Animals Squawking Their Mysteries: Narrative, Poetic Form, and the Nonhuman in Laura Jean McKay's *The Animals in That Country*

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Abstract

Scholarship on literature's engagement with the climate crisis has frequently highlighted the limitations of the realist novel vis-à-vis the scale and wide-ranging ramifications of climate change. This article reads Laura Jean McKay's *The Animals in That Country* (2020) as a powerful example of how the cross-fertilization of narrative and poetic forms can expand the imaginative reach of the novel. Through the plot device of a pandemic that enables human-nonhuman communication, the novel explores the fragility of nonhuman life in a world shaped by the violence of advanced capitalist societies. The poetic nature of the animals' utterances complicates interpretation and draws attention to the complexities of human-nonhuman entanglement, echoing—and performing through literary form—the ethical position formulated by Deborah Bird Rose under the rubric of "ecological existentialism."

Keywords: Ecological crisis, ethics, literature, nonhuman, pandemic

Introduction

"If a lion could talk, we could not understand him," Ludwig Wittgenstein famously wrote in *Philosophical Investigations* (2002: 190). Laura Jean McKay's 2020 novel *The Animals in That Country* revises Wittgenstein's dictum to something like: "If a lion could talk, he would compose verse. Largely, though, we still could not understand him." The novel's premise is that Australia is hit by a mysterious outbreak of "zooflu" that enables people to sense what animals say or, more precisely, the meanings they express through their bodies. As the pandemic spreads in the novel, this enhanced human-nonhuman communication increasingly

destabilizes both individual psychology and societal structures. For the reader, too, the inclusion of animal language is likely to have a defamiliarizing effect. The animals' verbalizations are presented as typographically demarcated poetic lines. These inserts, which range from a single word to several lines, create mystery and ambiguity and thus counterpoint novelistic progression: they accompany the narrator's quest for her son and granddaughter, but they also shift the focus from human kinship to the ethical complexities of regarding nonhuman animals as kin.

Situating McKay's work in relation to a number of debates in the environmental humanities, this article argues that the novel's combination of narrative and poetic language represents an innovative formal solution to the problem of how contemporary literature can engage the ecological crisis. The novel also ties in with issues explored by scholars in the field of animal studies, foregrounding the ethics of human-nonhuman entanglement as well as physical vulnerability as an existential common ground between human and nonhuman animals.[1] By lending a poetic voice to animals, the novel compensates for what is normally thought of as the "absence" of speech in animals, creating bodily and affective closeness to the nonhuman while preserving its alterity: empathy for nonhuman animals, in McKay's novel, is always disrupted and problematized by the ambiguities of poetic expression. In this way, *The Animals in That Country* displays the scale and reach of the violence inflicted on nonhuman animals by advanced societies, the kind of violence that leads to pandemics through intensive animal farming and habitat loss for wildlife (see Rodó et al. 2021). The novel points to the significance of corporeal connections across the human-nonhuman divide as a way past this structural violence of capitalist exploitation.

I organize my discussion around four keywords that help illuminate McKay's literary operation: body, voice, form, and ethics. Human and nonhuman embodiment, as we will see, is reimagined by the novel as a fraught site linked to both violence and compassion. The literary conceit of giving voice to nonhuman animals expands the novel's storyworld (and the reader's imagination thereof) beyond what Monika Fludernik has called narrative's "anthropomorphic bias" (1996: 13)—that is, its tendency to foreground human or human-like characters. In McKay's novel, by contrast, corporeal transactions with the nonhuman are inscribed in literary

[1] For an overview of animal studies, see for example the *Edinburgh Companion* edited by Lynn Turner, Undine Sellbach, and Ron Broglio (2019). Ethical issues will explored here through the lens of Deborah Bird Rose's (2011) discussion, but equally relevant is work by Anat Pick (2011) and Thom van Dooren (2014).

form and bring out an ethics of complexity in human-nonhuman relations that chimes with Deborah Bird Rose's (2011) philosophy of "ecological existentialism."

Inspired by Aboriginal thinking and mythology, Rose's ecological existentialism is primarily an ethics of interconnectedness with the nonhuman. Her philosophy centers on the acknowledgment of the vitality and vulnerability we share with animals, but it also involves awareness of the inevitable violence that comes with proximity: "To live in the world, to live in connectivity, is always to be living in proximity to death as well as to life, to cause death as well as to nurture life. The life that moves through us all does not give us morally unambiguous or pure sites to occupy" (2011: location 2584). This insight rings particularly true for societies in the Global North, whose capitalist, extractive practices are jeopardizing the existence of individual animals and entire species through pollution, habitat loss, and climate change.[2] For those living in these societies, whatever their beliefs and personal choices, it is impossible to ethically and materially distance themselves from nonhuman suffering. Thus, instead of offering a moral silver bullet, Rose's philosophy invites us to recognize that the search for justice in human-nonhuman relations can prove extremely unsettling. This uneasy proximity with the nonhuman world is, as I will show, one of the main foci of McKay's engagement with ethical questions in the novel.

The Animals in That Country is part of a long tradition of speculative fiction imagining the possibilities of human-animal communication, a topic taken up by McKay (2017) herself in her PhD dissertation.[3] In this article, however, I would like to position McKay's novel vis-à-vis a different corpus—namely, that of contemporary "climate fiction."[4] While the novel never refers to climate change directly, its unique combination of narrative and poetry speaks to debates on the imaginative challenges that literature faces when it engages with the climate crisis. Commentators such as Rob Nixon (2011) and Amitav Ghosh (2016) have drawn attention to the limitations of realist fiction when it comes to representing the scale and ramifications of the ecological crisis. McKay's work showcases the possibilities of literary experimentation that puts pressure on the conventions of realism, not just through its speculative premise (the zooflu outbreak), but also through the cross-pollination of storytelling and poetic language. This

[2] The topic of species extinction has been addressed by numerous scholars working at the intersection of animal studies and the environmental humanities; see, e.g., Heise (2016).
[3] Also relevant here is Sherryl Vint's (2010: chap. 3) discussion of animal communication in science fiction.
[4] See Goodbody and Johns-Putra (2019) for discussion on the scope and definition of "climate fiction."

hybrid form, as I will argue below, proves particularly valuable in dismantling the more or less explicit anthropocentrism of Western narrative practices.

Body

The link between literature and the body is anything but straightforward. When we say "literature," the first associations that come to mind are likely to involve philosophical or emotional depth, not the physicality of reading. Yet scholars have productively explored the embodied nature of literary practices. In broad strokes, they have followed two separate routes into the nexus of literature and the body. The first route builds on poststructuralist thinking on the cultural specificity of human embodiment: as work by, for example, Michel Foucault (1975) and Judith Butler (1993) has shown, every society provides a scaffolding for embodied experience that reflects and often imposes, for example, questionable notions of gender and race. Literature offers a range of perspectives on this cultural shaping of the human body, by exposing its contradictions and the often unconscious and transindividual affects it gives rise to.[5] A second route scholars have taken to probe literature's engagement with the body draws inspiration from the mind sciences, and particularly from a set of theories known as "embodied cognition." Starting from the 1990s, researchers operating in fields as diverse as philosophy of mind, cognitive psychology, and neuroscience have argued that our minds are not linked to our biological bodies as if by accident; on the contrary, our physical make-up shapes the way we think at a fundamental level.[6] Embodied cognition has also made its way into the study of literature, leading to a flurry of work on how the science of the embodied mind can shed light on numerous aspects of literary writing, reading, and reception.[7]

Both poststructuralist and cognitive approaches to the body have been invoked in studying the intersection of literature and environmental questions. Heather Houser (2014), for example, builds on Stacy Alaimo's (2010) poststructuralist work on the "transcorporeal" openness of the human body—that is, the way in which toxic pollutants and environmental disease destabilize the simplistic separation between the body and the seemingly "external" environment. Houser (2014) develops this kind of insight into a series of close readings of contemporary American fiction that stages the affects surrounding environmental illness. In parallel, Alexa Weik von Mossner (2017) has drawn on embodied cognition to discuss literature's power to expand the reader's perception of the nonhuman. By involving readers' bodies through a cognitive-level

[5] For a useful overview of this poststructuralist-inspired approach to the body in literature, see the collection edited by Hillman and Maude (2015).
[6] See, e.g., seminal work by Varela, Thompson, and Rosch (1991) and Lakoff and Johnson (1999).
[7] For instance, see Bolens (2012), Kuzmičová (2014), and Caracciolo and Kukkonen (2021).

mechanism known as "embodied simulation," Weik von Mossner argues, fiction (including both literature and film) can evoke vivid experiences of environmental catastrophe but also create an empathetic bond between human readers and animal characters. This form of "trans-species empathy," as Weik von Mossner (2017: chap. 4) discusses it, is the result of literary or narrative strategies that flesh out the mental lives of animals, often by anthropomorphizing them. However, as Weik von Mossner (2017: 118) acknowledges, anthropomorphism is not without its dangers, because it can lead to the misrepresentation of nonhuman experience.

Of the approaches to the body briefly outlined in this section, Weik von Mossner's account of the literary imagination of trans-species relations is perhaps the most directly relevant to McKay's *The Animals in That Country*, but Alaimo's and Houser's focus on environmental disease and transcorporeal connection can be helpful, too. The plot of McKay's novel is triggered by a pathogen, a strain of the influenza virus that "affects cognition in humans," leading to "enhanced communication between humans and nonhuman animals" (2020: 33).[8] This viral agent replicates silently in the novel: little attention is paid to how the virus is transmitted or how the protagonist and the characters around her contract it. The main manifestation of the contagion is that the human characters are suddenly able to sense the meanings expressed by the animals in their vicinity. The narrator, Jean, is a middle-aged woman who works as a guide at a wildlife park somewhere in Australia's interior. Her initial response to news of the outbreak is a skeptical one: deeply involved in her personal struggle against alcoholism and in a troubled family history, Jean does not take the idea of human-nonhuman communication very seriously, just as she dismisses the views of "animal libs" and "greenies" (2020: 13). But when the virus does reach her and life at the wildlife park is upended, Jean experiences a profound transformation in her relationship with animals, particularly through her complicated friendship with a dingo named Sue.

The novel insistently foregrounds the embodied nature of Jean's interactions with Sue (and other animals) after the contagion. Sue, we read, "isn't talking through her mouth or her mind but, like the mice and the things in the trees, through her whole damned body—upright and narrow, very proper in her way. Her voice isn't made of words either. She's speaking in odours, echoes, noises with random meanings popping out of them" (2020: 71). Saying that the virus allows the characters in McKay's novel to *hear* the animals around them *speak* is thus a

[8] In this article I will not be able to examine McKay's engagement with the discourse surrounding zoonosis (or the transmission of disease from animals to humans), but I refer to Tessa Laird's (2021) reading of the novel for further discussion.

problematic simplification or at least a metaphorical reading of what is, effectively, enhanced nonverbal communication. Of course, these bodily cues are still presented in verbal form by the novel, but only through the defamiliarizing lens of poetic language. As Jean repeatedly reminds us, the poetic lines interspersed throughout the narrative are an approximation of bodily meanings that are fundamentally nonverbal and synesthetic, since they combine multiple sensory modalities—olfaction and sound, in this passage. The nonhuman animal's body thus becomes directly expressive and communicative, without the mediation of verbal language: "Meanings wick off its whiskers, clink and scatter, the bones under its skin" (2020: 183).

This embodied understanding of meaning dovetails with work in animal studies that, inspired by phenomenology, points to the significance of embodied experience in human-animal interactions. Traci Warkentin, for example, describes her phenomenological method as follows: "I use forms of bodily movements, especially patterns in such movements, as well as the physical and social environment of an organism, to interpret what it is doing and thus, to some degree, its experience" (2012: 130).[9] McKay's literary conceit—the zooflu pandemic—builds on the possibilities of nonverbal communication with animals, deepening them to the point that embodied meanings can be expressed (poetically) with the level of detail and precision that is typically associated with verbal language. Nevertheless, the verbalization of nonhuman experience does not lead to a sense of transparency, it does not suggest that the inner lives of animals can be brought out in the open. Narrative theorist David Herman (2018: chap. 4) uses the term "Umwelt modeling" to discuss literary strategies that evoke, in a highly detailed way, the perceptual and emotional world of nonhuman animals, affording readers a glimpse into what it is (or might be) like to be an animal. McKay's poetic translation of embodied meanings does *not* aim to model animal Umwelten, or at least not in any straightforward way. When, for example, the dingo Sue repeats the phrase "Toy Breeder" (2020: 169) as a comment on Jean's ex-partner Graham, the metaphor is clearly meant to be dismissive, but its exact meaning remains undecidable. McKay's appeal to poetic language refuses to completely anthropomorphize animal meanings; therefore, the novel does not offer complete access to animal Umwelten but only foregrounds patterns of nonverbal communication that remain, nevertheless, ambiguous and partly unreadable.[10]

[9] See also work by Kenneth Shapiro (1997), which converges with Warkentin's phenomenological approach.

[10] See also the discussion of unreadable animals in contemporary fiction in Caracciolo (2022: chap. 3), which builds on Porter Abbott's account of "unreadable minds" in *Real Mysteries* (2013: chap. 6).

One of the effects of this literary strategy is that trans-species empathy in Weik von Mossner's sense becomes more difficult. If one defines empathy as a form of perspective-taking—as Weik von Mossner puts it, the fact of taking "an insider perspective on animal experience" (2017: 133)—then the novel doesn't consistently afford the reader such possibility, because it never presents a clear-cut animal Umwelt model we can project ourselves into. Jean's interactions with Sue would seem to offer the best opportunity for trans-species empathy, with the reader's engagement with the dingo following and building on the narrator's own developing relationship with her. Jean would thus serve as a "bridge character," to borrow Erin James's (2019) term, mediating between the human reader and a nonhuman character. But even in this case the perspective-taking remains incomplete, riddled with the uncertainties created by both Jean's uneasy relationship with the dingo and the poetic language in which Sue expresses herself. In other instances, empathy is trumped by sympathy or compassion, which are forms of "feeling-for" (from an outsider's perspective) rather "feeling-with."[11] For example, in a striking scene, Jean and Sue come across, and help liberate, a group of factory pigs trapped in an abandoned truck (2020: 115). The animals have never experienced the outside world and long, poetically, for "more" of it. Given the overt emotional cues deployed by this scene, Jean's compassionate gesture of freeing the pigs calls for a similar, sympathetic response from readers, but their empathetic engagement with the pigs' Umwelt remains extremely limited. All in all, the poetic nature of nonhuman "speech" in *The Animals in That Country* resists a straightforward appropriation of animal Umwelten—and thus undercuts the illusion that trans-species empathy can ever be complete or uncomplicated: instead, while the body is foregrounded as a means of fostering trans-species relations, the alterity of nonhuman meaning is preserved.

Voice

Voice, as I have already suggested, is an imperfect metaphor for the nonverbal communication at the heart of McKay's novel, and yet it is a metaphor frequently taken up by the narrator herself. Even if Sue's "voice isn't made of words," auditory language remains a productive blueprint for the embodied meanings expressed by animal bodies. This tendency towards auditory language reflects the significance of sound in human-nonhuman interactions, which is the subject of an insightful study by ecocritic Ben De Bruyn (2020). Discussing a range of contemporary novels, De Bruyn highlights the role of "acoustic contact zones" (2020: 22) between humans and animals in fiction as an alternative to the more codified, and dualistic,

[11] For more on the distinction between empathy and sympathy, see Coplan (2004).

language of vision. Paying close attention to animal sounds as they are evoked in novels unsettles an anthropocentric apprehension of narrative space as an inert (or, at best, atmospheric) background against which the human protagonists' vicissitudes are projected. Instead, filtered through awareness of animal sounds and how they shape narrative representation, the space of the setting becomes a rich site for human-nonhuman encounters. As De Bruyn puts it, "the activity of such backgrounded animal lives [can] puncture the boundary of setting and turn anonymous, undifferentiated [nonhuman] agents into characters proper" (2020: 265). De Bruyn's point can be linked to the psychology of narrative comprehension: for readers, making sense of narrative involves creating mental models of the situations evoked by the text, also known in psycholinguistics as "situation models" (Zwaan and Radvansky 1998; Caracciolo and Kukkonen 2021: 33–35). Such models reflect various aspects of the text, including the characters' physical position in space as well as relevant features of their spatial surroundings. By presenting the "voices" of nonhuman animals, fiction can enrich the readers' situation models by bringing the backgrounded setting, where nonhuman animals are normally located, to the forefront of the reader's attention. The result is the highlighting of the transcorporeal (to use again Alaimo's term) connectedness between human subjects, the environment, and the nonhuman creatures that inhabit it.

The Animals in That Country offers a number of examples of the expansion of readers' situation models via nonhuman language. This is perhaps most evident in passages that present the verbalizations of animal assemblages that are located far from the narrator and remain relatively undifferentiated in their collectivity (unlike Sue, whose individuality stands out). These animals offer a nonhuman "chorus" of sorts, broadening the reader's imagination of the storyworld (the situation model) to include both human and nonhuman perspectives. Here, for example, the narrator is anxiously looking for her granddaughter, Kimberly, when she runs into a mob of wallabies:

> The wallabies thump the ground with their hind legs, hiss and snort, telling each other,
>
> I woke up. Where I
>
> was
>
> beaten and —
>
> But Kimberly isn't there. She's not anywhere.
>
> Where.

Where. (2020: 95)[12]

The echo-like repetition of "Where" serves as a reminder of the nonhuman presence in the narrator's proximity: it mirrors Jean's concern over Kimberly's disappearance, intimating an emotional convergence between human and nonhuman responses. In other instances, however, the nonhuman chorus is far more threatening. Aided by Sue, Jean tracks down her son and granddaughter on a beach, where a crowd has congregated to listen to whale song. The whales sing about homecoming, their lines being periodically inserted in Jean's narrative: "People float and swim around him [the narrator's son, Lee], ears and faces down, while eight or ten enormous grey mammals breach the bay. Let's go home" (2020: 190). Throughout this scene, we come across statements such as "Come home" or "Welcome back," interspersed with the characters' frantic attempts to locate Kimberly and save Lee from drowning. The whales' vocalizations are as mysterious as they are deadly: like many others, Lee perishes while trying to reach the cetaceans. The refrain-like return of whale song expands the reader's situation model by underscoring the tragic distance between the narrator and her son, but also between human longings and projections and the enigmatic singing creatures. The scene makes explicit an element of nonhuman menace that was arguably present from the outset and that complicates the novel's reimagination of human-nonhuman relations, suggesting that there can be no embodied closeness without the possibility of violence.

In the novel's final chapters, especially, the nonhuman chorus becomes more disjointed as Jean's infection worsens and—following a pattern we have already observed in other characters affected by the zooflu—she starts "hearing" more and more animals, including insects:

> I feel blindly for the path I came along. The insects keep flinging themselves around the pond light.
>
> OH MOON.
>
> DON'T LET MY LIFE PASS.
>
> Other whispers. Goggling in the dim. Wherever I stand, little bodies scream out. Where I run, they die beneath me.
>
> HARD.
>
> FUCK-HARD. "Sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry." (2020: 228)

The capitalized phrases render the insects' language, whereas the final remark is uttered by Jean herself as she apologizes for crushing insects simply by moving around—a recognition of what

[12] Following the novel, I use a different typeface for the animals' utterances throughout this article.

Rose (2011) characterizes as the inevitability of violence in human-nonhuman relations. The reader's mental model here comes to encompass the microworld of insects, a scale of reality that is normally backgrounded in everyday human perception: the disorientation that the reader may experience in response to these sudden scalar shifts mirrors the narrator's mental breakdown as the animals' voices disrupt her ability to make sense of her spatial surroundings and fuel her guilt at the suffering she is unintentionally inflicting.

The form of McKay's novel is thus deeply polyphonic, with a high degree of differentiation not just between human and nonhuman language (the first prosaic, the second poetic), but also among styles of nonhuman language: insects, for example, express themselves in a profoundly different way from mammals, and Sue is clearly the animal whose "speech" is most nuanced and articulate. Likewise, individual animals communicate differently from animal collectives such as the whales. This polyphonic structure fulfills a number of functions: it creates a soundscape that extends the reader's imagination of the storyworld beyond usual human-scale expectations; simultaneously, it draws attention to the nonhuman as a constant, but typically overlooked, presence that alternatively underscores and counterpoints the human characters' emotions. Whether it is presented as sympathetic or menacing, this embodied presence hints at the multiplicity of overlaps between human and animal worlds: for the protagonist, as we have seen, this multiplicity proves destabilizing and overwhelming; for the reader, it can lead to a clearer sense of the uneasy proximity of the nonhuman within the seemingly human-centric reality we live in. But the trans-species encounter, as I will argue in the next section, is also the result of an encounter between narrative and poetic form.

Form

In discussing contemporary literature and the ecological crisis, numerous scholars have highlighted the limitations of the realist novel when it comes to encapsulating the realities of global warming, ocean acidification, and species extinction. The spatial scale and temporal reach of these phenomena resist the conventional patterns of novelistic progression, with their focus on individual characters and relatively self-contained communities. If, as mentioned above, narrative across the board displays an "anthropomorphic bias" (Fludernik 1996: 13), the Western tradition of *novelistic* narrative only deepens this bias, voicing individual human subjectivity at the expense of the more-than-human collective, playing a role in the affirmation of a liberal human subject that is deeply complicit in today's ecological crisis, and so on. Obviously, any generalization about a genre as complex and diverse as the novel is bound to run into exceptions and counterexamples. But, by and large, it seems sensible to claim that the

Western novel requires significant rethinking vis-à-vis the temporally and spatially distributed processes that we refer to as the ecological crisis.

The most influential formulation of this argument can be found in Amitav Ghosh's study *The Great Derangement* (2016), but Rob Nixon's focus on the "slow violence" of environmental devastation in the Global South brings out similar "representational, narrative, and strategic challenges" (Nixon 2011: 2) that call for new ways of thinking about the novel. Writers, and scholars, have started turning to fictional genres that seem more attuned than the realist novel to the disruptive nature of capitalist societies' impact on ecosystems: particularly science or speculative fiction and weird fiction have attracted more and more attention through their ability to imagine futures shaped by a radically altered climate, or in which the boundary between human societies and nonhuman entities is unsettled.[13] The genre of climate fiction ("cli-fi" in short) has become the focus of expectations about the novel's ability to cope with the dramatically changing climate, largely through hybridization with non-realist modes of fictional representation: cli-fi, writes Stephanie LeMenager, "is a relatively new structural response to changing social and ecological conditions. . . . [It] marks another way of living in the world—a world remade profoundly by climate change" (2017: 222).

By tying cli-fi to the evolving nature of literary genre, LeMenager brings up the question of *form*—that is, of the patterns and conventions that underlie fiction and can be affirmed, rejected, or modified by particular authors and audiences. Literary form, as LeMenager acknowledges, is a matter of both stylistic or narrative technique *and* affective impact, because literary strategies create a certain affective dynamic in the reader. Moreover, following New Formalist accounts of literature (Levine 2015), the forms adopted by literary works are always in dialogue with larger patterns or formations existing in society. Thus, the ecological crisis puts pressure on both forms of social organization (particularly in the capitalist and highly interconnected Global North) and on novelistic attempts to capture and narrativize anthropogenic transformations in the Earth system. Form, thus, becomes a central site for negotiating the climate crisis through literary representation.[14]

McKay's *The Animals in That Country* is certainly not a straightforward example of cli-fi, if only because climate change is never thematized or even mentioned by the characters. Nevertheless, the pandemic that sparks the novel's plot—and that substantially reshapes

[13] See, for example, Benjamin Robertson's (2018) account of Jeff VanderMeer's weird fiction.
[14] This line of argument is developed in *Narrating the Mesh: Form and Story in the Anthropocene* (Caracciolo 2021).

human-nonhuman relations, as we have seen—has broad resonance vis-à-vis the ecological crisis. The novel's foregrounding of nonhuman voices ties in with posthumanist thinking that rejects the discourse, entrenched in Western modernity, of human exceptionality (e.g., Wolfe 2010): no longer set apart by their mastery of verbal language, the human characters find themselves existing uneasily within a more-than-human, polyphonic world. The materiality of the body, including its transcorporeal extensions, creates common ground between human and nonhuman characters in the novel, undercutting any strong distinction between human subjectivity and nonhuman life. But, at the same time, the difficulty of the animals' poetic language opens up a space for an ethical recognition of the nonhuman as an alterity that can never be fully mastered or anthropomorphized.

Thus, despite not offering commentary on climate change per se, the novel targets the kind of humanist ideology that has led, historically, to the mindless exploitation of the planet's resources. It is, after all, well known that, through habitat loss and reduced distance between human communities and wildlife, the ecological crisis increases the likelihood of pandemics. Further, McKay's imaginative exploration of human-nonhuman relations holds special significance in times of catastrophic species extinction: the narrator's obliviousness to nonhuman life before contracting the virus, along with her dismissive attitude towards "animal libs" and "greenies" (2020: 13), are a human-scale version of our society's indifference to mass extinction.

However, it is the coexistence of narrative and poetic forms in the novel that makes it stand out in the landscape of contemporary literature engaging with environmental themes. The title itself is drawn from a 1974 poem by Margaret Atwood (1987: 48–49)—a poem that centers on the opposition between "that country" (where animals are endowed with personhood and respected in both life and death) and "this country" (our world, where animals have "the faces of / no-one"). McKay's pandemic forces the characters to recognize and attend to animal ways of life, bringing those separate "countries" into complicated coexistence. But that coexistence also involves a cross-fertilization of literary forms, as I have already suggested. Jean's adventures take the form of a quest narrative as she travels to the coast to look for her son and granddaughter. Parallel to this quest is Jean's psychological development, another narrative pattern that takes her from relative indifference to an increasing recognition of kinship across the human-nonhuman divide, as I will discuss in the next section. In themselves, neither the quest nor the heightening of individual awareness are particularly original forms for organizing novelistic narrative: on the contrary, they reflect the bias for individual protagonists and human-

scale events that, as we have seen, makes it difficult to capture the ecological crisis within a novelistic plot. However, the imaginative reach of the novel is greatly expanded by the inclusion of poetic language—the animals'—that enters into a productive tension with the comparatively conventional narrative forms of the text.[15]

After Jean comes down with the zooflu, the novel starts presenting the animal voices around her as poetic fragments, with frequent line breaks and a different typeface from the rest of the text. "They've got a weird way of expressing themselves," comments Jean (2020: 83), and indeed the animals' embodied utterings are highly metaphorical and frequently ambiguous or downright cryptic. The wallaby Wallamina, for example, remarks when entering Jean's home:

> I saw a shadow of
>
> me
>
> up but the law
>
> says down. (2020: 96)

There are, of course, many ways of interpreting Wallamina's lines, which could suggest a budding self-consciousness or longing for life after confinement ("the law"). What is important here, however, is less assigning unambiguous meaning to the animals' remarks than taking in the contrast between their open-ended, poetic form and the utterly prosaic context in which they are embedded, reflecting also Jean's lack of appreciation for the nuances of poetic language. In other words, the poetry interspersed throughout the novel eludes the teleological "pull" of the narrator's quest: it creates islands of metaphorical ambiguity and even uncertainty that the reader cannot fully dispel, but only accept in their resistance to the narrator's easily legible motivations (rescuing her family and surviving the pandemic). The animals' poetic language thus opposes the linearity of narrative form, evoking the magnitude of the nonhuman's challenge to human ways of thinking. If conventional narrative templates such as the quest tend to domesticate the nonhuman or capture it through an anthropomorphic grid, the ambiguity of poetic language preserves the inherent strangeness of both nonhuman animals and human societies' imbrication with them. "The animals around us squawk their mysteries and we're none the wiser" (2020: 48), reflects Jean before being exposed to the virus: the poetic nature of the animal voices spliced into the novel ensures that readers may come into close contact with

[15] Narrative theorists have already discussed such interactions between narrative and poetic forms, particularly with regard to the narrative potential of poetic texts. See, e.g., McHale (2009) and, in an ecocritical context, McAllister (2021).

nonhuman subjectivity and still be "none the wiser"—a mystery that largely prevents them from empathizing with the animals, and also from projecting anthropocentric assumptions onto them.[16]

McKay's literary strategy of combining narrative and poetic form can thus be seen as a step towards what Selmin Kara and Cydney Langill (2020) call "weird realism"—a form of literary realism attuned to the disturbing strangeness of the ecological crisis. Not only is this weirdness the result of a representational strategy typical of speculative fiction—the mysterious pandemic that enhances human-nonhuman communication—but it is deeply grounded in the tension between narrative and poetic forms. Ultimately, if the novel as a genre cannot fully come to terms with the challenges of the environmental crisis, a productive way forward may be to hybridize the novel with non-narrative forms. McKay's *The Animals in That Country* offers a stimulating example of this hybridization.

Ethics

As Jean's quest progresses, so does her relationship with the nonhuman—largely, thanks to her increasingly intimate bond with Sue. In the novel, this bond is signaled by the related metaphors of the "pack" and "kinship," which emerge in both Sue's poetic language and Jean's interactions with the dingo. Sue declares: "My pack. It / wants something" (2020: 103). While the exact boundaries and "wants" of the "pack" remain vague, Jean and her family are undeniably part of it. Precisely because of its ambiguity, in the course of the novel the word "pack" comes to refer to a feeling of loyalty and togetherness that transcends species divisions, explaining why Sue is so willing to help Jean find Kimberly and Lee. Yet Jean initially rejects this rhetoric, deploying an exclusionary concept of kinship in an exchange with Sue:

> I struggle to my elbows. Heart to heart with a hairy dingo. "Want to find my kin."
>
> Here.
>
> I'm here.
>
> I flop down again. "Not you. The real ones." Her body goes so quiet. (2020: 135)

Sue's interjection affirms a notion of trans-species kinship that echoes Donna Haraway's (2015) focus on "making kin": for Haraway, "the stretch and recomposition of kin are allowed by the

[16] See, again, the discussion in Caracciolo (2022: chap. 3) for more on how the mystery of animal minds can become productive in environmental fiction.

fact that all earthlings are kin in the deepest sense, and it is past time to practice better care of kinds-as-assemblages (not species one at a time). Kin is an assembling sort of word" (2015: 162). In the exchange between Jean and Sue, the human narrator resists this "assembling" force, falling back instead on a biologically grounded notion of kinship ("The real ones") that reflects intraspecies relations. But Jean's dualistic policing of the notion of kinship is not long-lived. When, in the novel's penultimate chapter, Jean reflects on her failure to save her son and locate her granddaughter, she states: "my Lee, buried down in the beach. Kimberly taken up north in a cop car—as much my blood as this dingo" (2015: 222). After experiencing Sue's selfless devotion to her "pack," Jean has thus learned to embrace the possibility of trans-species kinship.

It is important to stress that the rhetoric of kinship in the novel does not amount to a naïve celebration of trans-species relations. Just as empathy for the nonhuman is always problematized by the mystery of animals' poetic language, Jean's recognition of kinship is accompanied by heightened awareness of pain and death as structuring forces in human-nonhuman interactions. There is the suffering inflicted by practices such as intensive animal farming—a suffering evoked, for example, by the already mentioned episode in which Sue and Jean free a group of pigs from an abandoned truck. In turn, the nonhuman itself can represent a threat for the human characters: Sue bites Jean's hand twice, and whale song causes people—including Lee—to drown. If Sue and Jean are brought together by kinship, suggesting a broader convergence between human and nonhuman life, it is not an uncomplicated convergence. That, too, is part of Jean's embrace of trans-species kinship. The passage that precedes the last quotation reads as follows: "The sound that comes out of me is strong as decay. I grieve for everything dead and alive. Sue is calling for a family—well, so am I. For a home—where is it?" (2015: 222). The grief Jean expresses here is also an acknowledgment of her moral implication in violent processes that the zooflu pandemic, by lending poetic voice to nonhuman animals, registers in disturbing detail.

If there is an ethics of human-nonhuman relations that emerges from the novel, then, it revolves around a sense of closeness that can be compassionate as well as painfully uncomfortable: the language of kinship doesn't erase or paper over these difficulties, but it offers means of confronting them intellectually and affectively. In this respect, McKay's *The Animals in That Country* ties in with Rose's philosophy (already discussed in the introduction) of "ecological existentialism." Like Haraway, Rose highlights the importance of the kinship metaphor in understanding human-nonhuman relations. As Rose explains, "ecological existentialism . . . proposes a kinship of becoming: no telos, no deus ex machina to rescue us, no clockwork to

keep us ticking along; and on the other hand, the rich plenitude, with all its joys and hazards, of our entanglement in the place, time, and multispecies complexities of life on Earth" (2011: location 850). More explicitly than Haraway, however, Rose insists on the moral complexities of kinship, how it involves a proximity "to death as well as to life" (2011: location 2584) that can prove profoundly unsettling. Particularly in the context of advanced, industrial societies like the one portrayed by McKay's novel, an ethical stance on animals involves an acknowledgment of the structural presence of violence in human-nonhuman relations. Embracing nonhuman kinship thus becomes an affectively complex gesture that combines a sense of shared vulnerability, guilt at the violence in which one is implicated, and a recognition of alterity—that is, of how animal life cannot be subsumed under human categories or fully anthropomorphized.

In her shifting relationship with Sue and with the nonhuman voices that surround her, McKay's protagonist enacts this ethical complexity. Far from being a linear trajectory from ecological obliviousness to all-encompassing insight, Jean's psychological development reflects growing awareness of the intricacies and ambiguities of trans-species connection. For the reader, too, the ambiguities of literary form—via the animals' poetic utterances—underscore that awareness. Ultimately, there is no contradiction between recognition of kinship and the mysteries squawked by the animals' embodied language, because both point to the impossibility of finding a "morally unambiguous or pure site" from which to view the nonhuman, to quote again Rose (2011: location 2584).

Conclusion

The Animals in That Country illustrates how contemporary literature can develop useful tools to negotiate the ecological crisis and its uncertainties on a thematic, affective, and formal level. Thematically, the novel builds on the plot device of a pandemic to probe human-nonhuman relations and display the violence industrial societies are inflicting on nonhuman life, via intensive farming, habitat destruction, and pollution leading to a loss in biodiversity. Lending voice to nonhuman animals raises the affective stakes, for the protagonist—whose attitude towards the nonhuman undergoes profound transformation as the plot unfolds—and possibly for the reader as well. The defamiliarizing potential of this encounter with the nonhuman is inscribed in the novel's literary form, which combines narrative progression and poetic language. As I have argued in this article, while the novel's plot falls into the relatively conventional pattern of a quest, the animals' poetic utterances prove much more recalcitrant to interpretation: as the verbal presentation of nonverbal, bodily meanings, they are rich in

uncertainties and ambiguities that preserve—rather than resolve—the mystery of nonhuman life. Trans-species empathy is thus modulated by respectful acknowledgment of alterity, a stance that has direct ethical implications in that it prevents the human characters—particularly the novel's narrator—and the readers from projecting human(-centric) assumptions onto animals. The novel resonates with Rose's ecological existentialism in that it highlights the intricacies of human-nonhuman entanglement—how ecological insight cannot be reduced to a facile embrace of the nonhuman but requires an often uncomfortable interrogation of our own complicity in violence. *The Animals in That Country* thus turns what we normally regard as the absence of animal voices into a distressing, but ethically productive, sense of nonhuman presence in the novel's storyworld.

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