

Bad Vibrations: Tone and Translation in *The Animals in That Country*

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Abstract

This article focuses on Laura Jean McKay's *The Animals in That Country* (2020), a prize-winning novel that responds to the interlocking crises of the Anthropocene and the Phonocene by reworking the traditional animal fable and the motif of the speaking animal. Drawing on the work of Vinciane Despret and Rebecca Walkowitz, the analysis highlights

three interconnected aspects of the novel's complex sonic architecture, namely the fact that it incorporates the fragmentary utterances of traumatized animals, invites readers to participate in utopian acts of interspecies translation, and alerts us to the crucial role of tonal cues in uncertain acts of communication.

Introduction: Phonocene Fables

What would we hear if other animals could speak in a way that humans understand? How can writers represent nonhuman tongues at a time when scientists have established that animal communication systems exist but also that they operate in ways unfamiliar to humans (e.g. Meijer 2020)? Given that we live in a multilingual and multispecies world—in the wake of colonialism and the ruins of capitalism—should we, as readers and citizens, not abandon the search for perfect translations and focus more on approximate comprehension and paralinguistic features such as tone? These are the questions at the center of this article and its primary case study, Laura Jean McKay’s novel *The Animals in That Country* (2020). As I will explain with the help of insights from thinkers such as Vinciane Despret and literary scholars including Rebecca Walkowitz, this remarkable fable for adults attunes us to the sonic and nonhuman aspects of contemporary literature at a time of growing concern about biodiversity loss. More specifically, this article attends to the intricate aural architecture of McKay’s narrative—which features sounds of distress, cross-species conversations, and opaque tonal cues—to elucidate how the novel’s treatment of trauma, translation, and tone contributes to debates about planetary endangerment, linguistic imperfection, and literary soundscapes.

Winner of the Arthur C. Clarke Award in 2021, McKay’s novel merits further scrutiny from scholars interested in sounds and animals, as it focuses on a fictional strain of influenza called “[z]oooflu” that enables humans to communicate with other animals, with devastating effects (32).¹ Its plot can be split into several stages: the middle-aged protagonist Jean Bennett is initially helping at an Australian zoo forced to lock down as this flu spreads across the country; she abruptly embarks on an improvised road trip with a dingo from the zoo after her infected and wayward son Lee kidnaps his daughter Kimberly; Jean ultimately manages to locate both her son and granddaughter with the help of Sue the dingo but is forced to give both of them up immediately; and she struggles to survive together with Sue as the state of the country

¹ I have added an asterisk whenever I simplified the layout of McKay’s animal dialogue to increase legibility.

and her own health continue to deteriorate—until the arrival of a cure cuts short her uneasy alliance with the dingo. This novel turned out to be eerily prescient, seeing as it was written before the COVID-19 crisis but portrays a pandemic that causes lockdowns, compels citizens to wear face masks as the government races to find a cure, and generates wild theories, including the belief that it is “all a conspiracy anyway” in which humans are simply hallucinating (McKay 134). While the novel’s evocation of a viral pandemic deserves more attention, this article will concentrate on the fact that its pandemic enables, as scientists elucidate, “[e]nhanced communication between humans and nonhuman animals” (35). For the peculiar effects of this “animal apocalypse” imply that McKay’s text responds to other concerns too, namely the violent legacies of animal domestication and the sonic impoverishment attendant upon biodiversity loss (199). This story does not only offer a topical variation on pandemic fiction, as we will see, but also an unflinching reworking of the speaking animal motif that is traditionally associated with the genre of the fable. How should we understand its treatment of nonhuman sound and language, and how should it be situated vis-à-vis the tradition of the fable and growing fears about the disappearance of wild animals?

While *The Animals in That Country* incorporates features of several genres—including the road narrative and the zombie story—the animal fable is crucial for my purposes here. This genre is often criticized for downplaying political commentary and for reducing other creatures to easily identifiable symbols for human concerns. Yet Heather Keenleyside has reminded us that the fable is more complex than its reputation suggests and actually leads a subterranean existence in what are assumed to be more modern and naturalistic forms. As she demonstrates throughout *Animals and Other People* (2016), eighteenth-century writers fused narrative modes including the realist novel, the animal fable, the satire, and the biography to portray humans and animals variously as exceptional, named individuals, as generic specimens of a certain species, and as vulnerable bodies made up of similar body parts. A remark by Laura Jean McKay indicates that her twenty-first-century text offers a similar mixture of genres that are both more and

less committed to traditional realism and to individual characters as opposed to generic animals:

I wrote three novels in one [...] There's a gritty realist narrative about a woman going through a rough time; there's a speculative fiction about a dingo [...] in an epidemic world where humans can communicate with animals; and there's [...] the interspecies communication itself—the animal dialogue. (“Author interview”)

What is more, Keenleyside clarifies that even traditional fables did not always reduce other creatures to human ciphers but already portrayed them as beings of precarious personhood who call out for sensitive readers and *translators*. Writers such as Anna Laetitia Barbauld “put words into the mouths of animals,” Keenleyside admits, yet they often do so in a way that is “grounded in natural-historical knowledge” and “claim to give voice to ‘what an animal says,’ by means of translation from one language into another” (171). Far from obscuring animals completely, even these accessible texts invite readers “to practice the sort of fabulous-historical observation that understands animal motions, sounds, and bodies to be [...] the signs of thought and feeling” (181), nudging us to consider “squeaking, barking, and speaking as different tongues” and to function as confident “reader/translator[s]” of animal utterances (182). Animals may appear as human stand-ins in the conventional fable, in short, but they also appear as independent speakers of another language. This observation again resonates with *The Animals in That Country*, as I explain further below, because McKay’s fable for adults portrays animal characters as unusual yet plausible conversation partners that encourage active translation on the part of readers and human characters alike.

While the novel mixes its allegorical lessons with realism, its nonhuman utterances add up to a clear message that can only be summarized as a damning critique of interspecies injustice. As the prominent ecocritic Ursula Heise has remarked, the question of the globe’s equitable domestication has become an urgent concern now that we live in the

Anthropocene and the entire planet is being remade by humans (159). *The Animals in That Country* takes up that question in ways that can be illuminated with the help of insights by Val Plumwood and John Mowitt. McKay herself points out that the novel is indebted to the groundbreaking reflections of Val Plumwood on “Being Prey” and “Speaking Meat” (280). This Australian ecofeminist philosopher famously observed, in response to a near-fatal encounter with a crocodile and the successful farm movie *Babe*, respectively, that humans fail to perceive themselves as prey—though “[i]t is not a minor or inessential feature of our human existence that we are food: juicy, nourishing bodies” (10)—and that we mindlessly apply “the concept of meat” to other creatures, precluding the “possibility of encountering the meat as expressive, narrative subject” (59). Several passages from McKay’s text recall these arguments about the unstable cultural boundaries between human / animal, voice / meat, and predator / prey. Instead of peace and understanding, the arrival of interspecies dialogue lays bare the traumatizing impact of human brutality inflicted on wild creatures, lab animals, and farm animals. Though Jean initially imagines asking other creatures “what they want” (69) and “what it’s like to fly?” (73), she quickly learns that they all think “that every time we come near them we’re trying to eat them” (72-3). Jean’s son confirms that they all believe humans “are the enemy” and adds that both zoo animals and pets no longer belong to the categories of wild and domestic creatures but are actually traumatized hybrids (103).

The Animals in That Country accordingly also dovetails with John Mowitt’s remarks on creaturely vocalizations. In his view, sonic cross-species exchanges invariably register “the trauma of domestication” (76). The same is often true of the animal voices in McKay’s novel. Compare the shocking squeak of caged mice—“they scream bloody murder, the death of everyone, death in the cages and death in the walls” (75)—with the “affectionate” tone of their wild counterparts (148). Or consider the response of the cows Jean mistakenly believes to be her “friends,” part of which is rendered in their own voice and hence in a different font: “The sound the mothers would make at the fence line when the little ones were driven away. [...] Where are / they [...] Where / are they” (182*). Even beyond the zoo, the cries of these

creatures imply that “[t]here’s something wrong with the vibe of this place” (65). Via such scenes, the narrative forces its readers to consider the troubling legacy of animal domestication and its *bad* vibrations.

Although the novel’s acts of translation disclose interspecies violence, its creative revalorization of the speaking animal motif contains utopian overtones too and joins recent attempts to reimagine sound in the age of biodiversity loss (e.g. Smith 2015; Mundy 2018; De Bruyn 2020). *The Animals in That Country* frequently draws attention to sound, music, and sonic media, and it underlines the remarkable acoustic feats of other creatures, including the acute hearing skills of crocodiles (97) and the sophisticated use of sonar by flying foxes (249-51). But the most characteristic aspect of its soundscape is surely that it keeps returning to scenes where the “[n]onsense sounds” (80) of animals are shown to involve meaningful “undertones and microscopic sounds” (93) for attentive listeners. McKay is not the only writer who imagines new modes of interspecies conviviality via acoustic means. The philosopher Vinciane Despret, for instance, has proposed an alternative name for the present: we may be living in the Anthropocene, but accelerating species extinction implies that we also inhabit the *Phonocene*. “Living in our age while calling it ‘Phonocene’ means [...] living in territories of song” and “not forgetting that these songs [...] will disappear even more if we do not pay them attention” (*Habiter*, 181, translation mine). Similarly, the writer Amitav Ghosh has observed that colonialism involves the transformation of other peoples and creatures into “brutes,” a process that is facilitated by a cultural deafness to other sounds—and in which modern literature has participated:

Scientists now accept that trees in a forest are able to communicate with each other [...]. So it is only in that they lack language [...] that trees are mute. But in that humans lack the ability to communicate as trees do, could it not be said that for a tree it is the human who is mute? [...] [Bearing in mind these insights, the] erasure of nonhuman voices from ‘serious’ literature has played no small part in creating that

blindness to other beings that is so marked a feature of official modernity. (197-8, 204)

When thinkers articulate more hospitable approaches to unfamiliar sounds and species, they regularly appeal to the notion of polyphony. Anna Tsing describes her influential approach to multispecies ethnography as follows:

When I first learned polyphony, it was a revelation in listening; I was forced to pick out separate [...] melodies [and] to listen for the moments of harmony and dissonance they created together. This kind of noticing is just what is needed to appreciate the multiple [...] trajectories of the [multispecies] assemblage. (24)

Mushroom scientist Merlin Sheldrake embraces the same metaphor: “Polyphony is singing more than one part, or telling more than one story, at the same time. [...] Mycelium [the web of roots connected to a fungus] is polyphony in bodily form” (61). This embrace of polyphony is inspiring for literary scholars, given the longstanding influence of Mikhail Bakhtin’s claims about the inherently polyphonic nature of the novel (see De Bruyn 2016). Yet another promising strategy involves closer attention to the *polytonal* character of texts, especially the conjectural group we might label Phonocene fables. Though the animal sounds of McKay’s work appear as vulnerable vibrations, they also constitute utopian utterances of ambiguous tone, which await our translation.

GaiaTranslate

A contemporary mixture of the realist novel and the speculative animal fable, *The Animals in That Country* addresses the interlocking crises of the Anthropocene and Phonocene by portraying acts of interspecies translation and animal signs that remain elusive, even for human characters infected by its fictional zooflu. This posthumanist turn toward translation can be further contextualized via recent work by Rebecca

Walkowitz and Vinciane Despret, again. In his foreword to *What Would Animals Say If We Asked the Right Questions?* (2016), Bruno Latour remarks that Despret's philosophical essays about the ambiguities and ironies of animal science are "the scientific fables of an empirical La Fontaine" (vii). Though he is critical of orthodox fables, Latour feels that these scientifically informed reflections share traits with the fable through their peculiar portrayal of cross-species conversation:

Whereas in the traditional genre of the fable, there is no apparent problem in making the animal say something [...], here every instance of expression is related to *how* the questions are asked. And the questions are often funny, critical, clever, ironic, or downright silly [...]. So each fable [by Despret reminds us of] [...] the collective speech impairments of those who could make others say something if only they themselves were not so hard of hearing. (x)

While this summary already gestures toward the role of tone, the main point here is that it discloses significant parallels between McKay's novel and Despret's work, which arguably offers Phonocene fables too—and these parallels imply that *The Animals in That Country* belongs to a particular strain of contemporary environmental writing.

This is particularly obvious in Despret's *Autobiographie d'un poulpe* (2021), a speculative essay akin to the work of Donna Haraway and Ursula K. LeGuin that centers on the activities of so-called "therolinguist[s]" who work in the fictional "branch of linguistics that has devoted itself to the study and translation of the written productions of animals (and later plants), whether this takes the literary form of a novel, a poem [or] a pamphlet" (11, all translations mine). Reconstructing this quirky research, Despret's text features playful attempts to capture the meanings of particular spider web vibrations and reconstructed octopus phrases such as "let go of a thread to ask the wind" (28), "[r]emember you/me" (86), or "[t]he octopus without light is ptochopode for the octopus" (116). These animal messages again expose the violent behavior of humans, these predators who produce

a “vibratory cacophony without grammar” (31) and are ptochopodes, “poor in limbs” (116)—meaning that the earlier phrase is the octopus version of “man is wolf to man,” with humans in the unenviable position of the proverbial wolf. Not unlike McKay, Despret thus responds to the biodiversity crisis with a contemporary variation on the animal fable that centers on interspecies translators who are—much like the readers of these texts—trying to make sense of enigmatic animal utterances that strain against the rules of standard English and French grammar (“remember you/me”). Works like *Autobiographie d’un poulpe* consequently invite readers to participate in the arduous but thought-provoking attempt to piece together the meanings of partially translated nonhuman messages (Figure 1).

Such imperfect translations fit into a broader trend as far as contemporary writing and its cosmopolitan imagination is concerned. As Rebecca Walkowitz has detailed, recent texts by Jumpa Lahiri and Ali Smith, among others, embrace “linguistic restriction [as] a necessary condition of literary cosmopolitanism” (“Less Than One” 97), seeing that these writers deliberately showcase their imperfect command of dominant languages “to focu[s] the conversation on linguistic hospitality rather than linguistic ownership” (“On Not Knowing” 324). Walkowitz elaborates that multilingual texts of the past would usually enrich or combine languages, whereas “these new works tend to block or restrict languages [for instance by] provid[ing] inexact or approximate words. They are therefore postlingual” (“Less Than One” 97). Across a wide range of texts, writers are “generating new expressions of multilingualism by advancing expressions of postlingualism,” also by using “experiments with orthography, typeface, and design” to unveil a “language that is less than one” (96). These remarks throw light on McKay’s novel and Despret’s essays alike; in fact, Walkowitz already mentions an example involving other animals (“On Not Knowing” 338).

Souviens-toi/moi !

[Il m']appelle depuis le futur afin de devenir.

[Il m']appelle depuis le futur afin de revenir.

Ne plus être en apparence.

Trouver l'issue. Revenir chaque fois par le même chemin.

L'issue est un autre chemin.

Les corps accueillent comme des coquillages. Plus de coquillages, plus d'issue. Danger.

Mourir n'est plus réjouissant. Plus d'œufs, vivre en eaux noires. Plus d'issue. Le poulpe veut manger de la lumière.

Le poulpe porte la lumière, la lumière vient au poulpe. Sans manteau, la lumière s'éteint. Le poulpe devient encre. Noire, puis eau. Plus d'apparence.

Si aucun corps n'est trouvé, l'âme s'égarera. Ptochopodes [pauvres en bras] danger. Ptochopodes mémoires en eaux vives. Pas d'issue. Devenir moule ou poisson. Mémoires en eaux vives.

Lents et agités les temps des attentes. Courts et agités les temps des existences. L'impatience nous gagne.

Parler sans lumière est violence. Parler sans encre est violence. La langue des sans-corps est chargée de poisons. Le poulpe sans lumière est ptochopode pour le poulpe.

Figure 1. Octopus phrases from Autobiographie d'un poulpe, p. 86

Yet I propose tweaking her argument further so as to make more room for speculative nonhuman languages and even more awkward translations like the ones of *The Animals in That Country*. If the refusal of perfect linguistic mastery can function “as an affirmative strategy

of anti-racist cosmopolitanism” (330), as Walkowitz explains, it can surely also promote an *anti-speciesist* cosmopolitanism. And while the experiments she mentions suggest that “the normative technologies of the novel—the standardization of typeface and format, orthography and font—are complicit in the invisibility of English” (102), the related strategies of McKay’s novel do not only lay bare the violent history of this language but also its anthropocentric provinciality. *The Animals in That Country* explicitly alludes to this connection with human translation: “‘Clean cat no spew. Clean cat no eat animals.’ I’m starting to talk like [Sue]. Or like we talk to the foreigner tourists back at the Park. Loud, like they can’t hear” (166); “I’m reading [Sue’s] body like some language I barely remember from a high school textbook. *Bonjour madame, connaissez-vous le chemin de la gare?*” (84). Guided by these insights, I will now review the basic principles behind the novel’s other-than-human languages and inspect the recurrent tension between episodes of fluent translation and scenes that resist definitive comprehension. As this analysis indicates, McKay’s unusual fable explicitly reflects on the problem of “making the animal say something” and it implies that the acceptance of linguistic imperfection is both a deliberate strategy of and a necessary precondition for its more-than-human cosmopolitanism. Like GoogleTranslate, this version of a hypothetical GaiaTranslate does not always yield perfect results.

Readers are able to grasp the nonhuman dialogue of McKay’s novel because it follows certain rules. As soon as Jean is infected (76), her earlier speculations about the mental life of other creatures are replaced by their approximate translations and these look recognizably similar. Regardless of the species involved, these utterances of “animalese” (139) appear as short bursts that use monosyllabic words and deploy commands and repetitions while experimenting poetically with font and enjambment—line breaks rarely coincide with syntactic units—to ensure that these snippets of English remain alien. Instead of easily digestible sentences, we encounter what the novel itself calls an animal “stream of consciousness” (198). As the disease progresses, moreover, human patients begin to understand a wider array of creatures, moving from apparently accessible mammal minds to the increasingly distant

communications of birds, reptiles, and insects. The reader's knowledge of these species helps to reconstruct the meaning of certain phrases, as when insects state "I ONLY HAVE THIS ONE DAY" (250). The difference between species—or rather *classes*—of creatures is further important because their utterances are represented differently on the page. As McKay elucidates: "I tried to make the rhythm as awkward as possible to move the dialogue out of a human state (while still using written English)" and "I thought, how does a mosquito express themself on a page? CAPSLOCK of course. After that came the birds speaking in italics. Then Dingo Sue (in parenthesis)" ("Author Interview"). I will return to Sue—the only animal with her own typographic style, a move that foregrounds her individual personhood—in the next section. Here we should note that McKay's procedure confirms Walkowitz's observation about the affordances of deliberate linguistic awkwardness while extrapolating it to a nonhuman context. This procedure also assumes that the distinction between biological classes should be correlated with a recognizable difference in terms of layout. Biological diversity is hence linked to linguistic diversity and typographic experimentation, loosening up the standardized straightjacket of the novelistic page and its anthropocentric connotations (Figure 2). Apart from their similar simplicity and their class-based variations, the novel's animal utterances remain comprehensible because they reuse words, such as "dead whale" for petrol and "it" for human. This final word underlines that the narrative does not just anthropomorphize animals, but also utilizes the nonhuman perspective to imaginatively de-humanize characters like Jean, who are revealed to be no more and no less than frail animals — not "I" but "it".

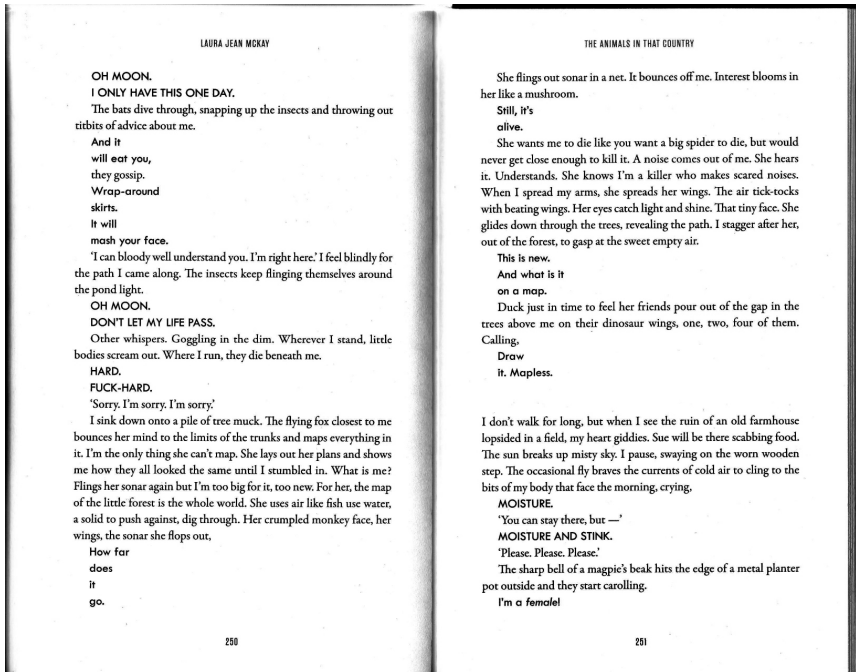


Figure 2. Animal utterances from *The Animals in That Country*, p. 250-1

If such principles help readers to grasp the animal dialogue, McKay simultaneously ensures that these nonhuman messages remain mysterious. Blocking the expectation of linguistic transparency, some passages require close attention and occasionally resist comprehension altogether. Even in the fictional world of this fable-like novel, animal sounds are clearly not human speech—and with good reason. At the start of the novel, her granddaughter remarks that humans “already talk to [animals]” (36) and Jean herself is capable of reading dingo body language: “Mister [...] grinds his paws into the dirt and dips his head low, keeping his rear and tail high: the play position” (4). Yet her daughter-in-law Angela rebukes Jean for using goofy animal voices around zoo visitors: “It’s not Disney, here. [...] [The manual] says people who

anthropomorphise tend not to read cues, and people who don't read cues are dangerous [...] to themselves, [...] the animals, and [...] visitors" (11). Though the reader is unlikely to sympathize fully with this character, the lesson is driven home in a scene where Angela herself enters the enclosure of the zoo's crocodile after being infected with zoo-flu. Though the creature is called Bernie, funnily, this is not a Disney scene. After she gets down on her knees because "[h]e said he wanted to play with me" (99), the crocodile "surges forward [and] latches on to Angela's leg with yellow teeth and a guttural roar" (98). This scene replays the crocodile scene from Plumwood's "being prey"—but in a zoo, importantly—yet it also underscores that we need to bear in mind species differences and treat animal messages carefully.

McKay's "animalese" is hard to translate for various reasons. Some phrases of animal dialogue defy human expectations. As Jean notes with surprise at one point: "Mice don't talk like that. Mice talk about eating and fucking" (76). Furthermore, the narrative systematically highlights the confusing, multimodal nature of animal messages, their "body talk" (147). When Jean first encounters Sue after contracting zoo-flu, for instance, we learn that "Her voice isn't made of words [...]. She's speaking in odours, echoes, noises with random meanings popping out of them [...] her body starts letting off hisses of meaning that build and burst" (81, 85). Indeed, Jean is only able to make sense of this synesthetic confusion after her granddaughter—not coincidentally a child—teaches her to attend to its visual as well as sonic nature (see 91). Other messages remain elusive even when we know what the animals are saying. How should we interpret wallaby voices saying "Happy / isn't the only / happy" (90*)? And what should we make of the "fucked-up shit" expressed by the cat Tizzy Puss, which her owner summarizes as follows: "You know how [cats] bring chewed-up mice and birds? Everyone always said it's a gift or they're trying to feed us. It's bullshit. [...] They're catching time. [...] Some fucked-up clock. Like, if they stop the mouse they control time" (229). Even when we encounter such translated phrases and recognize the words being used, their precise meanings remain hard to parse.

That does not mean we should not try to understand these enigmatic utterances. In fact, certain scenes featuring animal dialogue invite readers to participate in reconstructing its meaning by actively searching for clues. Consider the passage where a kind man is offering soup to everyone and a cat encourages Jean to enter an abandoned house, making weird remarks about kittens that make the protagonist think of her missing granddaughter and finally telling Jean that she does not belong there. At least some of the cat's phrases are unclear at first:

'*Kitten?*' I watch her whiskers, tentacles in the air. They whisper *kitten* again and I'm over that fence, clearing the empty garden beds, no matter who's in the house. [...]

Funny

cat.

Legs all the way from the
head

to the ground.

'My grandkid, is that what you can smell? [...]

I ate

it.

My laugh comes out a choke. 'She's a growing girl. Don't think you ate her.'

It

ate

it. [...]

We don't eat our grandkids, thank you, no matter what you think.' [...]

All the

kittens.

'You got kittens in there? Mine or yours?'

Ours. [...]

We're in it

together. [...]

The cat is crooning to kittens I can't see. [...]

'There's no kittens here. Not mine. Not yours.' (202-4)

However, these enigmatic utterances become much clearer when Jean discovers that the kind man offering “soupy stew [with] some globs of purple meat” (199) is part of a religious group that is making soup from pets (226)—demonstrating that even domesticated animals are not safe from human rapacity and are routinely ignored by humans deaf to other voices. Even if a friction-free dialogue remains unattainable, the novel suggests we need to become better translators of the creatures who live alongside us, because we’re in it together.

Understanding Undertones

Recalling the work of philosophers like Plumwood and Despret, *The Animals in That Country* confronts its readers with the trauma of animal domestication and the threat of biodiversity loss, but it also invites them to participate in utopian cross-species partnerships and imperfect translations via unusual typography and enigmatic animal phrases. Though this Phonocene fable draws attention to weird sounds through its plot and descriptions, I now want to consider a final layer of its sonic architecture. Because McKay’s novel does not just encourage readers to imagine mysterious animal vocalizations and to translate their traumatized sentence fragments but also to reflect on the tone of its human and animal characters. The narrative already foregrounds tone in the awkward interactions between the uninhibited Jean and Glen, a zoo employee with First Nation roots who later returns “east, back home” with the python Blondie (215-6). When Jean finds that the creatures call Glen “Father-Son,” the following exchange ensues:

‘Is that something to do with your tribe?’

‘My *tribe*? Are you talking about Djabugay people? Because-’

‘Maybe those wallabies are your totem animal or something?’

‘Jesus, Jean-. [...] Monthly cultural awareness sessions for three bloody years aren’t enough for you to know when you’re out of line? To learn how totems actually work and

how important they are to people?’
 ‘The sessions are on my day off.’ (94)

The reader is obviously expected to disapprove of Jean’s tone-deaf behavior, given that the novel opens with a so-called Acknowledgment of Country statement expressing solidarity with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of Australia and that Jean’s road trip leads her past “one of those damned places they put kidnapped kids back in the day” (160)—not to mention that Sue arguably functions like Jean’s totem animal, as it were. Nor is this the only moment when the protagonist’s views and tone are likely to irk readers. When a headstrong nurse tells her that she, despite now understanding animals, “probably still eat[s] them,” Jean blurts out: “What the hell else am I supposed to eat?” (176). The potential mismatch with the reader’s views in scenes like these encourages us to notice other moments where tone is key—and many of these involve animal utterances, Sue’s especially.

Before scrutinizing McKay’s nonhuman dialogue further, we should recapitulate existing arguments about literary tone by scholars such as Nicole Seymour, Sianne Ngai, and Judith Roof. Though Seymour is primarily interested in popular culture, the question of tone underpins her argument about “bad environmentalism” and the potential of irony and apparently inappropriate emotions to challenge mainstream environmentalism, its alienating didacticism, limited diversity, and “gloom-and-doomy tone” (120). By foregrounding a downwardly mobile protagonist who behaves badly, McKay’s novel opts for a related strategy and approaches topics such as social and environmental justice from an angle that pushes readers to respond and disagree. A similarly impertinent tone can be found in the text’s animal dialogue, which is littered with expletives and underlines bodily processes (see Figure 2). If Seymour’s work allows us to grasp the irreverent tone of *The Animals in That Country*, Ngai and Roof provide additional clues about the textual articulation of tone. Ngai argues that tone or “a literary work’s organizing semblance of feeling” is crucial but adds that it remains elusive, given that the tone of a text “cannot be identified entirely with a reader’s response to it, or said to be a feeling represented [...] by the

text” (56). Furthermore, she shows how a noisy but “essentially atonal” text by Herman Melville self-consciously reflects on the dubious instrumentalization of mood by capitalism and more traditional novels (51). Judith Roof has offered a definition of tone that is likewise linked to the reader’s perception of sound but provides more clues about its precise textual mechanisms:

Tone is the quality you imagine you hear (audiate) when you read. [...] The text’s diction, syntax, contexts, and connotations merge to produce tone as a complex, imaginary audial phenomenon. [...] Readers tend to be conscious of tone when it accompanies [...] more rhetorical arguments, where tone (ironic, exhortative, chiding, enthusiastic, etc.) is an overt device for persuasion. Tone is, nonetheless, a key element by which all texts produce the illusion of a telling voice [...] and create an ambiance that [...] produc[es] a *feel* that may or may not seduce or alienate readers. (x)

As Roof goes on to explain, tone is often ambivalent and dynamic in literary texts and it can articulate itself in numerous forms, including ironic, anxious, didactic, conspiratorial, and whimsical stances. Like Ngai, moreover, Roof notes that the tone of some stories “is one of [...] taking away all cues [resulting in] a tone that lacks feeling [and generates] a persona-less voice” (207-8). Important in the present context is also that Roof considers tone a defining feature of human language: while computer-generated texts appear increasingly convincing, she believes that tone continues to allow “[a]ttentive readers [...] to tell the difference” (231). I will follow these scholars in scrutinizing the tone of McKay’s text—by attending to diction and syntax—and considering flat atonal moments especially. Yet I am less confident that human and non-human tones can be distinguished so neatly and will argue that tone is central to speculative animal languages as well as to human exchanges.

Because a full account of tone in *The Animals in That Country* exceeds the scope of this paper, I will limit myself to five observations. First, the narrative as a whole mixes a wry, ironic tone with an anxious tone of dread. When a group of birds states “Let it *be*,” for example, Jean drily adds that they behave “[l]ike they’re the fucking crow Beatles” (170*). Yet such comic notes are juxtaposed with brutal scenes involving animal cruelty, not to mention plot elements like Jean’s festering hand wound, a bay filled with human corpses, and a group of people who try to stop the animal voices by taking a “[h]and drill to the skull” (200). Turning to the novel’s animal phrases, second, these frequently exhibit the blunt physicality and candid diction we stereotypically associate with animals: a wallaby says “Fuck its / face” (110*), for example, a rat “lick[s]” their friends (255), and a blowfly exclaims “SUCK AND FUCK” (265). Third, in line with stereotypes about specific animal species, the text contrasts the kind tone of some creatures with the aloof tone of others. When Jean first hears Sue properly, she notices “Creaking sounds of welcome in her throat that don’t say what they should say. No hello or hi, no formal greetings” (81). The implied, indifferent tone of the dingo is hence diametrically opposed to that of a horse (136-40) and that of the pigs Jean liberates from a transport truck. Though the latter creatures are shown to be half dead, they sound friendly and even “*hopeful*,” she observes (130). In contrast to the fierce dingo, moreover, they *do* say hello — cannot stop saying it, in fact (and remember that “it” refers to Jean here): “Hello. / Hello. [...] It’s with / us. [...] Hello. Hello. [...] / It was here / before” (125-7*).

Alongside animal utterances with frank tones and conventional connotations, other phrases exhibit an oblique tone akin to the atonality discussed by Ngai and Roof. While Jean’s son expresses hopeful fantasies about whales and whale song (103), these views turn out to be an illusion that leads to his own death and that of numerous others who are drawn by the call of whales to join them in the “home” that is the ocean (207-13). Though the murderous effect of that call is immediately apparent, the intent and tone of these creatures remain hard to interpret, despite their simple, reassuring diction:

Home is here. [...] / Come home it / has been away /
too long / [...] Welcome home / The bed is / ready.
[...] Can't wait until it / gets here. [...] We've / waited a
long / time. [...] Its pack is / here. [...] Here is where it /
came from and / here / is where it sleeps. [...] Yes. [...]
Welcome / back. [...] What took it so / long. [...] Why
doesn't it / rest for a / while. [...] Now it / is home we
can spend / some / time together. (207-13, 227*)

The final point I want to make is that enigmatic nonhuman tones and the tension between kind and unkind tones play central roles in the relationship between the novel's two main characters.

Via Jean and Sue's storyline, McKay's text offers its own version of Helen Garner's "Red Dog" (2012), which provides one of the mottos of *The Animals in That Country*: "I'm afraid that somewhere in his wild dog's heart, he secretly despises me" (vii). This short narrative about a pet's rebellion is similar to McKay's story about the tenuous partnership between Jean and Sue—even if the novel reorients our attention to a wild female creature that is indelibly linked to the history of Australia. The hierarchy within this peculiar cross-species pack changes in the course of the narrative, as these characters disagree, part ways, and regroup. A clear illustration of that remarkable dynamic is the fact that Sue's animal name for Jean changes from the powerful "Queen" (80) to the lowly "Dog" (232) and "Cat" (237) towards the end of the story, in a move that further deindividualizes this human figure by stressing "its" generic social position. This ominous ambiguity is on full display in the following scene, which does not just explore the trauma of domestication and the question of translation but uses tonal cues—such as word choice (expletives in particular) and the systematic use of imperatives—to portray the tension rippling through this interspecies alliance:

Sue, sick of waiting, nips my fingers, my hair.
Get up, Bad / Dog. / [...] Little / Bitch. [...] I'm the /
Queen Mum. It eats / later.

‘I don’t think so.’ Thunder from her wolf throat that rumbles
 my bones.
 It eats after / me. [...] Bad Dog / who eats.
 ‘You can stop calling me a Bad Dog for starters.’
 I’m the / Queen. It’s / the baby. [...] The plan is to /
 follow. / Watch. Eat what I give it. Lower / than me. /
 Fight when I / bite. (Get / started. Be fresh.)
 ‘Why are you being like this? We need to go back to the way
 we-’
 It’s not here, it’s / gone. / It was here. / Now it’s gone.
 (232-3*)

While the power dynamic between the human and animal protagonists becomes increasingly uncertain as the narrative unfolds, it would be a mistake to conclude that the novel follows a linear trajectory of increasing distance and hostility. As a matter of fact, Sue offers a set of rules later on that involve equality rather than dominance: “Encourage each other. / Let each other feel all the / time,” for instance (263*). Given that the tension first emerges fully because Jean is unwilling to consider Sue part of her “kin” (150)—making the dingo go silent and “disappea[r] into her own body” (151)—it is no coincidence, furthermore, that Sue’s final, incomplete utterance is “I’m the / kin” (276*). The point is not that interspecies partnerships are impossible but that they require close attention to the needs and messages of other creatures. Because, as the cat observed, we’re in it together.

As this article has shown, *The Animals in That Country* updates the tradition of the animal fable by avoiding obvious anthropomorphism and by conveying a lesson about human brutality; it joins other attempts to reimagine multilingualism by celebrating imperfect translations and by retooling traditional typography; and it pushes existing work on literary tone in a more-than-human direction by accentuating the role of non-verbal communication and divergent tonal cues—an overlooked aspect of the novel’s soundscape that complements my remarks on animal cries and interspecies dialogue. McKay’s novel highlights elusive atonal utterances in particular, but other options are possible in this respect, as

is illustrated by the whimsical tone of Despret's text about spider and octopus linguists. Ultimately, these Phonocene fables urge readers to become more aware of the violent legacies of planetary domestication and to be more attuned to the sounds, voices, and tones of dingos, octopuses, and other persons.

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Biography

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