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## Deconstructing the Chain of Being in Laura Jean McKay's *Animals in That Country*

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### Abstract

The current study intends to explore the concept of deconstruction in Laura Jean McKay's novel *Animals in That Country*. It argues that the relationship between humans and non-humans leads to the deconstruction of the chain of being. The novel shows that a virus creates a bridge between humans and non-humans, enabling people to understand the emotions and thoughts of animals .

In addition, the study aims to analyze a different formal strategy to break down the boundaries between humans and non-humans through conventions. It relies heavily upon the theoretical framework of Ecocriticism, specifically the concept of deconstruction. Laura's language is characterized as a complex tapestry, wherein language transforms into a dynamic entity, serving as a conduit between the human and the non-human, as well as the natural and the artificial. The study concludes that language is a dynamic

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tapestry that connects humans and non-humans, natural and artificial, transforming into a complex tapestry.

**Keywords:** Animals in That Country, Australian fiction, deconstruction, Ecocriticism, empathy.

تفكيك سلسلة الوجود في لورا جان مكاي الحيوانات في ذلك البلد

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## المستخلص

تهدف الرواية الحالية إلى استكشاف مفهوم التفكيك في رواية لورا جان مكاي في ذلك البلد. تجادل بأن العلاقة بين البشر وغير البشر تؤدي إلى تفكيك سلسلة الوجود. تظهر الرواية أن الفيروس يخلق جسوا بين البشر وغير البشر، مما يمكن الناس من فهم مشاعر وأفكار الحيوانات. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، تهدف الرواية إلى تحليل استراتيجيات رسمية مختلفة لكسر الحدود بين البشر وغير البشر من خلال الاتفاقيات. يعتمد بشكل كبير على الإطار النظري للنقد البيئي، وتحديد مفهوم التفكيك. تتميز لغة لورا بأنها نسيج معقد، حيث تتحول اللغة إلى كيان ديناميكي، تعمل كقناة بين الإنسان وغير البشري، وكذلك الطبيعي والاصطناعي ولخصت الرواية إلى أن اللغة عبارة عن نسيج ديناميكي يربط بين البشر وغير البشر، طبيعياً ومصطنعاً، ويتحول إلى نسيج معقد. **الكلمات المفتاحية:** الخيال الأسطوري، التعاطف، الحيوانات في ذلك البلد، التفكيك، النقد البيئي.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The First Nations people of Australia were the first to narrate stories long before Europeans did. Animals, spirits, and the land were all woven into intricate stories of creation, law, and survival in their oral traditions, which have been passed down through the ages. More than just myths, the dreaming stories such as the Rainbow Serpent chiseling rivers into the landscape or the cunning Dingo influencing fate were maps of the world, weaving human existence into the natural cycles of the planet. These tales are

still relevant today and serve as the cornerstone of Australia's literary legacy. (Tonkinson, 1993)

According to Goodwin in *Australian literature evolved through distinct colonial and postcolonial* (1993) British colonists brought their own stories of empire, invasion, and the purported "civilization" of new territories with them when they landed in 1788. However, Australia was not like anything they had experienced before. The leaping kangaroo, the egg-laying platypus, the laughing kookaburra, and other creatures that defied European reasoning were all part of the vast and foreign terrain. Authors of early colonial literature found it difficult to balance this alien and wild world with their European sensibilities. Journals kept by explorers and narratives by settlers chronicled their experiences with an environment that fascinated and threatened them. The pressing issues of climate change, Indigenous justice, and ecological crises are reflected in the ongoing evolution of Australian literature.

Manwaring in his book *Writing Eco-fiction* (2024) define Eco-fiction as a broad literary category that engages with environmental themes, depicting human and nonhuman relationships within natural ecosystems. It explores the impact of climate change, ecological destruction, and the interconnectedness of species, often blending realism with speculative or dystopian elements. Laura Jean McKay's *The Animals in That Country* belongs to this category of literature. Besides, the author explained in the introduction to the novel about the importance of raising the voice of the indigenous people of the Earth the land, with its many phenomena unnamable in the English language, tended to pull them towards a sense of national uniqueness. Laura Jean McKay states:

I am constantly aware that I'm of colonial heritage, and that every land, every country that I take up residence on in this continent is stolen. And really, a lot of my research and fascination has been in post-colonial theory and increasingly. I guess, deep colonization. And so, everything I write as a writer from here has colonization in mind. Then on the other hand, I'm so in awe and thrilled to live in a place that has one of the longest cultures in the world, it's such an honour to

be in the presence of such knowledge and such power. And you know, and such an incredible way of being with Country and ocean and sky." (McKay 12:45)

It is recognized clearly the novelist tackles the idea of colonizing nature which leads to capitalism and industrialization or have sought to dominate, control, exploit, and commodify the natural world.

With a PhD in literary animal studies, Laura Jean McKay is a successful Australian novelist and instructor on creative writing. Her most well-known work is *The Animals in That Country*, which was released in 2020 and has received a lot of praise. It was awarded the Victorian Prize for Literature in 2021 and the Arthur C. Clarke Award. Other noteworthy books by McKay include *Holiday in Cambodia* (2013), which was shortlisted for three Australian national book awards, and *The Animals in That Country*. Animal and environmental themes are frequently explored in her writing. (De Bruyn, 2021)

McKay's novel about a pandemic which causes humans and animals to be able to talk to each other is a startlingly original exploration of human/animal communication, a powerful and discomfiting read that asks probing questions about what it means to be human. Talking animals is such a staple of children's fiction and fantasy, yet McKay manages to make it strange and compelling by forcing us to face just how different animals' thought processes may be from ours, to accept animals on their own terms as autonomous beings with different needs, wants and agendas from us. McKay contrasts her animals with believable, well-rounded and deeply unlikeable human characters, people suffering from the inability to communicate with each other. On top of all of this, we get McKay's remarkable prose, a hallucinogenic evocation of the Australian landscape and a moving and all-too-familiar portrayal of society slowly collapsing at the seams. Combined together, this makes *The Animals In That Country* absolutely essential reading for anyone interested in what speculative fiction can do at its most bold and original. (Thornton, 2022)

Laura's language is described as an intricately woven tapestry, where language itself becomes a living, breathing entity, a bridge between the human and the non-human, the natural and the constructed. In her novels and short stories, McKay's prose pulses

with an energy that defies convention, challenging readers to rethink the boundaries between nature and culture. For example, "Encoding. Decoding. And here we are, healthy as horses. The animals around us squawk their mysteries and we're none the wiser"(p, 55). Her narrative style is richly evocative, employing vivid imagery and lyrical cadence that draw the reader deep into landscapes both real and imagined. With a subtle yet deliberate precision, she employs language that mirrors the complexity of ecological systems intertwined, dynamic, and ever-changing.

## **2. DECONSTRUCTION THEORY**

In actuality, deconstruction was a response to structuralism's dominance in literary criticism. It issued a forceful critique of many of structuralism's unquestionable presumptions and advocated for their complete disavowal. Order and significance in the text are denied by deconstruction. As the name suggests, deconstruction really identifies instability and the language's ongoing propensity to break down its apparent meaning. (Ryan, 69)

Deconstruction acknowledges the text's textual value, just like structuralism does. But instead of focusing on the text's grammar, it emphasizes its eloquence. According to Latimer in *Deconstruction*, language is always a tension between two forces: grammar and rhetoric. Grammar is about meaning created through word order, known as syntagmatic meaning. Rhetoric, on the other hand, is the system of signs that shifts grammar's meaning. The two main forms of rhetoric are irony and metaphor. (Latimer, 1989)

"Difference" is the most influential term used by Derrida. The Deconstructionists hold that, just as a trace precedes the existence of an object, difference precedes being. According to Derrida, writing—another term for difference—occurs before speaking. According to Derrida, any place of meaning in the text is preceded by a system of difference. Deconstruction seeks out anything in the text that contradicts an authoritative reading, including interpretations that the work itself seems to support, as Jonathan Culler points out. (Alqudah, 2019)

According to deconstruction, the legal, social, and political processes created literature as an institution. Most deconstructionists have a general method of addressing

the literary text, notwithstanding the variety of deconstructive moods. Deconstructive reading is immersing oneself in the ongoing dance of contradictions rather than trying to figure out the meaning of literary texts.

According to Raman Selden, the deconstructionist starts by revealing the text's hierarchical order, including the phrases "soul" and "body," as well as "masculine" and "feminine." By identifying a chink in the symmetry that permits this reversal, the deconstructionist seeks to reverse this hierarchy. However, indeterminacy reigns since this recently established hierarchy is not permitted to impose another truth. (Selden,2016)

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

This study is qualitative, and it follows critical and analytical approaches. It applies the theoretical framework of Ecocriticism, with a specific emphasis on the concept of deconstruction. This theoretical perspective provides a more in-depth view of how the novel examines the existing boundaries between humans and non-humans. The study explores the ways in which McKay's language serves as a medium between people and animals, demonstrating the transformational potential of communication. It explores McKay's formal strategies in dismantling human-non-human distinctions, revealing how these strategies enhance understanding of interconnectedness and empathy across species.

### **4. LITERATURE REVIEW**

For years, writers have been drawn to this distinct literary genre since it provides insight into the boundaries between the human and non-human world. One of these writers is Joshua Bulleid, in his published research entitled "*A Posthumanist Pandemic: The Limits of Derrida and Animal Activism in Laura Jean McKay's The Animals in That Country*" ( 2022). In this research the author critiques anthropocentrism in literature, highlighting the contradiction between nonhuman perspectives and human struggles. The author explores how the novel *The Animals in That Country* serves as an illustration of

this contradiction, as it investigates animal perspectives while ultimately focusing on human issues.

However, Tessa Laird in his research paper “*Laura Jean McKay’s The Animals in That Country, Contagion, Becoming-Animal, and the Politics of Predation*” (2023) reveals how Laura Jean McKay’s *The Animals in That Country* introduces the concept of “zoognosis,” a fictional phenomenon where knowledge is transmitted virally from animals to humans. Through a speculative “zooflu” that enables communication with nonhuman animals, McKay uses poetic language based on animal sensory perception (Umwelt) to challenge anthropocentrism and force readers to reconsider human-animal relationships.

Additionally, Ben De Bruy’s article entitled “*Bad Vibrations: Tone and Translation in The Animals in That Country*” (2022) argues that Laura Jean McKay’s novel “*The Animals in That Country*” uses traumatized animals’ voices and speaking animals to address Anthropocene and Phono Cene crises, encouraging interspecies understanding and emphasizing tonal cues in communication.

While, the current study intends to explore the deconstruction of the chain of being in the novel through the relationship between humans and non-humans, highlighting the creation of a virus that bridges the gap. It uses Ecocriticism’s concept of deconstruction to analyze conventions and Laura’s language as a dynamic tapestry, connecting humans and non-humans, both natural and artificial.

## **5. THE ANIMALS IN THAT COUNTRY: AN OVERVIEW**

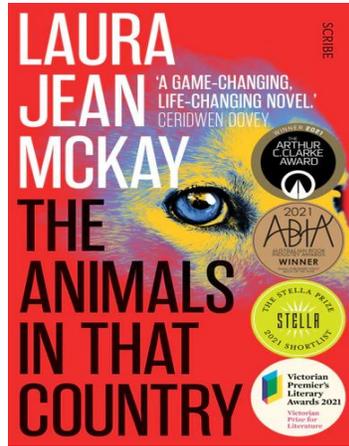
Laura’s novel *The Animals in That Country* explores a world where a virus bridges the gap between human and non-human in a sense that it allows humans to comprehend thoughts and feelings of animals a matter that leads to cross-species empathy. In “An empathy that closes gaps and transcends difference does not see “difference” as an obstacle to empathy. Instead, difference becomes a precondition for empathy”(Lanzoni, 2018). The story follows Jean, a woman grappling with her own personal struggles while navigating this new reality, namely animals’ reality. As she

interacts with various animals, the narrative delves into themes of empathetical interaction and the complexities of human-animal

The plot of *The Animals in That Country* is divided into several stages, before, during, and after the virus. In these three 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 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 eerily prescient, seeing as it was written before the COVID-19. The author explained that it took about ten years to write the novel. The story depicts a crisis where a pandemic leads to lockdowns, forces people to wear masks, and pushes the government to search for a cure. Meanwhile, wild theories spread, including the idea that it's all a conspiracy and humans are just hallucinating.

The title directly alludes to Margaret Atwood's 1968 poem "The Animals in That Country", in which the poet critiques humanity's tendency to project fears and desires onto animals. Atwood writes: "In that country the animals have the faces of people... their eyes flash fire in the dark". McKay reimagines Atwood's metaphor to challenge anthropocentrism, positioning animals as sentient beings with their own agency rather than symbolic reflections of human concerns. The "country" becomes a liminal space where human and animal worlds collide. (Julia. 2022)

The cover of the novel visualizes the image of Dingo, an Australian animal. Dingoes occupies an ambiguous space in Australian ecological and cultural narratives. Neither entirely wild like a wolf nor fully domesticated like a dog, Dingo straddles the boundary between nature and human civilization. This in-betweenness echoes McKay's thematic explorations of blurred boundaries between species, between languages, and between constructed human worlds and untamed non-human nature.



**Figure 1:** The cover of *That Country*

Macky's novel *The Animals in*

The novel consists of 18 chapters starting with Jean is an aging, hard drinking, straight-talking guide in an animal park in the Australian north. The park is run by her ex-daughter-in-law, Angela. Jean wants to be a ranger, but she drives Angela crazy with her behaviour. For example, she goes into the dingo enclosure to help Sue, who thanks her by biting her hand. Jean is kept in the park mainly to keep Angela's daughter, Kimberly, in mind, allowing Angela some freedom. Angela's husband Jean's son, Lee and Jean's husband both took off some time ago. Jean and Kimberly have a very close relationship, they constantly tell each other what the park animals are saying, complete with voices. Jean and Kimberly covertly plan their own animal sanctuary, named "Come to Kim and Granny's Animal Place". News comes in of a "zooflu" epidemic roaring up from the south, enabling "enhanced communication between humans and nonhuman animals". Those infected are going mad, some killing their pets and some releasing animals from captivity, some blissed out in a higher state of consciousness and some stubbornly resistant to enlightenment. Jean's son Lee turns up yearning for the sound of the southern whales. Kimberly and Jean get the Zooflu. Jean's hand becomes badly infected. Angela becomes very sick. And Lee and Kimberly disappear.



**Figure 2:** The dingo dog

Sue follows Jean as she sets out to locate Lee and Kimberly. Food and fuel shortages, resource wars, and mistrust of strangers are all present. There are similarities to the COVID-19 epidemic, including the haste to discover a cure, the use of drastic measures, conspiracy theories, denial, and snap judgments based on mask wearing or lack thereof. The devout question if Zooflu is the product of God, while the nonreligious believe it is. Jean is compelled to face her own shortcomings and shortcomings while she looks for Lee and Kimberly. The animals' voices challenge her understanding of herself and

humanity's place in the world. Sue, in particular, becomes both a guide and a mirror, her loyalty and wildness reflecting Jean's struggles. Through their bond, Jean begins to see the beauty and brutality of the natural world, and how humans have tried and failed to control it.

The climax comes when Jean finally finds Lee, who has joined a group of radicals intent on dismantling the barriers between humans and animals, no matter the cost. Kimberly is caught in the middle, torn between her mother's idealism and Jean's pragmatism. In a tense confrontation, Jean realizes that understanding the animals does not mean erasing the boundaries between species, it means acknowledging the messy, imperfect coexistence that has always existed. She manages to save Kimberly, but Lee chooses to stay behind, lost to her own vision of a world without cages.

Through Eco-fictional world expression of the New World reality, which simultaneously combines the rational and the irrational elements. The fictional world is not separated from reality. Referring to Henry James in his article *The Art of Fiction* (1905), he wrote that "fiction could even create reality or add to its significance". This is enhanced by A. H. Abrahams's book *The Mirror and the Lamb* (1971) in which he tackles the relationship between the text and the universe and explains the critical orientation of this relationship, a mimetic one. Accordingly, the novel explores complex themes and conveys deeper meanings that pave the way to challenge the boundaries of reality, question the chain of being as a grand narrative discourse.

McKay adds again to free her imagination: "I thought my next novel was a gritty realist story. But the problem is if you write gritty realism now (in the way we usually think of realism), you're writing historical or at least nostalgia fiction; and anything that used to be speculative is now realist. So, what I'm working on has become rather speculative. I keep using that term – it's not my favorite, but it's what we have to describe what I think of as sideways fiction." (McKay, 2020) In this sense, one can confirm that McKay, unconsciously, has taken the threads of postmodern simulation in which reality has no essence. She tackles the idea that the reality she is suggesting life we are in the midst of and twisted them, to reveal the hidden trajectory of our real-world predicament, the disinfecting of whole environments, the division of communities, the sudden, indelible shift in perspective that crisis brings.

## **6. DECONSTRUCTING THE CHAIN OF BEING**

A hierarchical framework known as the "chain of being" had an impact on medieval and Renaissance philosophy. All of existence, from the lowest forms to God, is meant to be ordered by. It originates with ancient philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle, but was subsequently refined by Christian theologians and Neoplatonists. The philosophical ramifications follow. The Chain promoted a teleological perspective, which holds that everything exists for a reason. Additionally, it backed up the plenitude theory, which holds that the universe is whole and complete. Perhaps even the desire to categorize species during the Enlightenment was inspired by this. (Lee, 1999) Ecocriticism emphasizes marginalized voices, including nonhuman ones. This aligns with ecocritical critiques of how anthropocentric systems silence nonhuman agency. The Chain of Being, which reduces animals to passive entities, is directly challenged by their

active, often unsettling communication. Ecocriticism foregrounds the entanglement of human and nonhuman lives. portrayal of zoonotic transmission and the resulting empathy between species reflects, where boundaries between humans and other beings blur.

In McKay's novel, the deconstruction of the great Chain of Being unfolds through the language as a power dynamic. the capacity for language has consistently been understood to constitute the decisive “anthropological difference” from antiquity to the present. Whereas such capacities and characteristics as mind, understanding of death, tool use, and agency are now widely accepted as existing in at least rudimentary form among some animals, the ability to use language is still thought by many people (in both academic and non-academic settings) to belong exclusively to human beings. Recent findings in the field of animal language research are, however, complicating this traditional picture, if not entirely displacing it. The novel is seen as a rupture in the very fabric of human exceptionalism. Jean, the protagonist, lives in a world where the mysterious flu grants humans the ability to understand animal speech not in the anthropomorphic way of fairy tales, but in raw, unfiltered torrents of sensation, metaphor, and pain. The rigid hierarchy that once placed humans at the pinnacle, above all creatures, begins to collapse. No longer can people pretend animals are lesser, soulless beings when their voices rise in a chorus of longing, terror, and instinctual wisdom.

At the early stages of the novel, Jean the main character does not take the idea of human-nonhuman communication very seriously. Despite her great curiosity to talk to animals, when the virus infects her as well as the wild life at the park, the usual system of everyday life 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 “isn't talking through her mouth or her mind but, like the mice and the things in the trees, through her whole 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” (Laird, 2021). This confirms that the novelist follows a postmodern tendency in terms of deviating from aspects of the logocentrism of signifier and signified discussed by Saussure. The novelist, to further explain, follows a deconstructional approach in terms of the engaged language between Jean and animals. Textuality, in other words, is a dialogical process that enables Jean to think about multiple meanings in interpreting animals' texts.

Not that it's that easy for humans to understand what the animals are saying. It's not so much words coming out of their mouths, but thoughts and impressions vibrating off their fur, their paws, their ears, their tails. A whole cacophony of sounds and signals that make little sense at face value, but as a whole, only make sense to young Kim. As in:

‘You have to look at all their whole body all the same time, not just the bits.’ [says Kim].

Get  
together,  
says a tail.  
Sip it —

an eyelash.

Musky fog from a bum calls,

Fancy.

You get the meaning of animals' language. A cryptic cacophony of sound and impressions that appears random and nonsensical. And there's no way to turn it off.

When you start hearing the sounds of animals, they turn into words that there is no escape to silence or escape from it.

Lee shakes his head, his hair flopping like black fingers over his eyes. 'It's just the furry ones for now. But I heard some people are bad cases. Talking to the birds and reptiles, insects even.' 'If I was sick, I'd talk to all the animals!'

In these lines Lee detects the three levels of Zooflu when infected, in the first level human can talk to mammals, in the second level he moves to talk to insects, and the third and most difficult level moves to talk to whales. (Cade, 2021) Every animal has something to say, and if you get a really bad dose of the zoo flu, one can also hear all the birds and all the insects talking too. The air is filled with the noise of their thoughts. It's enough to send you crazy.

Similar to Derrida in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, Montaigne uses his experience with a cat to consider more general issues regarding the abilities of animals. He makes assumptions about the intelligence, reasoning, and communication skills of a variety of species, including foxes, elephants, cows, dogs, horses, honeybees, and swallows. He continues by making assumptions about the "reason and foresight." The "complete and full communication" between cows, dogs, and horses is a type of "speech," as is the "reasoning" of a fox, the "science and wisdom" behind how goats, tortoises, and elephants avoid or cure pain, and the "intelligence" of dogs that aid in human guidance. "Animals do still other things which are far beyond our capacity, which we are so far from being able to imitate that we cannot even imagine them," he contends. Derrida challenges the anthropocentric notion that characteristics like intelligence and communication are unique to humans and contends that animals exhibit behaviors that are beyond human comprehension. In the end, Montaigne condemns human conceit, claiming that individual human differences can surpass those between humans and animals. (Ryan, 2015)

Furthermore, as a biologist and philosopher, Aristotle offers a materialist perspective on human existence that emphasizes essential processes that are similar to those of animals, albeit manifested in various ways. This is clearly in evidence in his book *History of Animals* (1991), which attempts to account for a wide range of animal bodies and modes of life, and which stresses that animals have sensation and especially the experience of 'touch'. This emphasis on touch is something also outlined in his *De Anima* (2015), it asserts that animals are not merely machines but rather possess "perceptive faculty," "desire," and the capacity for "pain and pleasure." They lack intelligence and thought, though, as "all animals enjoy sense-perception, while thinking admits of being false and is enjoyed by no animal that does not also have rationality."

Humans have "deliberative imagination," which relies on reasoning to make decisions, while nonhuman animals have "perceptive imagination."

Therefore, McKay's literary technique of fusing poetic and narrative form might be viewed as a step toward what Selmin Kara and Cydney Langill (2020) refer to as "weird realism," a type of literary realism sensitive to the unsettling oddity of the ecological crisis. The enigmatic pandemic that improves human-nonhuman communication is not only the product of a representational technique common in speculative fiction, but it is also firmly rooted in the conflict between poetry and narrative forms. In the end, hybridizing the novel with non-narrative forms might be a fruitful approach if the genre as a whole is unable to completely confront the difficulties posed by the environmental catastrophe. An intriguing illustration of this hybridization can be found in McKay's *The Animals in That Country*. (De Bruyn, 2021)

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 (p. 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. (P, 96)

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" (p. 183). This embodied understanding of meaning dovetails with work in animal studies that points to the significance of embodied experience in human-animal interactions.

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".

At the outbreak of zooflu, the animal sanctuary has security measures in place. Our social world relies on the fact that we do not know what animals think about these arrangements. And so, zooflu reaps dramatic consequences. People are freeing animals from enclosures, the TV news shows 'horses skittering up the streets. People bashing on hospital doors. A politician getting worried for saying we'll have to start eating our pets (P, 48). Farmers topping themselves.' As in our own pandemic, lockdowns are ordered, ports close, conspiracy theories propagate online. Sickness causes major upheavals, a re-evaluation of our assumptions; it changes what's safe, what's normal.

Human reactions to this new reality are united by their solipsism. Trying to discover the depth of their relationships with other beings and the strange attempt begins "Hello, I'm a

person A human. I want to talk to you,” (P, 97). Angela says, most unwisely, to the zoo’s crocodile. Many people cover their faces with masks and stuff their ears to keep out the cacophony, the government mounting a “cover and calm” campaign as the country lapses into anarchy.

In the latter half of the novel, 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.” (P, 228)

The capitalized phrases represent the insects’ language, whereas the final remark is uttered by Jean herself as she apologizes for crushing insects simply by moving around. but animal life, halfway distant from our consciousness, presents us with a more disconcerting enigma. In picturing the universe without a man, a universe in which only the animal’s gaze would be opened to things, the animal being neither a thing nor a man, we can only call up a vision in which we see nothing, since the object of this vision is a movement that glides from things that have no meaning by themselves to the world full of meaning implied by man giving each thing his own. This why we cannot describe such an object in a precise way. Or rather, the correct way to speak of it can overtly only be poetic. (Calarco, 2004)

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 story world 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.

Michel Foucault's theory of animality and insanity, as explored in *Madness and Civilization* (2003), posits that madness in the Classical Age was conceptualized as a regression to an animalistic state, stripped of reason and governed by primal instincts. As Foucault said "Madness, may challenge the world; may even call the world to justify itself ". This framework can be applied narratively to Laura Jean McKay's *The Animals in That Country* to analyze the collapse of human-animal boundaries and the societal chaos that ensues.

Before the virus, Jean works at a wildlife park, mimicking animal voices for tourists a performance echoing Foucault's "spectacle" of controlled animality. Post-infection, she *hears* animals' raw, unfiltered thoughts, which Foucault might term a plunge into "unreason". The virus triggers panic, echoing Foucault's "Ship of Fools" metaphor: infected individuals are exiled, treated as dangerous and irrational. Jean's road trip with Sue mirrors this exile, as they navigate a world where human institutions zoos, hospitals collapse under the weight of animalized consciousness, such as:

Casey and Liu are out the back, gaping in slack-jawed wonder at the series of bedraggled cages on death row. Ange would lose her shit to see them sitting cross-legged in the muck on the floor of one of the enclosures, staring at a spotted quoll. The look on Casey's face like the rapture you see on those late night happy clappy godbrother shows. Sort of TV my old mum used to get into. Face flung open, sore eyes widened, mouth gaping. Drowning in glory. The quoll darts over to a branch, rubbing its red furry chin along the wood. (p. 74)

This scene portrays Casey and Liu sitting cross-legged in the muck, transfixed by a spotted quoll. Their "slack-jawed wonder" and Casey's expression of "rapture" evoke a sense of delirium a state where reason gives way to raw emotion and instinct. According to Foucault this interpret as a moment when the boundaries between human rationality and animality blur, exposing the latent "unreason" within humanity.

## 7. CONCLUSION

Laura Jean McKay's *The Animals in That Country* performs a powerful deconstructive intervention into the medieval–Renaissance "chain of being," dissolving the long-standing hierarchy that privileged humans over all other creatures. By means of the speculative zoonosis virus, McKay gives voice quite literally to non-human animals, transforming language into an embodied, multisensory medium that challenges logocentric binaries of human/animal, natural/artificial, and self/other. Through Jean's evolving relationship with Sue the dingo and her gradual immersion in a polyphonic chorus of animal utterances, the novel reveals how the supposed "anthropological difference" of language is neither unique nor stable, but always already interwoven with non-human modes of perception and expression.

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