Biting Distance: Interspecies Empathy and The Limits of Posthuman Ecotopia in *The Animals in That Country*

Gaia Zaccaro

Abstract
This article reads Laura Jean McKay's *The Animals in That Country* (2020) as a contemporary reworking of apocalyptic and ecotopian imaginary. Rather than staging catastrophe as a cataclysmic event, the novel frames apocalypse as the consequence of a perceptual transformation: the spread of a pandemic that enables humans to comprehend nonhuman modes of communication, thereby unsettling established hierarchies of species and illusions of human control. Building on this premise, McKay questions the promises and limits of posthuman ecotopian thinking. Animals consistently frustrate the models through which they have been historically instrumentalised, sentimentalised, or idealised, exposing the instability of fantasies of seamless interspecies communion. At the same time, the novel foregrounds the psychological, emotional and social costs of enforced empathy, showing how unmediated exposure to nonhuman suffering may result in denial and violence rather than care. Drawing on ecocriticism, posthumanism and affect theory, the article suggests that *The Animals in That Country* moves beyond the opposition between ecotopian naïveté and dystopian paralysis, outlining, instead, an ethical horizon grounded in precarious coexistence, in dialogue with Haraway's (2016) injunction to stay with the trouble and with recent accounts of ecological precarity.

Keywords: apocalypse, empathy, interspecies communication, nonhuman, kinship.

these once-living
and phosphorescent meanings
fading in my hands
I try to but can't decipher
(Atwood 1968, 11)

1. Introduction

As Lawrence Buell (1995) once remarked, apocalypse might be "the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary

Textus 2-2026, pp. 115-134
ISSN 1824-3967
© Carocci Editore S.p.A.

environmental imagination has at its disposal" (285). From the "shadow of death" that descends upon the quaint little village in Rachel Carson's (1962) opening parable to *Silent Spring*, apocalyptic narratives have become an almost intuitive choice, both a response to the escalating environmental crisis and a valued rhetorical strategy meant to raise awareness about ecological issues. Despite the persistence of end-of-the-world visions though, neither the end nor the world imagined to be ending is ever quite the same. Far from constituting a fixed narrative template, apocalyptic scenarios function as culturally responsive frameworks. Their estranging effect allows for a critical reappraisal of the worlds they depict, prompting reflection on what is perceived to be at stake: which forms of life are deemed expendable, which values become non-negotiable, and which modes of coexistence remain imaginable. In this sense, apocalypse is always plural, historically situated, and culturally specific (Carey 2019; Garrard 2023).

In recent years, the enduring appeal of apocalyptic narratives has been profoundly reconfigured by the conditions of climate change. As Amitav Ghosh (2016) observes, the vast temporal and spatial scales involved, together with the gradual normalisation of events once perceived as exceptional or improbable, strain conventional modes of representation. Within this context, apocalypse is no longer primarily envisioned as a sudden catastrophic rupture, but rather as the cumulative effect of economic and political models that persist even as their unsustainability becomes increasingly evident. This shift is accompanied by a growing sense of epistemic disorientation. As Marco Caracciolo (2022b) suggests, environmental crisis progressively erodes humanity's ability to anticipate, model, and meaningfully interpret complex systems. Contemporary apocalyptic imaginaries thus register not only material and ecological degradation, but also a deeper loss of predictive and interpretive agency, foregrounding uncertainty as a constitutive feature of the present.

Laura Jean McKay's *The Animals in That Country* (2020) emerges within this fraught context, aligning only partially with the conventions of end-of-the-world storytelling. A work of speculative fiction, the novel is set in a present-day Australia abruptly overtaken by the spread of an infection known as the "zooflu" or "zoanthropathy". Rather than causing physical illness, the virus

affects human cognition, enabling communication between humans and nonhuman animals by allowing people to encode and decode previously imperceptible nonverbal signs. The narrative follows Jean Bennett, a middle-aged alcoholic wildlife ranger who, after a difficult life, tries to cling to the few family relationships she has left, most notably her young granddaughter Kimberly. When the "talking-animals" disease first begins to spread, Jean welcomes it, convinced of being more attuned to animal companionship than to human interaction. A belief that is constantly tested throughout the novel. After her wayward son Lee kidnaps Kimberly, Jean sets off across the country accompanied by the enigmatic dingo Sue, whose mind is constantly pulled between her loyalty to humans and the call of the wild. Meanwhile, the relentless influx of animal speech – ranging from the suicidal terror of laboratory mice to the pitiful yearning for freedom of livestock pigs and cows, to the eerie call back home of whales – soon becomes both individually and socially overwhelming. As the virus proliferates, society unravels. Infrastructure collapses under the weight of fear and confusion, while the government offers little more than isolation measures and militarised control. Many people grow increasingly aggressive, some retreat into religious fantasies of human exceptionalism, others develop obsessive attachments to specific animals, while most simply suffer psychological breakdowns. In the end, the mandatory administration of a vaccine restores the 'natural' order of things, yet it remains uncertain whether the human/animal divide can ever truly be reconstructed as it once was.

McKay explicitly draws inspiration from Margaret Atwood's poem "The Animals in That Country" (1968), whereby "that country" and "this country" are sharply opposed in terms of their treatment of animals: in the former, animals possess social standing, rituals, and respect, as "they have the faces of people" (2), whereas in the latter they are fleeting and disposable, "their eyes flash once in car headlights and are gone. […] They have the faces of no-one" (3). McKay collapses these two countries onto the same plane; rather than producing a harmonious convergence though, their encounter exposes a destructive incompatibility. Crucially, the novel engages with the traditional opposition between human and nature that has long influenced apocalyptic imagination, but in a non-traditional way, since catastrophe unfolds as the consequence of an expansion

of human perceptual capacity. This form of apocalypse is revealing on several levels. First, it interrogates the value societies assign to the privilege of remaining unaware of the suffering that underpins their ways of life. Most people, to reference Ursula K. Le Guin's (1973) renowned short story, would not walk away from Omelas but would strive to forget the child imprisoned beneath it. Second, animals are not portrayed as overtly hostile: in the early stages of the outbreak, it remains unclear whether they even register the cognitive shift brought about by the virus. What destabilises the social order is not animal aggression, but their nonconformity to human expectations, a breach sufficient to undermine established hierarchies of species. Finally, the narrative challenges the simplistic assumption that erasing the differences between human and nonhuman subjects is either possible or inherently desirable, or that such erasure would necessarily lead to mutual understanding and a more just society. The empathetic stress triggered by forced interspecies communication, alongside the persistence of radical unknowability despite increased proximity, exposes coexistence as a far more demanding ethical project than visions of seamless communion tend to suggest.

Due to its innovative approach to representing the human-animal relationship – made even more salient by the novel's publication during the 2020 Covid pandemic, itself closely tied to the issue of ethical animal treatment and the risks posed by its absence – *The Animals in That Country* has attracted considerable critical attention. To mention a few, Laird (2021) traces significant connections between the novel's events and key contributions in Animal Studies, focusing in particular on McKay's attempt to render as faithfully as possible the Umwelten of nonhuman animals. Duckworth (2025) examines the new soundscapes that emerge once communicative barriers are removed, highlighting how they come to engender both hope and despair. Caracciolo (2022a), in turn, foregrounds McKay's literary strategy of signalling animal nonverbal language through a range of formal strategies – including shifts in font, variations in text size and, more broadly, a structure that often recalls poetry – which foregrounds its? opacity and the difficulty it poses in fostering interspecies empathy.

Against this backdrop, the present article examines how *The Animals in That Country* articulates a contemporary form of apocalypse. The first section examines how animals foreground the

loss of human control by resisting the expectations through which they have traditionally been understood and managed; the second turns to the affective consequences of forced empathy, exploring both the characters' responses and McKay's strategic implication of the reader.

2. Ecotopian expectations and interspecies kinship

The possibility of interspecies communication has repeatedly surfaced as a fault line in Western ways of conceptualising the human/animal divide, functioning both as an impossibility instrumentalised to justify the deficit model of animal representation, and, for at least part of the environmental movement, as a utopian horizon through which human exceptionalism might be challenged. As John Berger (2008) observes, prior to the consolidation of capitalist modernity the "unspeaking companionship" animals offered to humans as a species held so much value as to generate the conviction that it was humans who lacked some crucial capacity to speak with animals, hence the persistence of myths and legends about exceptional figures, such as Orpheus, who could communicate with animals in their own language (6). This desire for multispecies dialogue is frequently materialised in environmental literature in a particular form of utopia known as ecotopia. Born at the intersection between '60s and '70s new wave science fiction and the first environmental movements, ecotopias, Garforth notes, are distinguished by their attempt to articulate "visions of the 'good life' for human societies [which] both respect ecological integrity and incorporate a radically revised conception of human self-realization" (2002, 101).

Central to these visions is not only a reorganisation of society in more ecological terms, but also an effort to recalibrate how human/animal relations are imagined. Although ecotopian narratives often remain marked by residual forms of anthropocentrism – evident in the persistence of species hierarchies, the instrumental use of animals for human ends, or the marginalisation of animals within narrative structures (Alberro 2019) – they nonetheless seek to unsettle traditional modes of perception and to challenge the normative distance through which nonhuman life is typically apprehended. Gaining traction from the recent more-than-human turn, contemporary ecocritical discourse has increasingly sought

to articulate non-anthropocentric perspectives and foreground the co-construction and permeability of species, environment and matter (Vermeulen 2020). *The Animals in That Country* engages directly with this discourse, yet rather than simply affirming the ethical promise of ecotopia, McKay questions the impact the abrupt convergence of human and nonhuman worlds may generate.

This destabilisation stems less from any intrinsic violence on the part of animals than from their persistent refusal to align with the heterogeneous and often contradictory expectations humans have historically constructed for them. Rosi Braidotti's (2013) account of human/animal relations provides a useful conceptual entry point for understanding these encounters. She identifies a limited set of modes through which humans interact with nonhuman animals: an oedipalised relationship (the animal is infantilised or reduced to a metaphor for human traits), an instrumental one (the animals are framed as sources of labour, objects of consumption, or materials for scientific experimentation), and a phantasmatic one (the animals are perceived as exotic figures and objects of fascination or excitation) (68). Building on these established relational frameworks, *The Animals in That Country* stages them through the ways different characters approach nonhuman life. As their attempts to relate to animals on familiar terms are progressively unsettled, and ultimately betrayed, by nonhuman responses, the ecotopian horizon proves increasingly unstable. This process is most clearly noticeable through the characters of Jean, Angela, and Lee.

Angela and Lee, in particular, occupy opposite positions. As the manager of the wildlife park, Angela establishes a sort of 'bureaucratic' relationship with animals – a stance Jean openly criticises: "Back when she worked with birds of prey, she had flight in her eyes. Eagle maiden with a leather glove, straight out of some medieval fantasy book. Look into those big browns now and there's just a bunch of paper clips and a digital calendar" (10). Although Angela's attitude does not fully correspond to the crudest form of instrumentalisation outlined by Braidotti, she nonetheless exploits the park's animals as entertainment for tourists and firmly resists any mode of representation that might blur the human/animal divide. As she insists: "It's not Disney, here. It's not The Lion King. […] People who anthropomorphise tend not to read cues, and people who don't read cues are dangerous. Dangerous to

themselves, dangerous to the animals, and dangerous to visitors" (11). Angela thus comes to embody a strand of Anthropocene discourse grounded in an unwavering faith in technical and managerial solutions, even when such approaches prove manifestly inadequate. Her insistence on maintaining control over the park – despite incursions by so-called "ecoterrorists" attempting to free the animals, mounting infrastructural failures, and escalating violence – perpetuates the idea that humans are destined to act as stewards of the rest of the world: "Angela paces around out front, yelling into her walkie-talkie about another emergency contingency. We've got so many emergency plans now you can't even breathe unless it's part of a spreadsheet" (64). Yet once the zooflu shatters the Cartesian premise according to which humans are superior to animals by virtue of a more advanced form of rationality, the usual hierarchy of species is disrupted, and every attempt to preserve the status quo comes to resemble an almost childish effort at denial. Humans are forcibly reinserted into a predator/prey dynamic, and Angela – as a figure of order and logic – is the one most deeply shaken by this shift. She is first warned to stay in her place by the eagles – "I'm not their friend. I'm their predator. I'm their prey. They're hunting me back.'[...]'The eagles call me Sinew. Bits of…" (88) – and later openly attacked by Bernie the crocodile – "'He said he wanted to play with me. Play with me. Until…" (99). The collapse of the world system she is used to pushes her to the brink of madness, and the only way to prevent her from killing herself is to keep her sedated and confined, a solution that ultimately underscores how voluntary unawareness functions as a crucial coping strategy within contemporary society.

If Angela can be associated with a rigorous and rational form of care for animals, her ex-husband and Jean's son, Lee, embodies the stereotype of the environmentalist and animal activist as a free spirit:

> "What's it like to be free? Ask him. He'll say things like as a bird, or freedom is something you can touch but never hold. He's always talking like he invented inspirational postcards. I guess when you don't have steady love, and you don't look after your children, and you don't have a house or a job – even keeping a date with a woman is a bit too hard – you can act free. Lee doesn't mind. Lee doesn't mind about anything. (61)

Lee's arrival at the park destabilises the existing order and provides first-hand insight into the effects of the zooflu, particularly in relation to how animals in captivity perceive humans:

> The domestics are messed up on thousands and thousands of years of us. They're domestic in a wild body or wild in a domestic one or some train wreck of it all' [...] 'With these poor little guys in here, the captive wild, it's more like an institution. Like a hospital, a prison. They've gone nuts. Their brains are nuts. They don't know whether they're in or out, wild or free, predator or prey. They've got it in their heads we're out to kill them and keep dropping food on the way. We're just messy predators, too clumsy to catch them. That's how all these animals see us. We're not "friend or foe"; we are the enemy, every single time. (103)

One might expect such a recognition of animal suffering to prompt concrete actions to liberate them, but this is not the case – "For all his hoopla about bonding with them, he seems pretty keen to keep the glass door closed" (67). Lee's interspecies solidarity remains largely rhetorical, expressed through a vague critique of an unenlightened humanity and a desire to retreat into a fantasised wilderness, rather than through any meaningful accountability. In this sense, his character echoes those strands of deep ecology (Naess 1987) that condemn urban, bourgeois, and capitalist ways of life, insisting on an abstract biocentrism and an idealisation of a nature purged of humans, but without articulating viable solutions for changing environmentally destructive practices. This ethical dead end ultimately materialises in Lee's literal death: drawn by the call of the whales – which urge humans to remember a primordial life once lived underwater – "Come home it/ has been away/ too long" (207-208) – he throws himself into the sea as part of a collective suicide.

More complex to read is the character of Jean, who functions as the narrative's main focaliser. Her interest in animals is genuine – it surfaces in the enthusiasm with which she engages visitors at the wildlife park, in her habit of taking injured strays into her own backyard, and in her dream to open an animal sanctuary together with her granddaughter, Kim – yet it is also largely compensatory. Jean repeatedly falls back on the familiar rhetoric that 'animals are better than people', seeking in nonhuman companionship a form of intimacy she is either unwilling or unable to cultivate with those

around her: "If I feed her, she might not try to eat my arm. Animals are straight up like that. It's people you have to watch out for" (13). In her perspective, animals tend to lose their status as complex subjects and are instead turned into ventriloquised figures, made to speak Jean's own emotional needs back to her – "She said, 'Jeanie-girl: you're my best friend.' They love that" (8-9). Jean is undeniably a tragic figure, abandoned by her family, trapped in alcoholism, and widely regarded as essentially useless. Yet it is precisely this shared condition of marginality that places her in a position to develop a more reciprocal relationship with animals (Browne 2025). When Kim is abducted, the only creature Jean can turn to for help is the dingo Sue, herself a fragmented subject – half wild dingo, half domesticated dog – "two songs playing at once" (85). In her study, Duckworth (2026) references Garrard's notion of ferality to underline how Sue's position between domestication and wildness functions as resistance to allegorisation, as it foregrounds the real animal hidden behind human categories, whose constructed nature is thus exposed. Sue immediately foregrounds the inadequacy of the infantilising framework Jean habitually relies on to account for the multifaceted nature of her mind: "*Pat pat walkies* had so much damned power yesterday. Now it seems stupid next to the rippling chorus that's coming off her white furry socks" (83). Crucially, Sue's decision to help Jean does not stem from blind loyalty – a trait conventionally attributed to her species – but from her own motivations, including her sense of Kim's absence. Sue is never merely the observed object, but always the observer as well:

> Mouth love. Good/morning,/Tomorrow. A rabbit's dream (goes/south)./ Hello,/plastic (eat/your eyes out). All together, this makes up Kimberly, but not a Kimberly I've ever known. In Sue's drool and eyelids and paws, Kim is an animal – a stinky thing but also patient, important. It's the stretch of Kim's neck, the small catch in her throat before she talks. Kim as something about to happen. (113)

The key concept shaping the relationship between Jean and Sue is that of *kinship*. The need for alternative conception of belonging is a crucial issue in contemporary ecocritical discourse, particularly in response to the failure of social models grounded in human exceptionalism, individual interests and reproductive futurism.

Donna Haraway (2016; 2018), in particular, has investigated its transformative potential through the notion of non-reproductive kinship. While she explicitly develops this theory out of the necessity to slow human expansion, the broader implications of making kin entail abandoning the idea of discrete subjects operating within external contexts and instead embracing relational ontologies. Such relations are not organised around domination or competition but around *sympoiesis*, a process of becoming-with which may take the form of non-reproductive bonds among humans, the recognition of the multiple actors that compose what appears, from a humanist perspective, as a singular subject and, more relevantly here, multispecies alliances with nonhuman beings.

Read through this lens, the relationship between Jean and Sue gestures towards the possibility of multispecies kinship. At first, however, Jean refuses to recognise Sue as part of her family, despite the affection Sue expresses for her and the practical help she provides: "Mother's/want. I'll get/it. (Don't.) 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" (150). As their journey unfolds, however, maintaining this interspecies boundary becomes increasingly untenable. Growing mistrust, and at times open violence, from other humans pushes them closer together. Language – "'Sue's helping me to find my kittens. 'You mean your kids.'" (166) – sensations – "The fear in her hairy armpits. Feel of their hands on my fur, leather around my face, tight on my neck" (178) – and even identities – "Lee has all this hair. He lets out a sound, his deformed shape a lump in the dark. 'Lee-Lee?' I call, soft at first and then loud, 'Lee?' The dingo moves away from me and thumps down from the campervan bed." (237) – increasingly blur. As Sue flourishes and matures in her regained freedom, the terms of their relationship begin to shift. No longer positioned primarily as a dependent companion, Sue dictates her own modes of relationality, which echo, in fragmentary form, the sympoietic logic described by Haraway:

> Sue's rules are full on, but they're real. She throws them down her tail at me while we walk along. I have to watch for them, careful. Unless others aren't as/good,/succumb to/others./The other can get/better quickly so/watch, in case it needs to/bow./Don't take other's foods, others/can't take

from it./if it eats dogs, be/secretive./Encourage each other./Let each other feel all the/time./(Carry)/a message with its/anus./Pay particular/attention to dirt and wind./(Enjoy/everything.) (263-264)

However, it is precisely at this point that the limits of Jean's capacity to inhabit such a relational framework become apparent. Faced with Sue's increasing autonomy and the prospect of her joining a dingo pack, Jean attempts to stabilise their bond by translating it into familiar terms of possession. Terrified of abandonment, she first attempts to shoot Sue and then chains her: "The rope has rubbed away a bit of her gingery fur by morning. Black skin beneath. 'Sorry, Sue. But you see why I had to do it'" (246). Here, Mckay seems to oscillate between the possibilities of the kinship model described by Haraway and the oedipal framework defined by Braidotti. The result is an interspecies bond which resembles a more fraught and realistic familial dynamic, marked in equal measure by love and recrimination, where negotiating the right distance between subjects proves far more difficult than expected: "Sue wants to be near me, and she wants to be as far away from me as the road will let her be. Biting distance is too close" (262). The final moments of Jean and Sue's relationship crystallise this tension. Drawn to one another by mutual need and recognition, they remain caught in a proximity that is at once necessary and intolerable. Duckworth (2026) identifies this oscillation between hope – particularly the hope of building companion relationship – and apocalyptic despair as the novel's most distinctive feature.

Before Sue and Jean's fragile attempt at coexistence can develop into a more sustainable form of kinship, this is foreclosed by a social order intent on restoring previous boundaries. Forced to take the antidote to the zooflu, Jean loses access to Sue just as she begins to grasp what making kin would demand of her. The last message she is able to perceive from Sue's body – "I'm the/kin" (278) – thus registers less as a reconciliation than as a belated recognition of a relational possibility that remains, within the novel's world, untenable.

3. Forced Empathy and Affective Breakdown

One of the novel's underlying concerns is precisely how the development of forms of non-reproductive kinship may be facilitated

or obstructed. In her theory of affective ecologies, Alexa Weik von Mossner (2017) argues that empathy may have a major role, since it constitutes the primary mechanism through which readers engage with narrative action and learn to care for others. Central to this claim is the idea that readers' involvement in fictional storyworlds can function as a means of comprehending reality in ways comparable to lived experience. This process relies on embodied simulation, a cognitive mechanism whereby performing an action, observing someone perform it, or reading about it activates similar neural responses, thus enabling an understanding of others in both embodied and cognitive terms. This framework is particularly relevant for literary texts that pursue an explicit ethical aim, such as in works that seek to extend practices of care beyond the human, as with *The Animals in That Country*. Von Mossner suggests that empathetic distress – the visceral awareness of another's suffering combined with the belief of its injustice – can be powerful enough, in both empirical and narrative realms, to prompt prosocial action, even across species boundaries. McKay tests this hypothesis on multiple levels.

At the level of content, the spread of the zooflu should, at least in theory, foster the development of empathy. The main obstacle to such an affective response is empathy inhibition: the suppression of empathic engagement for reasons ranging from individual self-interest to entrenched cultural beliefs and outright denial (Von Mossner 2017: 108). One of the most common manifestations of empathy inhibition is the definition of in-groups and out-groups. Given that animals have historically been constructed as absolute others based on their supposed lack of those abilities deemed typically human – however arbitrary such distinctions may be – it would seem reasonable that the partial removal of this perceived difference might facilitate mutual identification. Laird (2021), in her analysis of the novel, coins the term *zoognosis* precisely to underline how the pandemic cause not only a biological transmission, but also an epistemological one, forcing a reckoning with non-human points of view. However, what the animals 'say', once their voices become accessible, does not encourage emotional intimacy. In most cases, animal speech takes the form of accusation; not always articulated explicitly, but emerging through the stark contrast between the intelligence and complexity of animals' inner worlds

and the conditions of confinement and exploitation in which they are forced to live. Faced with this dissonance, human characters are less inclined to reconfigure their relations with nonhuman life than to seek withdrawal. McKay selects a wide range of animal species in order to offer a panoramic view of the ways humans relate to different nonhuman categories, from livestock to companion animals to wildlife (Caracciolo 2022a). Yet it is telling that her attention repeatedly gravitates towards those animals that have been deliberately displaced from public attention precisely because of their primary role in human subsistence.

The first species Jean encounters after the outbreak are mice, bred to feed snakes and raptors in the park. Up to this point, Jean has actively longed to contract the zooflu, convinced that her already 'special' relationship with animals may only improve through the disease. The mice, however, violently crush her expectations:

> Dozens of mice sit up on their haunches, alive, horrified. Gas rising, not from the pipes, but from their bodies. Not squeaking, screaming. They scream bloody murder, the death of everyone, death in the cages and death in the walls. All the little kids in the whole world die. My poor old Dad reaches out from his early grave. Disease eats my face, crunches my bones until I'm rotting, empty, sucked dry by raptors, bones left to dust. I fall back, fumbling. What's left of my body? Blood and bits, a carcass. (75-76)

At first, the zooflu blurs the boundaries between self and other, making it difficult to distinguish who is thinking, feeling, or speaking. Subjective differentiation is restored only later, through a conscious effort. When Jean finally understands what the mice are communicating, the message is profoundly disturbing, a desperate injunction to flee: "On a/hillside. Run/to the wall./You go, I'll/make my way, one/and everyone./Everything. The body. Run" (76). The mice's sense of communal belonging, their grief for lost companions, and their acute awareness of death leave Jean in shock and prompt an immediate reaction of denial: "I'm going fucking crazy. There's no screaming, just a whole bunch of fat-arsed mice with their noses in the air. [...] Mice don't talk like that. Mice talk about eating and fucking (76).

As encounters with animals become more frequent, such withdrawal becomes increasingly difficult to reach. During her journey, Jean crosses paths with a couple of pig farmers who, unable

to endure the animals' incessant chatter, abandon them by the roadside: "'That's money in there.' 'Money didn't talk before'" (125). McKay avoids constructing a single, homogenised animal language, instead differentiating voices across species. This is particularly evident in the pigs, portrayed as naïve, vulnerable, yet curious beings, endlessly wondering what lies beyond the cages they have inhabited all their lives. By contrast, both Sue –"Inside/it slithers. She starts dribbling, and her saliva says, Pop" (126) – and Jean – "The smell seeps into my scarf – sweet, like they're already dead and cooking. [...] Can't look at a pig without thinking of its meat, its afterlife on my plate" (127) – are framed as predators struggling to restrain their killing instincts. Perhaps it is precisely this new awareness of her predatory role that pushes Jean to release the pigs, albeit hesitantly, and to question the justice of their treatment:

> I've seen battery hogs before – of course I have. But not out and about. Not staggering around and trying to walk, calling to whatever they think is 'more'. Glazed eyes that strain like they've never seen sunlight. Skin stretched over bodies fed to the point of bursting – something between swine and meat. Saw some animal liberationists on the street in the city one time, saying factory farms were the same as Nazi camps. I called them bloody racists too. The pigs clatter past me down the ramp, fucked-up eyes on the road ahead, calling, Hello/ is it more. Those animal nutters were wrong, but not in the way I thought. It's not the same as the Nazis: that was us doing to us. What's this? [...] These pigs are half dead, they're stumbling around, blind, mad, and fucking *hopeful*. (129-130)

In his reflections on contemporary eating practices, Jonathan Safran Foer (2009) notes how factory farming operates through a regime of invisibility; animals are hidden until they become meat, ecological damage is made invisible by externalisation, and labour exploitation is obscured by taking advantage of unprotected minorities. McKay forcibly lifts this veil, showing the disturbing consequences of visibility without offering a consolatory resolution.

Jean's reactions change with each encounter, but they never evolve to the stage of actual care. On the land of her ex-husband Graham, Jean is confronted with a different kind of livestock, a herd of cows. Now accustomed to Sue's presence, Jean approaches them amicably, only to be overwhelmed by an atmosphere smelling of "milk, fermenting grass, grief and heat", in which the cows'

bodies voice an anguished and accusatory appeal: "Could it tell/my babies I'm/still/here. [...] It came and/made babies from/babies. Where/are/they" (182). Jean's memory of her own wrecked family reemerges, as she explicitly recognises the similarities between their different kinds of loss, but this only provides her with a justification for backing down, "These cows want to tell me stories I don't want to hear. Got my own lost babies to find, thank you very much" (183).

These scenes highlight how Jean undoubtedly experiences sympathy for animals; however, it remains unclear to what extent this feeling *for* ever develops into a genuine feeling *with*, and whether, even if it does, such empathy can ever become a reliable basis for justice. As Martha Nussbaum (2022) observes, imaginative sympathy for nonhuman suffering can guide attempts to define more just human/animal relations, but it remains malleable and it is easily compromised when it threatens the comforts of a way of life grounded in the instrumental use of other animals. Rather than fostering solidaristic bonds, empathy becomes a source of strain, pushing human characters to seek distance as a means of self-preservation within a social context structured around individual survival rather than shared responsibility.

Another issue concerns the sheer scale of empathy required to remain responsive to the multitude of vulnerable beings. When Jean becomes able to understand even the language of insects, her mind collapses under the weight of this expanded perceptual field:

> I yell, but my words, my thoughts, my everything is sucked into the fog of meaning that buzzes, crawls, twists, and burrows. They're all over me. In my mouth, my nose, my ears, like they said they would be. Black, twisting bodies. Legs over my skin. Biblical. A plague of tongues. Casey up there at the Park following them to her end. That little girl at the hospital pawing at the ground. Me flinging my hair about my face to get the fuckers off me. Slap and kill a few. They scream themselves to death. (240)

This passage vividly exemplifies what Greta Gaard (2020) defines as 'caring exhaustion': an affective overload that emerges when the volume of problems, needs, and suffering exceeds what can be meaningfully absorbed or ethically sustained.

If Jean embodies, at least tentatively, the possibility of empathetic engagement, the world around her proves far less receptive. Those who contract the zooflu and rush to liberate animals are dismissed

as hallucinatory at best and branded as terrorists at worst. More broadly, the social response is marked by distrust and violence; people abandon their pets, kill them, or take their own lives. Conspiracy theories proliferate, and, as in every large-scale crisis, the search for a scapegoat intensifies: "You can't trust anyone. Especially the army. [...] That's where our taxes are going – some stupid animal that's suddenly got a story. Have you talked to them? I mean communicated? Try talking to them about anything important and you'll soon find out what their brains are made of: grass and dog food" (132). Attempts to silence animal voices take increasingly extreme forms. Some turn to cough syrup as a sedative, others resort to acts of self-mutilation – "Hand drill to the skull, relieve the pressure caused by the flu. Stops all the critters talking to you" (200). Religious communities, convinced that animal speech is a satanic deception, isolate themselves from nonhuman life and dispatch hunters to kill pets to eat, enacting a grotesque reworking of the Judeo-Christian notion of human dominion over creation (Nussbaum 2006).

> The god-botherers are faster than me. They grab that dog with WWE wrestling passion, using real lumps of wood, real knives. The little dog has enough time to issue a thick whiff of terror from its undercarriage, Help/her, before they've slit it ear to ear right there in the pulpit. [...] The door to the kitchen is open. Matthew the soup cook leans on the jamb, then turns back. A fluffy tail on a chopping board. (226)

At the height of this collective breakdown, so-called "people towns" are established, spaces in which any animal is shot on sight and the nightmare of silence and desolation evoked in Carson's parable is actively pursued, "You won't see a bird around here". In such places, there is no room for empathy of any kind, whether interspecies or interpersonal: "Crying and bloody, and they won't let me in, even when I bash on the doors and scream blue murder. Sue butts me away down the street" (267).

Taken together, these episodes suggest that empathy, when experienced as an unfiltered and compulsory exposure to suffering, becomes less a vehicle for ethical transformation than a source of affective overload. Yet McKay does not abandon empathy as a narrative resource altogether. Instead, the novel relocates the problem from the diegetic level to the formal one, mobilising a set

of representational choices that instead seek to foster empathetic engagement, but in a more oblique and complex way. Regarding the representation of animals, Greg Garrard (2023) maps the most common strategies along a spectrum ranging from metonymy, understood as absolute likeness to the human, to metaphor, or absolute otherness. Similarity may be foregrounded either by humanising the animal (anthropomorphism) or by animalising the human (zoomorphism); difference, by contrast, is usually emphasised negatively, portraying animals as lacking capacities attributed to humans (mechanomorphism), or, far less frequently, as possessing a form of quasi-sacred superiority (allomorphism). McKay deliberately distances herself from anthropomorphism, instead attributing to animals an alien form of consciousness that nonetheless presents a sense of continuity with the human one. These connections are implicitly articulated through the depiction of human physicality and behaviour in zoomorphic terms (Laird 2021) and explicitly expressed through the parallels Jean herself draws between her own experiences and those of the animals she encounters. Jean thus functions as a pivotal mediating figure in the novel's strategy of transspecies empathy, operating as a bridge between human and nonhuman perspectives. McKay's approach also aligns with a form of allomorphism, although it remains constrained by the problem of expressing an other-than-human consciousness through human language.

Language becomes the primary tool through which this tension is negotiated. From the outset, it is made clear that animals do not 'talk' in any straightforward sense: "Birds are making nonsensical sounds above but, all around me, trails of glowing messages have been laid out overnight. In stench, in calls, in piss, in tracks, in blood, in shit, in sex, in bodies" (77). Understanding, moreover, is never guaranteed: "I can parrot the words, but the meaning is in scraps" (84). Stylistically, animal communication is rendered through poetic fragmentation and typographical variation, distinguishing between species that display a higher degree of individualisation and proximity to human language, such as the dingoes, and those whose voices remain more collective and elusive, such as birds or insects. As Caracciolo (2022a) observes, the defamiliarising lens of poetic language allows typically overlooked forms of animal expression to be foregrounded without erasing ambiguity or producing any illusion

of communicative transparency. This strategy serves the dual function of trying to render animal Umwelten in non-anthropomorphic terms (Laird 2021) and of breaking the linearity of conventional narrative, considered an obstacle to the representation of the environmental crisis (Ghosh 2016, Caracciolo 2022a). What emerges is a sense of proximity that demands recognition but does not necessarily invite comfort; on the contrary, it may prove deeply unsettling.

4. Concluding remarks

It is precisely this sustained sense of discomfort that constitutes the most distinctive feature of *The Animals in That Country*. The novel resists the consolatory impulses that often structure both apocalyptic and ecotopian imaginaries. Rather than staging catastrophe as a spectacular rupture or a redemptive reset, McKay locates it in the slow unravelling of the perceptual, affective, and ethical models that have long sustained human exceptionalism. If ecotopian visions of unproblematic interspecies communion risk appearing naïve, and dystopian imaginaries devoid of any horizon of change tend to reinforce anxiety and paralysis, McKay's novel pursues a more demanding narrative strategy. The novel insists on the necessity of rethinking human/nonhuman relations while refusing to neutralise their tensions, foregrounding forms of proximity that are uneasy, asymmetrical, and often painful. In this sense, the repeated failure of forced empathy does not amount to a rejection of care itself, but of ethical models that assume affective exposure to be sufficient or inherently transformative. Empathy remains indispensable, yet fragile. This unresolved tension resonates with Haraway's (2016) call to stay with the trouble: an ethical orientation that commits to living as critters in multiple transitory enmeshments. Even after vaccination restores silence, the novel refuses to re-establish a stable human/animal divide, suggesting that the challenge lies not in recovering a lost order, but in accepting a shared condition of vulnerability that exceeds individual subjects, undermines fantasies of control, and renders ethical life contingent and provisional.

AI use declaration

An AI-based language model (ChatGPT) was used for assistance with structural and linguistic revision, and bibliographical

formatting. The intellectual content and scholarly analysis remain entirely the responsibility of the author.

References

Alberro, Heather, 2019, "'They Are With Us, Not For Us': Plumwood's Theory of Ecological Animalism and Ecotopian Approaches to the Human-Animal-Nature Relationship", paper presented at the *20th International Conference of the Utopian Studies Society Europe: Utopia, Dystopia, and Climate Change*.

Atwood, Margaret, 1968, *The Animals in That Country*, Little, Brown and Company, Boston.

Berger, John [1980] 2008, *Selected Essays of John Berger*, Vintage International Series, Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, New York.

Braidotti, Rosi, 2013, *The Posthuman*, Polity Press, Cambridge.

Browne, Josephine, 2025, "Australian dystopia and the (m)anthropocene: future-thinking men and masculinities in The Animals in That Country (McKay 2020) and Juice (Winton 2024)", *NORMA* 20 (4) pp. 325-345.

Buell, Lawrence, 1995, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*, Harvard U.P., Cambridge (MA).

Caracciolo, Marco, 2022a, "Animals Squawking Their Mysteries: Narrative, Poetic Form, and the Nonhuman in Laura Jean McKay's *The Animals in That Country*", *English Text Construction* 15 (2), pp. 118-137.

Caracciolo, Marco, 2022b, *Contemporary Fiction and Climate Uncertainty: Narrating Unstable Futures*, Bloomsbury, London.

Carey, Matthew, 2019, "What Is the Plural of Apocalypse? An Essay on the Ends of Time", *Terrain* 71, pp. 6-25.

Carson, Rachel, [1962] 2012, *Silent Spring*, 50th anniversary ed., Penguin Classics, London.

Clarke, Adele, and Haraway, Donna (eds.), 2018, *Making Kin Not Population*, Prickly Paradigm Press, Chicago.

Duckworth, Melanie, 2025, "Animal Voices in the Apocalypse: The Animals in That Country and The Ghost of the Cock", in D. Benjamin, M. Duckworth and J. Wagner (eds.), *Narratives of Hope and Despair*, Routledge, New York.

Foer, Jonathan Safran, 2009, *Eating Animals*, Hamish Hamilton, London.

Gaard, Greta, 2020, "New Ecocriticisms: Narrative, Affective, Empirical and Mindful", *Ecozon@: European Journal of Literature, Culture and Environment* 11 (2), pp. 224-233.

Garrard, Greg [2004] 2023, *Ecocriticism*, The New Critical Idiom, Routledge, London.

Ghosh, Amitav, 2016, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
Garforth, Lisa, 2002, "Ecotopian Fiction and the Sustainable Society", in J. Parham (ed.), *The Environmental Tradition in English Literature*, Taylor & Francis, London.
Haraway, Donna, 2016, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Duke U.P., Durham.
Laird, Tessa, 2021, "Zoognosis: When Animal Knowledges Go Viral. Laura Jean McKay's The Animals in That Country, Contagion, Becoming-Animal, and the Politics of Predation", *Animal Studies Journal* 10 (1), pp. 30-56.
McKay, Laura Jean, 2020, *The Animals in That Country*, Scribe, Melbourne.
Naess, Arne, 1987, "Self-Realization: An Ecological Approach to Being in the World", *The Trumpeter* 4 (3).
Nussbaum, Martha C., 2006, "The Moral Status of Animals", *Chronicle of Higher Education* 52 (22).
Nussbaum, Martha C., 2022, *Justice for Animals*, Simon & Schuster, New York.
Vermeulen, Pieter, 2020, *Literature and the Anthropocene*, Literature and Contemporary Thought, Routledge, London.
Weik Von Mossner, Alexa, 2017, *Affective Ecologies: Empathy, Emotion, and Environmental Narrative*, Ohio State U.P., Columbus.