows share a common origin: the Raka are "said to have hatched from the same great crow nest, shedding their feathers to become human" (Pierce, 2003, p. 173), aligning avian participation with the struggle to restore Raka rule.

such as taunting Stormwings⁵ or gathering intelligence without Aly's direction—demonstrate agency that exceeds human coordination. This makes the duology a narrative laboratory for questions that multispecies scholarship is asking about agency, infrastructure, and political life.

This paper argues that Pierce's Trickster duology presents avian agency as a form of political labor—one that challenges anthropocentric models of resistance. Focusing on crows aligned with Kyprioth, I show how their networks of communication, mobility, and care extend the reach of Aly's intelligence operations, not as instruments but as co-architects of resistance. Methodologically, this paper adopts a relational, practice-based approach, analyzing three key practices: communication (information gathering and relay), mobility (flight as spatial disruption), and care (affective support as political infrastructure). The conclusion reflects on how this reading contributes to YA studies and multispecies scholarship, positioning YA fantasy as a vital site for theorizing distributed political life.

Theoretical Scaffolding: Multispecies Agency and Political Action

This paper draws on multispecies studies to conceptualize agency as relational, distributed, and enacted through material practices rather than as a property of individual human subjects. Such an approach allows the analysis of animals' participation in political worlds without reducing them to allegorical proxies for human concerns or resorting to anthropomorphic projections. By bringing multispecies theory into conversation with feminist fantasy criticism and young adult studies, the paper treats avian actors in Tamora Pierce's Trickster duology as both narratively consequential and politically meaningful.

The introduction outlined that literary criticism has repeatedly confined animals to symbolic or metaphorical roles, rendering them analytically inert. Multispecies scholarship challenges this confinement—but the challenge must be precise. Not every form of nonhuman participation constitutes agency. The distinction between agency and instrumentality is central to the framework developed here and requires explicit articulation.

An animal acts as an instrument when it is enrolled into a political project without the capacity to modify, refuse, or redirect its participation. A carrier pigeon delivering a message performs a logistical function; its contribution is real but structurally determined by human design. An animal acts as an agent, by contrast, when its species-specific capacities—movement, perception, communication, social organization—enable it to alter the conditions under which political action unfolds. Agency, in this sense, refers not to intention or moral reasoning but to the capacity to modify relational networks through situated practice. As Latour argues, agency should be understood in terms of what entities do within networks—what they "authorize, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, render possible, forbid" (2005, p. 72)—rather than in terms of interior mental states. What matters is whether an actor's participation changes what is possible for others in the network.

This distinction is crucial for reading Pierce's crows. The YA comparators introduced above illustrate the instrumental pole: logistical contribution without the capacity to modify,

⁵ Stormwings are an immortal, winged humanoid species whose origin is explicitly tied to human war-making. According to the novels, they were created through the dreams and nightmares of a human woman who had witnessed the horrors of war and imagined a species that would desecrate corpses and feed on fear and death, in the hope that their existence would impede future warfare. Nawat, a crow who of his own accord turns into a man, further recounts that the first Stormwings were born from volcanoes. Like other Immortals, Stormwings were later exiled from the Mortal Realms by humans for over four centuries, an event that marks the beginning of the Human Era (HE), a calendar system that continues to structure historical time even after their return.

refuse, or redirect participation. Pierce's crows, by contrast, choose whom to report to, decide which information to prioritize, withhold cooperation when they judge conditions unsafe, and form affective bonds that reshape the emotional infrastructure of rebellion. Their participation is voluntary, negotiated, and consequential—hallmarks of agency rather than instrumentality.

Donna Haraway's relational ontology provides theoretical grounding for this distinction. For Haraway, agency does not belong to pre-existing individuals but emerges through interaction: "The partners do not precede their relating; all that is, is the fruit of becoming with" (2008, p. 17). Animals are therefore not reducible to what they signify within human cultural narratives; they participate in relational processes through which shared worlds are produced. Applied to Pierce's duology, this means the crows' agency is not a magical endowment but an emergent property of their entanglement with Aly, Kyprioth, the Raka resistance, and the colonial surveillance apparatus they navigate.

Anna Tsing's work further foregrounds movement, encounter, and alliance as drivers of political and historical processes. Her concept of "contaminated diversity" traces how beings are transformed through encounters shaped by imperialism and economic extraction, producing forms of life that exceed human planning: "We are contaminated by our encounters; they change who we are as we make way for others" (Tsing, 2015, p. 27). Rather than treating history as the outcome of deliberate human design, Tsing insists on following how beings move across disturbed landscapes, encounter one another, and generate unintended consequences. This emphasis on mobility and practical collaboration is particularly productive for literary analysis, where narrative attention to motion and interaction can illuminate forms of agency that remain invisible within symbolic readings. In the Trickster duology, the crows' capacity to traverse restricted spaces—palace grounds, military encampments, island coastlines—generates intelligence that no human operative could obtain, and their independent taunting of Stormwings demonstrates action that exceeds Aly's coordination.

Importantly, multispecies agency also encompasses complicity and coercion. Animals may be enrolled into systems of control, surveillance, and extraction, becoming participants in political projects without authoring them. Juno Salazar Parreñas's ethnography of orangutan rehabilitation in Malaysian Borneo demonstrates how "colonial legacies and postcolonial institutions impact the way orangutans live and die" (2018, p. 4). Orangutans are incorporated into programs of care, reproduction, and visibility — managed by state agencies whose conservation targets reflect political ambitions rather than the animals' own social or ecological priorities (pp. 6, 87). Recognizing similar dynamics avoids romantic accounts of animal resistance and situates nonhuman participation within uneven and coercive political arrangements. Pierce's duology engages with this complexity: The crows' participation in resistance is voluntary, but it is also shaped by uneven power relations—between divine patron and mortal species, between human spymaster and avian operative, and between the colonial state that would exterminate them and the rebellion that offers them purpose.

Having established the multispecies framework, the question becomes: Why is fantasy—and specifically YA fantasy—a productive genre for examining these dynamics? Fantasy foregrounds the infrastructures, alliances, and asymmetries through which power operates across species in ways that realist narratives rarely do. Where realism tends to naturalize human exceptionalism, fantasy renders political structures visible as constructed and contestable. Fantasy scholarship has shown how immersive fantasy renders the political relationship between characters and their world explicit rather than naturalized (Mendlesohn, 2008, p. 67). Feminist readings of the genre have further demonstrated how secondary worlds encode and expose mechanisms of control — custom, divine sanction, and inherited hierarchy

— that constrain political participation along gendered and species lines (Altmann, 1992, p. 153). These narrative conditions allow animals to be positioned not as moral symbols but as actors embedded within political infrastructures whose movements, capacities, and alliances materially affect outcomes.

Young adult fantasy, in particular, is centrally concerned with power. Roberta Seelinger Trites argues that YA novels are fundamentally about how adolescents negotiate institutional authority rather than achieve individual self-realization (2000, p. 3). What distinguishes YA fantasy is that these negotiations frequently occur within worlds in which humans are not the sole political agents. Action unfolds through networks of obligation, assistance, and constraint that include nonhuman actors—a structural feature that makes the genre especially amenable to multispecies analysis.

Recent YA scholarship has further emphasized the genre's entanglement with global and institutional inequalities. The *International Journal of Young Adult Literature* explicitly positions YA as a cultural production formed by structural exclusion, precarity, and uneven access to visibility and legitimacy (Waller et al., 2020, pp. 1–5). Read through multispecies theory, YA fantasy becomes a particularly productive archive for examining how agency, responsibility, and political participation are imagined as relational and infrastructural rather than individual and heroic. Animals in these narratives participate in the same networks of communication, surveillance, and care as human characters, and their actions actively shape the possibilities and limits of resistance. Pierce's Trickster duology, with its structurally embedded avian operatives and its explicit inversion of human-divine-animal hierarchies, represents one of its most fully realized experiments.

Crows as Agents of Resistance: Communication, Mobility, and Care

The political role of crows in the duology is inseparable from their alliance with Kyprioth, the trickster god whose wager initiates Aly's entanglement in the Copper Isles' rebellion. In mythic and political theory, trickster figures are associated less with the creation of stable alternatives than with boundary-crossing, disruption, and epistemic disturbance (Hyde, 1998). As William Hynes argues, the trickster's defining practice is the violation of social, moral, and epistemic borders: "Breaking down division lines, the trickster characteristically moves swiftly and impulsively back and forth across all borders with virtual impunity" (Hynes, 1993, p. 34, as cited in Eller, 2023, p. 46). This understanding of trickster politics is key to reading Kyprioth's interventions in Pierce's narrative. Power is exercised not through the installation of a new governing order but through the opening of blocked passages, the destabilization of elite routines, and the strategic rerouting of information. Crows embody this logic through practices that erode imperial certainty. They operate as agents of misdirection, leakage, and interference—not by overturning sovereignty in a single event but by undermining the informational asymmetries on which colonial governance depends.

Their irreverence—often expressed through commentary, mockery, and refusal—signals a rejection of the legitimacy of elite authority. When the Balitang household first arrives at the royal palace in Rajmuat, "Stormwings circled the palace, snarling as crows darted in and out of their reach, calling crow insults" (Pierce, 2004, p. 59). This moment is not framed as simple moral commentary. It functions as a political tactic: by puncturing dignity and decorum in the most heavily surveilled site of imperial authority, the crows disrupt the affective and symbolic economy through which colonial power is stabilized and displayed. That the crows do this without instruction from Aly or Kyprioth—darting in and out of the Stormwings' reach

on their own initiative—demonstrates the kind of unsanctioned, species-driven action that distinguishes agency from instrumentality as defined in the theoretical framework above.

Trickster action in the duology is also explicitly non-heroic. Although Kyprioth is a singular celestial figure, his political effects are produced through dispersed networks of crows whose minor and banal acts accumulate into systemic disruption. Trickster politics is therefore collective and infrastructural: power emerges through coordinated interruptions and quiet rerouting rather than spectacular violence.

This distributed agency is most clearly visible in the crows' work as messengers and intelligence gatherers. The political efficacy of resistance in the duology depends on the circulation of information across spaces fragmented by surveillance, class hierarchy, and colonial control. Crows make this circulation possible. Their capacity for flight allows them to traverse cities, palaces, ports, and countryside with a freedom unavailable to human agents, bypassing checkpoints and guards that constrain human mobility. During the final assault on the palace complex, Aly receives live battlefield intelligence relayed through avian agents, including the report that "Crows drive archers from the wall and knock some off" and that "Some crows are shot dead" (Pierce, 2004, p. 424). These moments reveal an aerial layer of reporting that extends Aly's intelligence field—but they also register the cost of avian participation, a vulnerability that underscores the crows' status as agents bearing real risk rather than expendable tools.

These networks do not simply transmit information; they reshape the spatial politics of the Copper Isles by reallocating access to knowledge. Information that would otherwise remain localized—confined to a household, a faction, or a neighborhood—becomes mobile and actionable. Aly's effectiveness as a spymaster is therefore not reducible to personal brilliance. It is a function of being embedded within a multispecies intelligence ecology that extends her perceptual and communicative reach.

The novels are careful not to treat "the crows" as a uniform political bloc. Avian participation is explicitly differentiated by location, access, and relational history. This becomes clear in a pivotal exchange when Nawat—a crow who has taken human form to fight alongside the resistance—pushes back against the rebel leadership's assumption that the crows will simply serve as urban surveillance. "You have your human crows in the palace and the city and the households, picking up whatever news they have," he tells the resistance council. "My people cannot enter houses, and there is very little food for us here. We are here to win our wager with the god, not to sit about preening ourselves" (Pierce, 2004, p. 42). The term "human crows" refers to the Raka spies embedded in elite households—figures like Vereyu⁶, a part-blood Raka operative who represents the resistance network inside the palace itself (Pierce, 2004, p. 75). Nawat's distinction between human and avian operatives is itself an assertion of agency: the crows define the terms of their own participation rather than accepting roles assigned by human strategists. The rebel leader Ulasim⁷ concedes the point,

⁶ Vereyu is a part-blood Raka woman who serves as the resistance network's chief operative inside the royal palace compound. She manages a cell of Raka spies embedded within the palace household staff, coordinating intelligence gathering under conditions of direct imperial surveillance. Nawat's term "human crows" (Pierce, 2004, p. 42) refers to operatives like Vereyu — Raka agents who perform the same intelligence functions as the avian crows but within domestic interiors that birds cannot access.

⁷ Ulasim is a Raka man who serves as the Balitangs' head footman while secretly operating as the military commander of the Raka rebellion. He coordinates the conspiracy's armed forces, manages its network of operatives, and serves as the primary liaison between the rebel leadership and Aly's intelligence operations. He is killed during the final assault on the palace.

acknowledging that "At Tanair⁸ the crows were our watchers and patrols" (Pierce, 2004, p. 43)—recognizing that avian contributions are shaped by spatial context and cannot simply be transplanted from rural to urban environments.

This spatial differentiation matters politically. It shapes communicative fluency, trust, and risk exposure. Some crows operate primarily in mobile and marginal spaces—roads, forests, ports—where intelligence circulates horizontally through everyday movement. Others operate close to administrative and courtly centers, where information is valuable but dangerous and where agency is constrained by proximity to elite routines and institutional attention. Read through Tsing's emphasis on encounter and collaboration across difference (2015, pp. 27–29), agency in more-than-human worlds materializes through the capacity to move across boundaries and to connect otherwise separated sites. In the Trickster novels, avian mobility collapses distance, compresses time, and disrupts monopolies over what can be known and when it can be known. Where colonial power depends on regulating visibility and access, crows introduce infrastructural unpredictability, making total surveillance unattainable. This mobility also redistributes vulnerability across the resistance network. Because crows can carry messages and gather intelligence without being subject to the same disciplinary regimes as human agents, risk travels differently through the network. Resistance thus emerges not as an abstract political ideal but as a practical system in which embodied capacities determine who can perform which forms of political labor, and at what cost.

Beyond intelligence and mobility, crows perform a less visible but equally vital form of political labor: affective care. Aly's capacity to maintain the momentum of the resistance depends not only on strategy and secrecy but on emotional endurance—patience, steadiness, and the ability to remain functional under sustained threat. Nawat contributes directly to this endurance. In *Trickster's Choice*, he sits with Aly in the sun and runs his fingers through her hair—a gesture rooted in corvid preening behavior rather than human courtship. Aly notes that "the movement of his hand was soothing" (Pierce, 2003, p. 121), and in the same scene Nawat seamlessly transitions from this intimate care to relaying tactical intelligence about Raka troop movements around Tanair. The juxtaposition is striking: Care and intelligence are not separate registers but interleaved practices within the same relational exchange. Later, in *Trickster's Queen*, after a devastating loss within the household, Aly and Nawat share a meal in the servants' hall: "When Nawat came to eat beside her, they slid together until their legs touched and ate in silence" (Pierce, 2004, p. 348). The servant Boulaj later observes that Aly had seemed "a little lost" without Nawat—"Not lost as a spy, but lost as a woman. As if he'd taken a piece of you away that you needed" (Pierce, 2004, p. 348). Boulaj's distinction between being lost "as a spy" and lost "as a woman" is precisely the distinction that political theory tends to enforce between strategy and affect. The novel refuses this separation: Aly's operational capacity is entangled with her emotional grounding, and Nawat's care is part of what keeps the resistance infrastructure functional.

Political theory has often separated emotion from strategy, casting care as private or sentimental rather than political. Feminist social reproduction theory, however, foregrounds care as labor that supports life and enables collective action. As Tithi Bhattacharya argues, social reproduction theory makes visible the labor that sustains life itself, revealing that "labor dispensed to produce commodities and labor dispensed to produce people" form part of a single systemic totality (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 2). Read through a multispecies lens, the crows' everyday attentiveness, companionship, and emotional steadiness become forms of sustaining labor that buttress the resistance infrastructure. This affective labor is not framed as selfless

⁸ Tanair was an estate located on the island of Lomby in the Copper Isles.

devotion. The crows' futures are entangled with Aly's, and their actions are shaped by reciprocal dependencies rather than hierarchical obligation. Care emerges as political because it is embedded in shared risk and shared futures. It also functions as a counter-ethic to colonial governance: Where imperial authority relies on discipline, intimidation, and the management of visibility, the resistance network is sustained through trust, humor, and responsiveness. These practices do not replace secrecy or strategy; they make them livable.

Taken together, the roles crows play in the Trickster duology—disruptors, messengers, observers, and caregivers—demonstrate that resistance is not a human-only achievement. Political change emerges through coordinated multispecies labor in which different actors contribute distinct capacities. Humans bring institutional knowledge, planning, and social organization; crows bring mobility, perceptual acuity, and the relational labor that sustains endurance. Neither is sufficient alone. This reading echoes Kendra Coulter's multispecies analysis of labor and care, which argues that we must "recognise their labours, and that they are both sentient beings and social actors" whose work materially participates in the production and maintenance of social worlds (Coulter, 2016, p. 211). The crows' intelligence gathering, communicative coordination, and affective support operate as forms of political labor that actively structure the possibilities of resistance—labor that is species-specific, spatially differentiated, and consequential for the outcome of the rebellion.

Avian Agency under Empire: Constraint, Visibility, and Enrollment

The previous section established crows as politically consequential actors within resistance infrastructures. This section complicates that account by tracing how avian capacities are reshaped under imperial conditions of surveillance, coercion, and administrative routine. A multispecies framework does not guarantee emancipatory conclusions; it clarifies how nonhuman participation can be uneven, constrained, and sometimes captured—not because animals "choose" domination, but because their capacities are positioned within systems that redirect movement, attention, and information. In the Trickster duology, avian agency is therefore best understood as positional: defined by proximity to power and by the politics of visibility that organize colonial governance.

Colonial authority in the Copper Isles is sustained through managing visibility: who can observe, who can circulate, and whose knowledge is permitted to matter. Court and administrative spaces—palaces, elite households, and official routines—operate as infrastructures that regulate perception and access rather than merely staging political conflict. Aly, trained as a spymaster, reads power primarily as an information regime; she assumes that elite environments are saturated with watching and reporting. When she tells Vereyu that "There is always at least one" spy embedded within elite households (Pierce, 2004, p. 89), she is not offering a paranoid aside but naming the structural condition of courtly politics. Her subsequent use of controlled misinformation—calibrated for overhearing—shows that action in these spaces is shaped less by confrontation than by anticipatory calculation: who is listening, who will repeat what, and through which channels it will travel.

This is the condition under which avian agency becomes politically ambiguous. Birds moving in or near elite environments are subjected to heightened visibility. The same mobility that makes avian actors valuable to resistance—flight across boundaries, access to roofs and terraces, the capacity to traverse spaces closed to human movement—also renders them legible to governance as potential disruptions requiring management. A basic insight from surveillance theory clarifies the stakes: Surveillance is not simply information accumulation but the structuring of social space through asymmetries of visibility. As Foucault argues,

discipline "presupposes a mechanism that coerces by means of observation" (1975/2012, p. 170) — a modest, pervasive power embedded in routines and spatial arrangements rather than reliant on overt force. In the Trickster duology, visibility is never total—avian mobility repeatedly disrupts it—but imperial structures attempt to reassert control by absorbing movement within patterns of watching. Birds in court-adjacent space thus occupy an ambivalent positionality: Their capacity to traverse and observe can interrupt surveillance, yet their presence can also be folded into the informational environment that helps the empire anticipate risk. For example, when crows retreat from Stormwings over the water, neither courtly observer reads them as agents of resistance. Countess Tomang dismisses the Stormwings as troublemakers — "you know how the ugly beasts like to start trouble" — while Imajane⁹ responds with cold political calculation directed at her own courtiers, not at the crows (Pierce, 2004, p. 300). The crows' retreat registers within the court's interpretive framework only as background to elite concerns, illustrating how avian agency near administrative space can be absorbed into the informational environment of governance without ever being recognised as politically consequential.

The novels dramatize this ambivalence directly. In one scene, a confrontation between Stormwings and crows over the harbour ends with "the crows in retreat," and Aly crosses her fingers "in the hope the crows would go unhurt" (Pierce, 2004, p. 300). The courtly observers interpret the incident through entirely different registers: Countess Tomang dismisses the Stormwings, telling the regent not to believe them because "you know how the ugly beasts like to start trouble" (Pierce, 2004, p. 300). The regent Imajane responds with cold calculation, treating the aerial encounter not as animal behavior but as a signal within the political environment she monitors. Neither courtly figure reads the crows as agents of resistance—but their attention to avian-Stormwing conflict demonstrates how bird behavior near elite space becomes legible within the apparatus of governance, absorbed into courtly interpretation regardless of the crows' own intentions. The crows' retreat, moreover, registers a material limit: avian agency is not invulnerable, and proximity to power carries physical cost.

As established in the previous section, Nawat makes the spatial politics of this constraint explicit when he distinguishes between urban and rural operating conditions, noting that crows cannot enter houses and face resource scarcity in the capital (Pierce, 2004, p. 42). Pierce makes this positional differentiation structural rather than incidental. The political ecology changes between Tanair and Rajmuat: Agency is formed by access, routine, scarcity, and visibility—by what the built environment and administrative life make possible. Avian action is thus systemic and positional rather than a stable attribute of species or allegiance.

To describe how avian capacities can participate in governance structures without moralizing, this paper uses the term enrollment: the recruitment of nonhuman capacities into human infrastructures—state power, elite security, colonial routine—through patterned dependence and spatial routing rather than direct command. Enrollment is not reducible to overt coercion. Timothy Mitchell's analysis of colonial Egypt is instructive here because it shows how heterogeneous nonhuman agents—from environmental conditions to material systems—become part of governance when placed inside circuits of expertise, control,

⁹ Imajane Rittevon is princess-regent of the Copper Isles, ruling jointly with her husband Rubinyan, a Luarin nobleman who married into the Rittevon dynasty. Barred from ruling as queen in her own right under Luarin succession laws — which displaced the Raka tradition of female-only succession — she governs as regent on behalf of the child king Dunevon. In the scene discussed above, her cold reading of the Stormwing-crow encounter contrasts with Countess Tomang's dismissal of the Stormwings as mere nuisances — a courtly reflex that normalises imperial violence by treating its instruments as unworthy of political attention. Imajane refuses this evasion, treating the aerial conflict as a signal within the political environment she monitors.

circulation, and regulation (Mitchell, 2002, pp. 30, 33–35). Political order is produced not by sovereign intention alone but by stabilized arrangements that position bodies, materials, and movements within administrative logics.

This matters in the Trickster duology because the empire is not only military; it is logistical and administrative. It depends on stabilizing elite routines and containing dissent through information management. From the opening of Trickster's Queen, power is framed as an environment of reporting and filtering: The rebellion operates through "long-standing networks of spies" while Aly trains agents to collect intelligence, conduct sabotage, and manage information flows (Pierce, 2004, p. 3). In such a system, avian capacities—movement, observation, rapid relay—can become functionally useful to the very structures resistance seeks to undermine. Birds moving through elite space may register disruption, attract interpretive attention, or serve as signals within a broader ecology of monitoring, even when they remain aligned with insurgent goals. The text need not depict birds "working for the court" in a literal sense for enrollment to operate; the point is that proximity to administrative space can redirect the practical effects of animal participation.

Enrollment also clarifies why it is conceptually risky to collapse animal agency into resistance. Agency, as defined in this paper's framework, refers to the capacity to affect outcomes through participation in networks of action—not to a guarantee of liberatory politics. Under empire, avian capacities such as mobility and perceptual acuity can be treated as resources within regimes of monitoring and control. This is why positional differentiation matters: the same capacities that enable insurgent coordination in marginal spaces can, under courtly conditions, be redirected within patterns that stabilize elite visibility and authority.

Jonathan Saha's work on British rule in Myanmar underscores this broader point. As Saha argues, "Humans did not make, maintain, or contest empires alone" (2022, p. 1): Animals materially shaped how imperial power was assembled, while simultaneously posing challenges and imposing limits to imperial dominance (pp. 13–14). Empire was reliant on both the power of animals and the human labor that attended them, yet neither was fully under colonial control. Read through this lens, avian participation in the Trickster duology can be politically consequential without being morally simplified: domination, like resistance, is assembled through multispecies infrastructures of movement, perception, and routine.

This refusal of moral simplification is itself an interpretive commitment. Multispecies readings can easily slip into romanticization—"animals resist by nature"—or into moral projection that recodes animals as agents of oppression. Both moves reproduce anthropocentrism by treating animals as vessels for human ethical drama rather than as participants embedded in power relations. Complicity, in this framework, is understood structurally rather than psychologically. It does not require interior assent; it names the ways participation within a system contributes to that system's reproduction. Under colonial conditions in the Copper Isles, some avian nodes may reinforce control simply because they are positioned within spaces where their movements, perceptual capacities, and habitual routines coincide with elite visibility and administrative order. Such reinforcement may be incidental rather than chosen, but it remains politically consequential. This framing aligns with Haraway's insistence that multispecies entanglements cannot be morally purified. As she writes, "There is no innocence in these kin stories, and the accountabilities are extensive and permanently unfinished" (Haraway, 2016, p. 114). Analysis must remain within entanglement rather than seek distance, attending to how participation reproduces systems even without intent.

This is also where the genre becomes methodologically significant. By rendering political struggle through intersecting networks—human, avian, divine—YA fantasy makes distributed power narratively visible. Resistance depends on infrastructures of communication and care; domination depends on infrastructures of surveillance, routine, and administrative coordination. In the Trickster duology, that negotiation is widened into a multispecies field: Agency is not heroic purity or sovereign intention but relational participation within uneven networks—participation that can sustain transformation and can also be conditioned by constraint and enrollment.

Implications and Conclusion

This paper has argued that avian actors in Tamora Pierce's Trickster duology function not as symbolic familiars but as politically consequential participants within a multispecies world structured by colonial power. By analyzing crows aligned with Kyprioth as agents of communication, mobility, and care, the preceding sections demonstrated that resistance in the novels is sustained through dispersed multispecies labor rather than individual heroism. Crows extend the informational and emotional infrastructures that enable long-term political endurance — choosing whom to report to, defining the terms of their own participation, and providing the affective grounding that keeps the resistance operational under sustained threat. At the same time, the analysis showed that agency is not inherently emancipatory: Under imperial conditions of surveillance and administrative governance, avian capacities can be constrained, redirected, and enrolled into systems of control through proximity to elite routines and the politics of visibility. Political change in the duology emerges through relational networks that include human, nonhuman, and divine actors rather than through sovereign intention alone — and those networks are unevenly structured by access, risk, and spatial position.

These conclusions carry implications for two overlapping scholarly conversations. For young adult studies, this reading demonstrates that YA fantasy is a productive site of political theory not in spite of its speculative form but rather because that form makes distributed agency narratively visible. Gods, animals, humans, and institutions occupy the same political field; power operates across species without being reduced to symbolic representation. Protagonists in YA fantasy typically operate under structural constraint — young, socially marginal, politically vulnerable — so that their capacity to act depends on alliances, improvisation, and relational support. The genre therefore renders legible what multispecies scholarship increasingly emphasizes: that political worlds are co-produced through heterogeneous and uneven labor. Pierce's novels exemplify what Maria Tatar calls the "transformative power of words and stories" in childhood literature — narratives that move and reshape perception not by transmitting moral lessons but through the affective and cognitive intensity of encounter (Tatar, 2009, pp. xiv–xvi). The Trickster duology does not teach readers that animals are good or that resistance is noble; it trains them to attend to who moves, who watches, who carries information, and who sustains endurance — and to recognize that these capacities are distributed across species rather than concentrated in a human protagonist.

For multispecies scholarship, this paper's central methodological contribution lies in its shift from reading animals as symbols to reading them as networked actors whose agency is positionally differentiated. Rather than asking what birds represent, the analysis tracked what avian actors do — communicate, traverse, observe, care — and how those practices become politically consequential within particular spatial and relational conditions. This approach resolves an enduring tension in literary animal studies: how to recognize nonhuman agency

without collapsing into anthropomorphism. By treating agency as relational participation rather than interior intention, the analysis avoids attributing mental states that the narrative does not sustain while still taking animal practices seriously as politically consequential. And by insisting on positional differentiation — the distinction between rural crow patrols at Tanair and the constrained, dangerous operations near the palace in Rajmuat — the reading avoids the opposite error of romanticization, recognizing that the same capacities which enable insurgent coordination in marginal spaces can be redirected under courtly conditions within patterns that stabilize elite authority.

One further implication deserves emphasis. The Trickster duology reconfigures culturally sedimented assumptions about crows as disposable, ominous, or morally suspect. In many cultural imaginaries, crows are associated with dirt, death, and social marginality — species coded as unworthy of ethical attention. By positioning crows as indispensable political workers — intelligence gatherers, coordinators, and agents of care — Pierce invites young readers to recognize animal lives not through sentiment or symbolism but through situated labor and relational capacities within unequal political worlds. This is not a sentimental revision; it is a structural one. The novels do not ask readers to feel differently about crows. They ask readers to see differently — to attend to what crows do and what that doing makes possible.

As Pierce herself has stressed: "I've sneaked in a lot of what I think about the modern world, about modern politics." She rejects the assumption that fantasy offers a safe or apolitical refuge: "Everybody thinks fantasy is so safe, because we don't deal with heavy modern issues. Are you kidding? We do this stuff all over the place" (Flood, 2018). Read through a multispecies lens, the Trickster duology shows precisely how such political work unfolds — not through heroic individualism or human autonomy, but through the entangled, infrastructural, and uneven labor of humans, birds, and gods within colonial worlds. In doing so, it expands both the archive and the conceptual vocabulary through which more-than-human agency can be studied in literature — demonstrating that speculative texts aimed at young readers can offer unusually precise models of how multispecies political life is organized, sustained, and constrained.

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