




“You’ve Got to Know How to Speak Animalese”: Literary Explorations of Engagements with the Animal Other

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Author/s	Jessica Murray	
Affiliation	University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa	
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“You’ve Got to Know How to Speak Animalese”: Literary Explorations of Engagements with the Animal Other

Jessica Murray

University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

Email: murray@unisa.ac.za. ORCID: 0000-0001-8383-2459

Abstract

As the harmful impact of anthropogenic activity on the environment becomes increasingly glaring, it has become more urgent than ever to find more ethical and sustainable ways of engaging with the other animals with whom we share space. From extreme weather events to food supply disruptions and species extinctions, it is no longer possible to cling to the hubristic myth of an independent human who exercises dominion over nature. Our actions and choices have very real, immediate, and often unintended environmental consequences and our own species survival depends on accepting this inter-dependent reality in a spirit of respectful responsibility. While climate change is now widely considered to be an issue that demands serious attention, this article will argue that any attempt to foster greater environmental care will be compromised if we fail to listen to the voices of the animal other. I will explore the ways in which other animals try to speak and the challenges that inevitably arise when attempting to hear those voices by anchoring my argument in a literary analysis of selected contemporary novels. I will demonstrate that, even when authors represent characters who care deeply about the environment, animals tend to fall through the cracks of their activist commitments, and they repeatedly turn away from opportunities to listen respectfully to the voices of animals.

Keywords: Animal, voice, listening, climate change, violence, environment, contemporary fiction

[\[Sustainable Development Goals: Climate Action, Life on Land\]](#)

Introduction

We currently find ourselves at a historical moment when climate change represents a significant challenge to lives, livelihoods, and human modes of understanding the dynamics of respectful, responsible engagement with the natural world. I argue that, by centring and grappling with animal voices, authors and scholars will enrich discussions about climate change and the environment in pressing ways. Regardless of disciplinary focus or activist strategies, we cannot make meaningful contributions if we continue to gloss over animal suffering and our own complicity in it. The selected texts in this article all explicitly focus on various consequences of climate change, and they all offer characters who clearly understand the need to act and to do better. I also selected these novels because they refuse to settle for easy representations of performative greenwashing. Rather, they expose and grapple with the nuanced complications of acting ethically in a neo-liberal capitalist context where there always seems to be yet another layer of victims who will be harmed by whatever choices we end up making. This embrace of complexity

and acceptance of failures are important as the magnitude of the challenges we face can easily feel debilitating and immobilising. This article will thus be teasing out how literary characters navigate a terrain where no course of action is necessarily “right”, but where all attempts at respectful engagement provide more information about the extent of our entanglement with our environments. Animals play significant roles in all the selected novels, whether they are explicitly foregrounded or whether they speak from the margins and from between the lines of the texts. By mobilising the theoretical tools of Critical Animal Studies (CAS), I will demonstrate that listening to these voices is an urgent first step as the characters try to move, however haltingly, towards positions of more responsible interactions with their worlds. The selected texts are *The Animals in That Country* (2020) by Laura Jean McKay, *My Days of Dark Green Euphoria* (2022) by A.E. Coppenhaver and *Eleutheria* (2022) by Allegra Hyde.

Theoretical and conceptual frameworks

The quotation from the first part of the article title is taken from McKay’s novel and I selected it because it points to the most obvious challenge we all face when we try to respond with respectful care to other inhabitants of our worlds. Simply articulated, there is no such thing as “animalese” (McKay, 2020: 139) and we do not share a common language. We are thus always already acting from the problematic starting point of speaking for other animals and assuming what they need and what is best for them. Entire bodies of scholarship emanating from, amongst others, feminist theory, queer studies, and critical race theory continue to signal the epistemological and activist dangers of attempts to “save” marginalised others by assuming that individuals in more powerful positions will act in their best interests. In the absence of any semblance of power parity and with no common language, CAS offers the most useful conceptual and ontological tools for exploring the implications of representing the animal other and their experiences. In the next section of the article, I will provide an overview of the environmental concerns that are foregrounded in the selected texts before moving on to analysing how the authors link these concerns to representations of other animals. These overviews will be brief, and they will not explain the plotlines in any detail, if at all. This is a strategic decision to ensure that the analytical focus remains on the animals and their experiences. References to the human characters’ actions and thoughts are included only when they offer insight into worldviews that directly shape the lives of animals. In my attempt to recognise the otherness of animals, I will refer to them as “animals” rather than as “nonhuman animals” throughout the writing. My own authorial position is necessarily anthropocentric and, even as I challenge what Lori Gruen (2015) refers to as “arrogant” anthropocentrism, I do not make false claims about having transcended either the power or the limited perspective that comes with my human subject position. As I seek to write respectfully about animals in a language that does not yet have the concepts or terminological repertoire to do so, I repeatedly negotiate these obstacles as they arise, and I will signal them at appropriate places in the rest of the analysis. For instance, when the name or species of an animal is specified by an author, I will use that information rather than some homogenising reference to “the animal”. When the sex of an animal is specified, I will use the appropriate pronoun and, when it is not, I will use the non-binary pronouns “they” and “them”. I will not be using “it” or “that” to refer to animals to avoid discursively perpetuating larger epistemological dynamics that serve their

continuing objectification. As I reflect on my researcher positionality, I find resonance with Fiona Probyn-Rapsey's (2018: 48) description of what happens when we recognise the ways in which anthropocentrism always infuses all aspects of life: It leaves us "with a generalized sense of complicity that limits what we can claim to be outside of but also indicates a deep and abiding sense of responsibility to a complex problem that takes a huge toll on nonhuman animals". In this article, I thus proceed in a spirit of respectful responsibility as I seek to centre voices that we are not equipped to hear adequately.

Overviews of the primary texts

In *The Animals in That Country*, the human protagonist, Jean, is accompanied by a dingo, Sue, as they find themselves in a pandemic landscape where people have mysteriously been infected by a type of "superflu" that gives them and other animals insight into each other's thoughts. This results in such a breakdown of established social structures that most of the narrative takes place in a space that resembles a post-apocalyptic landscape. As authorities try to understand what is happening, they investigate a "possible eco-terror connection" (McKay, 2020: 22). Before the pandemic, Jean works in an animal park that is clearly represented as a glorified zoo, even though the manager, Angela, insists that it is a conservation organisation built around core values of "[r]espect [and] accurate information" (11) about the animals. Of the three texts, this one most explicitly centres the animal other's experiences and voice in a context where they are oppressed and consistently misrecognised and misunderstood. McKay uses various paratextual elements to establish this animal focus from the outset. First, the dedication includes the line "And for animals – all of us" to signal the commonality human animals share with other animals. Second, she uses an epigraph from Helen Garner that reads "But I'm afraid that somewhere in his wild dog's heart, he secretly despises me". The latter suggests the essential unknowability of the animal other that will be unpacked and problematised in the rest of the novel.

In *Eleutheria*, Willa refers to rising sea levels and eroding coastlines by the second page of the novel. The whole plot revolves around her experiences on the eponymous island where a group of people try to create a different type of society according to a manual that is tellingly called "Living the Solution: The Official Camp Hope Guide to Transforming Ourselves and Saving the Planet". The group critiques what they refer to as the "average environmentalist" (Hyde, 2022: 18) whom they describe as someone who "only whimpered, equivocated, begged for corporate salvation, gave into the ease of greenwashing, the capitalist diversion epitomized in reusable shopping bags: *keep on spending*" (18-19) [italics in original]. Although Willa is attracted to this apparently radical revisioning of society in service of a more sustainable relationship with the environment, she soon starts spotting the cracks in the philosophy. One of the group members, Corinne, notes that "[c]limate change is hot, no pun intended" (157) and it emerges that the leader capitalised on the fashionable aspect of environmental activism rather than intending to engage with its challenges in any substantive way. Climate change is indeed a hot topic, and this is also reflected in the thematic concerns and plotlines of a significant number of contemporary fiction releases. Using environmental destruction to draw in a reading audience and to appear relevant is a strategy that can be used in superficial and even cynical ways and the extent of an author's attempt to engage with human complicity in climate change often becomes clear when reading

in search of the animal other. So-called climate change fiction that unproblematically uses objectifying pronouns, words like “pet” and “owner” and tired tropes of “good dogs” and other grateful animals tend to be texts that fail to offer much in terms of literary imaginings of other ways of interacting with our worlds. While animals appear at various places in the novel, there are no serious attempts to hear their voices and this, I argue, should have served as an early warning sign for Willa.

Finally, *My Days of Dark Green Euphoria* presents the reader with Cara, who works for a non-profit organisation that is “dedicated to grassroots environmental campaigns” (Copenhaver, 2022: 32). Cara exhibits a nuanced understanding of the challenges facing the planet and she explicitly identifies and rejects performative environmental activism as she states that, “[a]las, organic wine and artisanal nut cheese would never be enough” (5). Different species of animals and various forms of animal suffering are foregrounded in the novel but, while Cara clearly cares deeply, she tends to be so overwhelmed by the enormity of the planet’s peril, that she misses many opportunities to listen to the animal voices. In her world, the animals tend to become one monolithic group of suffering victims. While bearing witness to suffering and acknowledging complicity matter, these modes of action do not get us very far. I will demonstrate how they risk allowing the focus to remain on the human and maintaining a status quo of marginalising the voices of the animals.

Considerations that shape attempts to hear the animal other

The decentring of the human and the recognition that speciesist assumptions about human exceptionalism are open to interrogation offer important starting points for imagining what we owe other animals and what responsible, respectful engagement with them would look like. There are entire disciplinary subfields devoted to animals, ethics and the moral responsibilities that emerge when we consider our modes of interactions across species lines (for a succinct overview, see Cray, 2018). One does not need to delve into these important scholarly contributions to know that focusing exclusively on animal suffering is neither particularly respectful nor effective. Such an approach fails to recognise animal agency and, beyond temporary activities flowing from the shock value of witnessing an animal in pain, our undeniable knowledge that human decisions cause animal suffering has done little to effect meaningful change. For the purposes of this analysis, I will be drawing on Lori Gruen’s (2018: 148) work on entangled empathy, which she describes as “an experiential process in which we recognize we are in relationships with others and are called on to be responsive and responsible in these relationships by attending to another’s needs, interests, desires, vulnerabilities, hopes, and sensitivities”. In utilising Gruen’s work, I am sensitive to the challenges that are posed by an uncritical insistence on entanglement. This attunement to entanglement’s ontological limitations is shaped by Eva Haifa Giraud’s foundational work on the topic. Giraud (2019:1) recognises that “[n]arratives of entanglement have [...] proven important in implicating human activities in ecologically damaging situations and calling for more responsible relations to be forged with other species, environments, and communities”. The responsible and, I would add, respectful, relations that we need to cultivate, however, will not result from simplistic assertions about entanglement. Rather, they can only crystallise when we acknowledge that, “although narratives about entanglement grasp something

important about the world, they do not capture everything" (Giraud, 2019: 2-3). Problematic uses of entanglement can be found in statements that we are all animals and that we are all mutually interdependent. Yes, we may well all be animals, but we are very differently located in terms of power and privilege. Yes, we are all mutually interdependent, but such a formulation suggests a level of equal dependence on this entanglement that simply does not exist. The human animal continues to have a disproportionate amount of power, from determining the discursive value of what it means to be "animal" to leveraging interdependence in ways that serve human interests. Like Giraud, we thus need to be careful of the "tensions" that emerge when we try to "ground an ethics and politics in the recognition of relationality" (2). I am proposing that respectful engagement with animals is only possible when we embrace the complexity, messiness and nuance of all such attempts, and I agree with Gruen's (2018: 148) caution that this is all the more challenging when we are dealing with "nonlinguistic or linguistically inaccessible others".

The lack of a common language makes it all the more tempting to reduce the voices of animals to the suffering they speak. I am purposefully using the word "speak" here as I will be arguing that the animals who are represented in my selected texts are, in fact, saying something worth listening to when their pain is depicted. While I am in no way suggesting that the positions of animals and women or animals and racialised others are comparable (for an explanation of why such comparisons are problematic, see Hamilton, 2019), animals do occupy a subaltern position where they are vulnerable to being spoken for, and where their voices can easily be read as an inarticulate, primarily passive expression of pain. I argue that the challenge is not that animals cannot speak, but that humans cannot hear them, not least because we mostly choose not to listen with any care. Even for people who purport to care deeply about the wellbeing of animals and the environment, their commitment tends to falter when it comes to meaningful, respectful engagement with the animal voice.

Critical readings of animal voices in selected texts

When Cara refers to the voices of animals in pain, it is quite clear that she cares greatly, but also that she neither listens nor moves beyond the centrality of her own human subject position. As part of her work, she has to watch video footage of animals who are factory farmed. She shares her experience of this process as follows:

I could not stop hearing the screams of the animals, their sputtering, the almost mechanical pleading as they choked on their own blood, and then the laughter of the workers, the perpetrators, who were themselves marginalized and subjected to unsafe, illegal, and undignified working conditions (18).

She prefaces this description with saying that she is "cauterizing [her] emotional reserves with the latest undercover investigation footage from factory farms" (18) and she follows it with a reference to her therapist's diagnosis of "intrusive thoughts" (19). These brief extracts offer a great deal to unpack for a CAS scholar who is focusing on hearing the voice of the animal other. When Cara notes the precarious situation of the slaughterhouse workers, she is signalling a space where a larger, multispecies justice approach could usefully be deployed. There is a well-documented tendency to assign humans who are constructed as marginalised and disposable to work in

factories where animals are slaughtered (see, for instance, Giraud, 2021 and Struthers Montford and Wotherspoon, 2021). The animals, in turn, are subjected to “editorializing that removes [them] from the epistemic, legal, and emotional frameworks that would make their lives matter” and this is an ontologically strategic manoeuvre that “ensures that violence continues and animals go ungrieved” (Pick, 2018: 415). Petra Tschakert et al (2020: 1) argue in favour of the conceptual value of multispecies justice in ways that are specifically relevant for the purposes of this article because they ground their argument in challenging silenced voices and in linkages to more effective engagements with climate change. In addition, as foregrounded in the title of their article, “Multispecies Justice: Climate-Just Futures with, for and Beyond Humans” (Tschakert et al. 2020: 1-10), they seek to unsettle anthropocentric assumptions about the primacy of the human to bring other participants in our world into the frame of consideration. I am raising the potential of multispecies justice here to clarify that my critique of Cara’s description is intended neither as criticism, nor as an attempt to deny the reality of othered human suffering. It is, however, significant to note the authorial choice to place the representation of the animal scream alongside a description of human suffering in a paragraph that is prefaced with a reference to Cara’s emotions and is again followed by the information that she finds the work of bearing witness to animal pain so traumatising that she needs to see a therapist. Again, without glossing over the very real care burden and compassion fatigue amongst animal activist workers, one should question how the animals’ voices are becoming muffled within these additional layered articulations of victimisation. The representation of the animals’ pain can be read as a literary choice that is made in service of saying more about Cara and workers’ rights than it does about the actual animals’ experience. When one keeps in mind that we are already facing the obstacle of trying to hear the voices of “linguistically inaccessible others” (Gruen, 2018: 148), would it not be more effective to prioritise those voices and to focus our necessarily limited listening capacity on them?

The novel’s tendency to let the voices of animals in pain become lost amidst the points the author is making about the human characters emerges at numerous other points, and I will only raise a selected few before moving on to analysing the other selected texts. Copenhaver’s text is at its most effective when she exposes the dangers of performative activism but, unfortunately, this is also often where she misses opportunities for respectful engagement with the voice of animals in pain. A conversation between Cara and one of her colleagues, Charlie, reveals how a suffering animal is discursively instrumentalised in a game of virtue signalling one-upmanship. This exchange takes place after Charlie asks Cara whether her “[c]ute shoes” (32) are leather:

‘Vinyl – synthetics in general – they’re just the worst for our planet. All those emissions and microfibrils. I just can’t support that,’ she [Charlie] said. ‘I’d much rather wear a dead cow than have fossil fuels touch my body, you know?’

... What I wanted to say was, ‘Ghosh, you’re absolutely right there, Charlie. It’s just that the trouble with cows is that they have a sensory nervous system and they scream so loud when you rip their skin off.’ I thought about the footage I had seen in the leather factories (33).

Cara does not say any of this because it would have given Charlie more reason to think of her as “rude” (33). I will not dwell on the obvious problem of someone with a linguistically accessible

voice choosing to stay silent about such extreme violence because of something as banal as being considered unpleasant, but this does further signal how the focus remains on the human in general and on Cara in particular. In her exploration of the efficacy of animal advocacy activities, Paula Arcari (2022: 73) argues that it is important to identify “gaps or exclusions – elements of strategy that are foreclosed or diminished as others are prioritised”. This is equally true when one considers climate change advocacy and, as Charlie’s comments reveal, animals can fall through the cracks in environmental movements. Núria Almiron (2019: 1101) interrogates “[w]hether appealing to climate change and the environment is an effective advocacy strategy to reduce oppression of nonhumans”. Although Almiron recognises that a focus on climate change may have the potential to improve animals’ lives, she raises arguments asserting that, “to use the environmental frame to reduce animal oppression is a speciesist approach” (1112). Despite the critiques Almiron explores regarding this stance, I am in broad agreement with it. Ultimately, she concludes that the crux of the problem of the animal in climate change discourses can be traced back to the “fact that animal ethics and environmental ethics have an incompatible core” (1113). Her explanation of this crucial clash is quoted at length below as it speaks directly to Charlie’s casual dismissal of a cow’s pain:

While environmentalists think we have moral reasons to perform negative interventions in nature (like the practice of killing animals to preserve an alleged balance in ecosystems or certain plant species), animal ethicists think the opposite, that we always have moral reasons to abstain from performing negative interventions and, by contrast, we have decisive moral reasons to perform positive interventions in nature (like helping animals). This may entail incompatible criteria at the decision-making stage. Therefore, using an environmental frame to defend animals may lead to conflicting situations at any given moment when core values are at play (113).

Almiron offers a nuanced engagement with these important questions and her article deserves to be read in full. For the purposes of this article, however, I will proceed with my argument that nothing less than a clear and unambiguous prioritisation of animals will improve their experiences. They cannot be afterthoughts of people who are trying to address climate change to ensure that the planet continues to provide a liveable habitat for humans. The quality of any given animal’s life, and the quality of her or his death, matters as much to that animal as human life and death matter to us. The fact that this continues to be elided, even in writing about characters who are represented as good and caring environmental activists, demand interrogation. Reducing their voices to their “screams” and “pleading” does not help us to listen even when, as Cara does when she watches video footage, we do hear them.

In *Eleutheria*, there is never any doubt about Willa’s good intentions and her understanding that, as far as climate change is concerned, we are “moored in apathy, in the comfort of willful blindness” (Hyde, 2022: 18). While my focus is on the inability to hear the animal voice in this scenario, it is worth pointing out the ableist language in this quotation. Nik Taylor and Richard Twine (2014: 4) identify disability studies as one of CAS’s “potentially kindred fields” and numerous other scholars have located rich theoretical potential in the spaces where CAS and critical disability studies intersect. In their introduction to a special journal issue dedicated to the topic, for instance, Alan Santinele Martino and Sarah May Lindsay (2020: 1) look to scholarship on these intersections for its capacity to shed “light on disablism and speciesism as interconnecting oppressions, how

animality and disability are mutually constitutive, as well as the tensions and coalitions shared by these two related fields”. For the purposes of my argument, the salience of their articulation of the missed opportunities that result from marginalising disabled voices from CAS discussions is immediately apparent in the following assertion: “Disabled people bring rich perspectives around interdependence, creative ways of mobilizing, and making space for non-normative ways of voicing lived experiences” (Martino and Lindsay, 2020: 2). “Non-normative ways of voicing” experiences require non-normative modes of listening and this, I argue, constitute the cracks in the commitment of the characters in my selected texts. To Willa, the animals she encounters mostly remain unheard, even as the author uses the bodies of animals in various ways. Within the first chapter, a cow has been reduced to an absent referent (see Adams, 1990) as Hyde uses the eating of their body to foreshadow that the founder of the supposedly utopian Eleutheria will end up being exposed as a fraud. Willa describes Roy Adams as someone who “looked like a man who liked his steaks rare and his golf courses pesticide-drenched” (18). On the next page, the body of a frog is metaphorically deployed to explain how people were failing to address climate change: “We still had the audacity to call climate change a problem for another time – another country – as if we weren’t already proverbial frogs, our skin sloughing off in hot water” (19). While a proverb such as this one about frogs or expressions such as “there is more than one way to skin a cat” have become common currency in our language usage, they are actually references to extreme violence and pain. The fact that we continue using them with such casual disregard for the animal referent in pain signals the extent to which we discursively perpetuate anthropocentrism. Timothy Baker (2019: 7) notes that “[s]pecies divisions are predicated not only on material violence but also on linguistic violence”. Baker continues (2019: 7) to argue in favour of challenging “traditional epistemological hierarchies” in search of new ways of thinking about the ways in which certain species and linguistic accessibility are prioritised. Here it is significant to note that, regardless of Willa’s apparent commitment to climate change, Hyde still chooses to represent her thoughts in a language infused with violence against animals. It seems as if we are not even hearing ourselves properly when we speak about animals, which suggests how far we have to go in terms of cultivating non-normative modes of listening that will enable the voices of animals to be heard. I agree with Catherine Parry (2017: 2) when she asserts that literature “teems with animals whose bodies, lives and literary forms demand attention to more than just their participation in the story of the human”. Despite its rich engagement with environmental activism, *Eleutheria* fails to meet the challenge of listening to the voices of the animals the author uses in service of moving the human character-centred plot forward. The novel’s disservice to animal voices is all the more striking because various references lull the reader into thinking that the text will engage with animals respectfully. It emerges, however, that the “vegan-leather sneakers” (68 and 138) that are part of the activists’ uniforms amount to little more than performative caring for animals and can more honestly be read as another example of greenwashing.

Willa critiques the way in which people often treat activism as a “hobby. A feel-good diversion” (128). She finds this approach problematic because such people “always fall away when the going gets difficult. And things will get difficult” (128). When one reads these lines through a CAS lens, the immediate reaction will be that things are already extremely difficult for animals, and animals have been saying so for some time. Ron Broglio (2022: 135) reminds us that animal allyship “means telling stories of animals as active and important players on the earth and in our own social worlds.

The animals keep reminding us of that". In her engagement with Broglio's work, Ashley Kerr (2023: n.p.) refers to his insistence that "humans must look [and, I would add, listen] past the animal as allegory and instead focus on how real animal bodies interrupt real human systems". Various animals' bodies are suffering but they are also speaking through their suffering and, in doing so, they are they are "letting us know that there are other worlds where time, space, and perception work differently. They will not comply with the way we perceive and our way of world building" (Broglio, 2022: 63). Cara and Willa appear to realise that alternative modes of world building are required to address climate change, yet they repeatedly miss opportunities to learn from other animals, who are already signalling alternative ways of knowing and being in the world. Willa's prediction of the difficulty to come, as if this were some imaged future scenario, seems particularly disingenuous since, barely twenty pages earlier, she recounts how an "enormous flock of starlings" suddenly "dropped from the sky like feathery rain. Their small bodies thumped onto windshields and sidewalks and park benches, splashed into the Charles [river]" (105). She runs through various possible anthropogenic causes of these deaths, but she ends her description by saying that "[n]o one knew for sure ... The deaths would be labelled mysterious: another tragedy tucked into the corner of our minds" (105). Willa knows animals are suffering and she suspects that these deaths reveal something important about human complicity but, like the environmental hobbyists she criticises, she does not take the time to listen to what the "small bodies" of these birds are saying.

Hyde represents another missed opportunity to listen to the voices of wild dogs later in the novel. As with the birds, these dogs' suffering speaks directly to the consequences of climate change, but the humans who hear them, choose not to listen. In the description of the dogs, Willa's sense of threat is prioritised as the dogs barked and she heard them "growling like a motor sputtering to life" (143). She feels trapped and afraid as they "formed a circle around [her], barked with their jaws stretched wide, the pinks of their throats exposed" (143). She attempts to communicate with them by telling them to go home and by pleading "please" (143). These dogs, however, have no home to go to because they have been brought to an island that is structured around human needs to such an extent that they cannot properly care for themselves, and where humans are not caring for them (for more on the ways in which human spatial planning ignore and actively harm such "liminal animals", see Spanning, 2019). Two local people assist Willa by throwing stones at the dogs and, when Willa tells them "[d]on't hurt *it*" (146) [*italics mine*], Athena offers a succinct lesson in the power dynamics that are at play here: "You don't have to hurt them, said Athena. You just have to show them you could" (146). As with the representation of Cara and the slaughterhouse footage, the bodies of animals in pain become literary props in service of exploring the feelings and identities of the novels' human protagonists. The links between the dogs' behaviour and the environmental consequences of climate change are merely noted before the characters move swiftly along. Athena explains that the dogs "have gotten meaner since the recent hurricanes, with fewer scraps to scavenge around the settlements, no tourists to toss them half-eaten conch fritters and guava duff" (146). When one spends some time with this explanation, it seems clear that the dogs are voicing something significant with their barks and growls, yet the human characters choose to scare them away as a nuisance rather than taking the time to listen. The reference to tourism is one that crops up again later in the novel when Willa and her group try to "rescue" a sea turtle who they know to be In addition to inserting her into a anthropocentric emotional "critically endangered" (208). Deron, who is local to the island, insists on taking the

turtle back because “she’s for hotel guests” who “need more activities” (208). Significantly, Deron, whom Willa regards as a threat to the turtle, refers to her with the pronoun “she”, while Willa, who is there to save the island, its animals and the planet while she is at it, refers to the dog as “it” and discursively objectifies the turtle in a similar manner (210). He is not convinced by Willa’s insistence on the survival of this turtle species and he explains what seems to her as his uncaring attitude as follows:

if you’re so interested in survival, let me tell you something, because I know about survival. All of us on Eleutheria do. Because after the most recent hurricane, no one brought over any supplies. In the past, most countries sent food, water, medicine, but now we’re on our own. We weren’t responsible for creating these superstorms or the rising seas, but we have to bear them (208).

He is unapologetic about using the sea turtle as a resource in order to survive the devastating impact of climate change on the island’s economic landscape, which is heavily reliant on tourism. Deron is articulating a reality that scholars and activists have long been signalling about the global socio-economic distribution of the effects of climate change. Bathiany et al (2018: 1) argue that the “countries that have contributed least to climate change, and are most vulnerable to extreme events, are projected to experience the strongest increase in variability”. The sea turtle, the stray dogs and all other animals become collateral damage as the islanders, who are themselves marginalised, struggle to survive.

Neither the incursion of Willa and her group on the island, nor the violent commodification of the sea turtles are anything new. The contemporary narrative of Willa is interspersed by brief chapters recounting the historical experiences of a ship captain who originally colonised and named the “uninhabited” (30) island of Eleutheria. In one of these short chapters, the captain voices the vulnerability of the turtles while signalling the precarious subject position of the marginalised human characters: “And, oh God, the turtles. They killed the creatures constantly; there were hardly any left for crafting the little combs the Lords used to groom their wigs” (200). Lest there be any confusion about whose voices and lives matter, he explains: “Empire was built on order – or perhaps on ordering: whose life as worth the most, whose life could be expended; who could own and who was owned, who had a right to profit from his labor. A turtle wasn’t only an ungainly reptile, but a resource to be roll-called”. For Deron, the turtle is a resource in service of the tourism, but she is no less of a resource for Willa and the young people who have joined her as volunteers. Willa comes to realise this as the cracks in her utopian island construction become ever larger. She admits that, for many people, the turtle is merely part of their own projects that include leaving the island and writing “self-aggrandizing college application essays about their time rescuing wildlife [as they ...] went on with their lives” (207). The acceleration of climate change and its consequences, however, suggests that the notion of getting on with one’s life will become increasingly challenging without radically altering our modes of engaging with our natural environments and the animals who populate these spaces. The apparent powerlessness of the turtle belies a much more profound understanding of the urgency of our current ecological state. When the group managed to get the turtle to the ocean, they are disappointed to see that she “did not move” and “seemed stunned, or else exhausted” (210). The encouragement of telling the turtle “You’re free” (210) has no effect as she remains as “motionless” as a “stone” (211). The fact

that the turtle is unable to recognise and return to her natural habitat should be telling Willa a great deal but, once again, there is no real attempt to listen. This scene ends with the group returning to the shelter of the van when it starts raining. They simply leave the turtle at the edge of the water. The description of the drive home suggests that Willa realises that the experience was infused with meanings and knowledge that remain beyond their grasp. Willa is grateful that the drive back is so difficult “because it meant the recruits couldn’t ask questions about what had happened, what we’ve done – and also because I couldn’t ask myself” (211). Hyde consistently represents Willa as a character who embraces discomfort and difficulty as she works towards salvaging the world. Yet, it appears that listening to what the animals in her world are saying and the questions they signal, is not a challenge she feels willing or able to tackle.

Not listening to the voices of animals is not an option for the characters in *The Animals in That Country* and this is the selected novel that helps readers move forward in terms of an imaginary understanding of what such a listening might entail and, crucially, what it might reveal. Significantly, for the most part these characters do not seek to listen because they regard it as a necessary element in respectful and responsible engagement with the animal other, but because a pandemic makes animal voices audible and unavoidable. The tropes of instrumentalising animals as tourist attractions as part of a larger capitalist imperatives, under the guise of saving them, and the profound misrecognition of various animals are introduced from the beginning of the text. Unlike Angela, who regards herself as such a saviour, Jean is honest about the exploitation of the animals that lie at the core of her work as a park guide. Angela might be able to quote sections on the dangers of anthropomorphism (11) from the park manual, but Jean’s honesty about the limits of human understanding of animals makes her a much more interesting character. Jean’s insistence that animals are saying more than the meanings that rangers ascribe to their behaviours is noted in the brief page that precedes the first chapter of the novel. She listens to various sounds at night and describes them as follows: “Dingo, owl, night thing – that sound is a warning. Loneliest you’ll hear. ... She’s saying: ‘Hey, *hey*. There’s something coming.’” (1) [emphasis in original]. This literary foreshadowing is deployed before the pandemic forces her to listen, and she already responds to their sounds with at least this recognition: “Tell me that’s not special. Tell me she [a dingo] doesn’t know something about the world that you and me haven’t ever thought of” (1). Jean recognises both the urgency, as signalled by the italicised interjection “*hey*”, and the limitations of human understanding and imagination when it comes to other animals.

Jean herself plays to human misrecognitions in her work as she understands that people wish to make sense of animals in and on human terms. On a guided tour of the park, she describes Sue as “sweet Sue” (6). In addition to inserting her into an anthropocentric emotional framework, she uses a jocular reference to human gendered assumptions and hierarchies to engage the tourists’ attention: “‘But you know who really runs things around here, ladies and gents? A woman, of course! Here’s sweet Sue’” (6). As the text progresses, “sweet” will emerge as a very inaccurate description of Sue’s disposition and she is not in charge of much in a space marked by confinement and control, as signalled by words and phrases like “fenced-in enclosure” (4), “rail” (5), “fence” (7) and “wire” (7). After Sue’s foot gets ensnared in the wire as she attempts to get over the fence and Jean pulls her out, she feels Sue’s “oversized fangs, yellow as her pelt, slice clean into [her] flesh” (8). This scenario is a cause of great excitement amongst the tourists. Significantly, it is a little girl who seems most interested in how Sue might be experiencing this

event and the child asks “What did she say”... The dingo. What did she say to you?” (8). Jean’s response sums up what the tourists are able to hear at this pre-pandemic stage of the text:

The whole lot of them is listening, so I get the mic out. Make my voice high and feathery, like a wild dog tail. ‘She said, “Jeanie-girl: you’re my best friend”.’

They love that (8-9).

Jean understands the extent to which the tourists need to have their anthropocentric assumptions about Sue validated, and the strategies she employs to foster their engagement resembles crude, simplistic anthropomorphism, which can be defined as the “attribution of human traits to nonhumans” (Andrews, 2018: 240). Although she knows that there are fundamental differences between dogs and dingoes (1; 4), she understands that the trope of the dog as “man’s best friend” is one with a powerful grip on human imagination and she uses it accordingly. In her private interactions with Sue, Jean’s deployment of anthropomorphism becomes more nuanced, and she clearly aims for greater recognition of Sue as an animal who is trapped. While she dismisses the bite as a playful “scratch” (8) for the tourists, for instance, she describes it to herself as a “warning bite – Dingo Sue’s way of saying, ‘You’re in my face, bitch’. What a thug” (9). The language, register and tone that Jean ascribes to Sue represent a more responsible attempt at listening to what her body was saying with the bite, but these are very much elements of a speech style that is Jean’s.

CAS scholars have interrogated the conceptual and epistemological dynamics of anthropomorphism and they find its outright rejection no more useful than a simplistic embrace of anthropodenial. The latter term was coined by Frans de Waal (2006) and Kari Weil describes it as a “particular othering of nonhuman animals” where there is a complete “refusal to see that some share basic human capacities” (2018: 115). Kirstin Andrews (2018: 240) uses the phrase “unwarranted anthropectomy” to refer to “the rejection of human traits in nonhuman animals”. Andrews argues in favour of a more nuanced mode of engagement where, “[i]nstead of attributing content that reflects our standpoints or biases, we can carefully ascribe content to nonlinguistic creatures just as we do for humans who are other” (240). Any attempts to speak for and “ascribe content to” animals need to be undertaken with extreme caution. Eva Giraud (2013: 113) draws on the work of Donna Haraway about “speaking for” an animal protagonist to argue that Haraway has herself been guilty of practices “which condemn any form of political ventriloquism because of the way it silences non-human actors through projecting the (well-intentioned) desires of the speaker onto them”. Giraud is specifically referring to Haraway’s work in “The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others” (1992) where she teases out how speaking for another perpetuates unequal power structures in favour of the one doing the speaking. She critiques the constitution of objects “as the ground of a representational practice that *forever* authorizes the ventriloquist. Tutelage will be eternal. The represented is reduced to the permanent status of the recipient of action, never to be a co-actor in an articulated practice among unlike, but joined, social partners” (Haraway, 1992: 312) [emphasis in original]. I make these points to argue in favour of focusing our attention on alternative ways of listening to (and reading) the voices of animals and to acknowledge that McKay is, like all the other authors, speaking for the animals she represents in her novel. These alternative modes of listening can add valuable tools to our imaginary repertoires, but they are also of strategic political importance. These animals have crucial things to say about the damage we are doing to our worlds, and we are

ignoring their voices at our peril. I argue that McKay's literary appropriation of animals' voices (or the ways in which she speaks for them) most approximates respectful engagement and facilitates a move towards meaningful ways of listening. While I am not suggesting equality in any sense, this text does offer Sue, who remains very different from Jean but does join her in the quest she undertakes to find her family after the pandemic has decimated most existing human social structures. The positioning of Sue as a kind of partner who joins Jean is only possible when both the points of similarity and the unbridgeable differences are acknowledged.

The primary symptom of the "zooflu" or "talking animal disease" is the ability of "infected humans" to "communicate (encode) and translate (decode) previously unrecognisable non-verbal communications ... with non-human animals" (35). The terminological choices suggest the "proper" place of animals with the reference to zoos and the description of this as a "disease" signals the major disruptive potential of the animal voice. The radical novelty that is associated with the speaking animal betrays the level of misrecognition from humans since animals have, of course, always been communicating and voicing their experiences. The only thing that is new here is that humans can no longer avoid listening and they cannot pretend that they do not understand. Jean, and especially her six-year-old granddaughter Kim, are keen to hear what the animals are saying but, it soon turns out, they will not like what they hear. Animals will not be using their newfound communicative powers to tell their human "owners" and "saviours" how much they love their best friends and how grateful they are for their conservation projects. Kim tells an infected man she meets that she would like to talk to a dog and his response is as follows: "No, you don't. My hunting bitch was a tough, mean, fighting machine dog that didn't take shit from nothing. But what it was she had to say once I knew what she was saying – " (55). He is unable to articulate what the dog was saying and, when Jean and Kim ask him again, "the guy turns away" (55). The relatively easy things, like volunteering at animal projects and being "kind" "pet owners", mean very little when one is unable or unwilling to do the more uncomfortable things that are essential to any responsible, respectful relationship with another being. Listening is one of the most basic actions that are required yet, even when forced to do so, humans turn away from doing the work that will inevitably come with hearing what an oppressed other has to say. When Jean eventually finds her son, Lee, he is more honest about the likely truth regarding "how all these animals see us": We're not 'friend' or 'foe'; we are the enemy, every single time. Sure, there's respect there because we hold the food" (103). Human engineered dependence is the source of this dubious "respect", but Lee recognises that any discussions of how animals see us will result in profoundly uncomfortable listening experiences.

Like the little girl in the group of tourists, it is again a child who seems most interested in actually listening to what the animals are saying. Acculturation and socialization into an anthropocentric worldview are processes that take time, and adults have had more exposure to devaluing animals and more time to learn how to dismiss their voices than adults have. Marianne Heggen et al (2022: 87) argue that children's relationships with their environments are more holistic and less narrowly cognitive, and that they are thus positioned "differently in the world both ontologically and epistemologically. In some senses, their thinking is wild; it isn't corralled or regulated—yet". Kim rejects Jean's attempts to soothe her by ascribing sweet sentiments to animals and, when she sees that Kim refuses to be so easily placated, she asks her what she would like "to ask the animals" (69). Kim's response encapsulates a level of respect that is simultaneously such an obvious

necessary first step in any responsible engagement with another and so far beyond anything the adult characters regard as relevant that it reveals the inadequacy of human responses to animals: “I’d ask them what they want” (69). McKay’s authorial attempt to voice what animals want signals that listening to them will require careful and innovative attention to ways of speaking that is not our own. She places the animals’ voices in bold print and these sections mostly consist of short, often single word, sentences that are often grammatically incorrect and seem incoherent at first glance. These sentences resemble the linguistic efforts of someone who is speaking a language they do not know well, and it takes some effort to extract meaning from them. Jean notes that she is “reading [Sue’s] body like some language I barely remember from a high school textbook” and, while she “can parrot the words, the meaning is in scraps” (84). In the halting, stumbling, seemingly contradictory snippets of speech, the animals are speaking clearly enough for an attentive listener, or reader, to extract a great deal of meaning and information. As the pandemic spreads, the reader is mostly told via the voices of human characters what they are hearing from the animals. The first animal voices McKay directly represents are those of mice. The mice are kept in a back room of the “park” where Jean works and they are bred as food to live feed to certain other animals, such as the raptors and snakes. Their voices are saying:

Run.

...

Run.

**It’s glands from the
body. It’s crops
and
killing and shelter –**

....

Everything. The body. Run (76) [bold font in original].

The embodied knowledge of fear and the imperative to escape are unmistakable. Jean and Sue spend a considerable amount of time together and she notes that Sue’s voice “[d]oesn’t make a lick of sense” (82). In an attempt to communicate, she employs a familiar, patronising tactic of speaking down to Sue: “I speak slow so she can understand me. ‘Why. Don’t. We. Go. Back –’”. Sue, however, is having none of this and responds:

Barking

mad.

By this stage of the text, Jean is becoming more adept at hearing the other ways in which Sue’s body is speaking. When she suggests that they take her back to her “enclosure” (82), the “smell of metal comes from her forehead at the mention of the cage. It gets in my nose too” (82). When she understands what Sue is saying in response to her mention of confinement, Jean thinks back on the years she spent in the park “[l]ocking up Sue and the other creatures all safe and sound” (83). Jean was always sceptical of Angela’s insistence that they were acting in the best interests of

the animals at work, but the mice and Sue are now telling her how they experienced these human efforts to save and protect selected species. Listening to their voices suggests that we need a radical reconsideration of how we think about what is in the best interest of the animals over whom we have power.

The voices of animals who are farmed for food speak even more haunting truths and Jean is forced to hear them when she and Sue pass by a farm in their search for Jean's family. Jean immediately notices that the "whole place smells like milk, fermenting grass, grief and heat" and she sees a "wild look of survival in those cow eyes" (182). The fact that Jean is hearing grief and wildness in what she smells and sees suggests that she has already broadened her modes of listening being the traditional, normative ones. She is also understanding that her perception of the world is an embodied experience as she recalls that she rode "along roads [she] saw with a body that held Lee" (181). She is thinking back to a time when she was pregnant and part of a larger family who lived in a farmhouse where there was also a "herd of diary cows" (181). These recollections are shared by the author in the same section where Jean hears the voices of the cows who "appeal through the wire":

**All of
me
...
Could it tell
my babies I'm
still
here.
[...]
It knows
them. Where are
they.
[...]
It came and
made babies from
babies. Where
are
they (182).**

The cows are deploying the objectifying use of "it" to refer to humans in an inversion of the common terminological strategy of using such pronouns in reference to animals. The absence of question marks and the grammatical incoherence do little to mute the poignancy of the plea for information about the calves who were taken from these cows to access their milk, and the

indictment of diary practices is spoken loudly and clearly. Despite the recollection of her own pregnant body, Jean’s reaction exemplifies human disregard for animals voicing suffering: “These cows want to tell me stories and I don’t want to hear. Got my own lost babies to find, thank you very much. Turn my back on their big, frustrated bodies ...” (183).

Conclusion

In this article, I have demonstrated that, when reading contemporary fiction through a CAS lens, literary animals speak loudly from the pages of the texts. When reading with respectful attunement, with a more-than-human focus and with a willingness to mobilise non-normative ways of listening to “animalese”, the reader learns a great deal about how our assumptions, uncritical anthropocentrism and actions shape a relationship with the rest of the world that is toxic and destructive. Regardless of how good intentions may be, the impact of even our efforts to “help” needs to be reconsidered and, in order to do so, foregrounding animal voices should be a necessary first step. Animals cannot simplistically be packaged along with the rest of the environment in sweeping environmental programmes to combat climate change as clashing interests emerge that will not always serve animals. The lives of animals are entangled with those of humans and the natural world and there can be great value in tackling the seemingly overwhelming challenges posed by climate change through a holistic, multispecies approach. However, this requires careful listening to the halting, conventionally unintelligible voices of the most marginalised members of any group whose interests are being agitated for. It cannot mean turning away when what we hear becomes uncomfortable or inconvenient, and respectful listening will require an embrace of discomfort and inconvenience that challenges the very foundation of how we understand our ontological and epistemological positions as humans. In order to have a real chance of changing our relationship with our natural worlds, we need to do much better than vegan sneakers, nut cheese and oat milk. The voices of the animals in the selected texts have illustrated that we can perform exemplary environmentalist identities while still prioritising human feelings and desires over animal suffering and death. Our climate change efforts will have little long-term influence if we continue to live blithely alongside such violence and merely turn away or pretend not to hear when animals articulate their pain.

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Jessica Murray is a full professor at the University of South Africa, where she has been based in the Department of English Studies since 2011. She is currently on secondment to the Office of the Executive Dean in the College of Graduate Studies. She is trained as a feminist and queer theorist, and she has published extensively on women’s contemporary fiction and historical life writing. Her current research project focuses on women’s literary interventions in climate fiction and on the intersections between animal representations in these texts, Critical Animal Studies and the emerging field of Vegan Studies.
