

## Zoognosis: When Animal Knowledges Go Viral

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Laura Jean McKay's *The Animals in That Country*, Contagion, Becoming-Animal, and the Politics of Predation

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**Abstract:** This paper proposes a creative neologism: zoognosis, with an added g, to indicate that knowledges can be transmitted virally from animals to humans. If so, what are the animals trying to tell us? Laura Jean McKay's *The Animals in That Country* (2020) provides an opportunity to find out. McKay's prescient novel was written before, but published during, the COVID-19 pandemic, and is about a 'zooflu' that enables the infected to understand animals. The author has forged a poetic language based on animal sensory perceptions – what ethologist Jakob von Uexküll termed Umwelten. In doing so McKay effects a 'becoming-animal' of the text, reintroducing readers to their own animality. McKay's 'perspectivism' enables us to see from the point-of-view of non-human animals, forcing a reckoning with animal abuse and extractive lifeways. While her speculative fiction is bleak, it offers tools for attunement and thinking-with non-human others.

**Keywords:** Zoonosis, Umwelt, Becoming-Animal, Perspectivism, Cannibalism

In 2020 the specialist technical term ‘zoonosis’ became common parlance. From the Greek *zōon* (animal) and *nosos* (disease), zoonosis is the terrifying moment when a virus makes a species jump from animals to humans.<sup>1</sup> Hearing the word repeated on news broadcasts, I started to imagine it contained a silent ‘g’, becoming ‘zoognosis’: the transmission of *knowledges* from animals to humans. *Nosos* and *gnosis* (knowledge) aren’t entirely at odds with each other, since viruses themselves are languages that can be ‘read’ genomically, and the phrase ‘going viral’ now refers to the spread of information.<sup>2</sup> If we imagine COVID-19 as itself a message, or conduit for messages, not a zoonosis but a *zoognosis* – then what are animals trying to tell us? Clues seem to be everywhere in the COVID-19 world, where lockdown breeds both paranoia and a new attentiveness to detail.

As Jacques Derrida’s neologism of *l’animot*, or word-animal, demonstrates, creative interventions into language can shift human thinking about animals, demanding a pivot in perspective that becomes a thinking-*with*.<sup>3</sup> *Zoognosis* jettisons associations of animals as reservoirs of disease, waiting to infect innocent humans. Instead, animals become the source of mystical or esoteric knowledges, what John Berger once described as ‘messengers and promises’ (4). Or perhaps zoognosis is a form of mystical wisdom deployed by animals into human consciousness precisely *via* the route of an infectious disease? How else are we supposed to get the message?

Gnosticism is at its core a transcendental, anti-materialist belief system that feminists such as Donna Haraway and Val Plumwood would have no truck with. The inherent anthropocentrism of Gnosticism doesn’t make it a likely candidate for use in Critical Animal Studies; however, I propose *zoo-gnosis* as a cosmology that re-centres animal knowledges. The esoteric messaging and hidden symbols of Gnosticism offer apt methodologies for decoding cryptic information, and indeed, ‘cryptic transmission’ is the technical term for the undetected spread of a virus, while *crypsis* covers a range of methods animals use to avoid predation, such as camouflage and mimicry. The release of a novel dealing with a zoonotic disease, *The Animals in That Country* by Laura Jean McKay in March 2020, seemed a perfectly timed mystical clue or sign. McKay’s imagination of Australia gripped by ‘zooflu’ bears a strong relationship to our COVID-19 reality: both feature face masks and paranoia. Zooflu, however, is a virus with a

difference. Its primary symptom, other than pink eyes, is that it renders humans capable of reading the many and varied non-verbal animal languages that have hitherto been opaque to us: in this sense, it is as much *zoognostic* as zoonotic.

*The Animals in That Country* has already received a glowing review in this journal (Armstrong 2020), but here I examine the text at length, teasing out some of its key relationships to animal studies scholarship. Firstly, I attend to its innovative treatment of animal language (I call this section the ‘medium’). In order to write ‘for’ animals,<sup>4</sup> McKay explores animal worlds or *Umwelten*, as conceptualised by Jakob von Uexküll. This enables her to take language to what Brian Massumi calls the ‘literary limit’, which surprisingly, given animals don’t write, gives human writers and readers ‘all the more animal character’ (Massumi 280). In addition to McKay’s style, her immersion in the field of animal studies means that there are other kinds of clues in the text, including references to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s concept of becoming-animal, Val Plumwood’s encounter with a crocodile, and Thomas Nagel’s eternal question, ‘What is it like to be a bat?’ Secondly, I turn my attention to what we might learn from these ‘beastly’ messages, namely regarding the maltreatment of animals by humans for purposes of entertainment, scientific experiment, and especially, their ongoing exploitation as sources of food. Using scholarship from Brazil which translates Amerindian cosmologies into concepts the Western world needs to heed, I will examine Els Lagrou’s discussion of disease as animals’ ‘revenge’ and Viveiros de Castro’s concepts of perspectivism and multinaturalism in his *Cannibal Metaphysics*. The Brazilian artist-thinkers Alexis Milonopoulos and Jorgge Menna Barreto designate eating as a cosmopolitical act, drawing inspiration from Indigenous cosmologies, as well as Jane Bennett’s vital materialism as it relates to food. This section I refer to as ‘the message’.<sup>5</sup>

## The Medium

*The Animals in That Country* is narrated by Jean Bennett, a name which immediately conjures Jane Bennett. But unlike her near-namesake, Jean is not an erudite New Materialist; rather, she is a hard-bitten middle aged working-class white woman, with a tiger tattoo on her left breast;

chain-smoking, sly-grogging, and foul-mouthed. Jean speaks in no-bullshit prose full of Ockerisms, perhaps a little too redolent of an Australian white imaginary steeped in colonial myths of the rough-as-guts but ultimately loveable convict-come-pioneer. On another level, however, Jean's blunt locution is a precursor to the gnomic non-verbal utterances of animals she eventually comes to understand. In other words, she is simply a species among other species, with her own peculiarities, her own 'Umwelt' or bubble, as ethologist Jakob von Uexküll characterises it.

Every living creature occupies its own milieu, or environment, with which it is co-constituted. It is the unique and specific sensory capabilities of individual creatures that make up their Umwelten, and indeed, the same objects or environments will be perceived differently by different organisms. As von Uexküll charmingly puts it, 'A honeybee meadow is something very different from a human meadow. It is a honeybee composition made up of bee notes' (von Uexküll 'The New Concept' 120). This means an attunement to different colours, different shapes, and an overall different spatial perception to that of a human, as though two entirely different meadows were being experienced. Von Uexküll's delight in the infinite diversity of animal worlds is infectious – he traces the potential uses of a flower stem in order to illustrate his Umwelt concept – the same object is variously a pipe full of liquid for a spittlebug, a ladder for an ant, and a tasty morsel for a cow (von Uexküll 'An Introduction' 108). But he is just as lyrical when describing the bubble-worlds of blood-sucking creatures, for example mosquitos who 'dance' at sunset (108), or a tick falling off a twig and sucking with gusto the blood of its host mammal ('The New Concept' 119). While the tick's reductive Umwelt possesses 'no "sight things" or "hear things" and only one single "smell thing"' (119) nevertheless von Uexküll attunes us to the peculiarly pared-back poetry of its life cycle, what Elizabeth Grosz has further refined to 'the conjunction mammal-twig-sun' (Grosz 42). Grosz emphasises the musicality of von Uexküll's vision, in which '[e]ach animal is itself a kind of creative response – an improvisation of a score that is provided by its Umwelt' (42). A planet of creatures bounded by bubbles might seem an appropriate image in the era of COVID-19 lockdowns, but far from being a world of atomised individuals, von Uexküll sees sense-bubbles as 'composed of

coextensive overlapping beings and fragments of milieus' (41) and while we are all, including humans, engaged in playing our own, unique parts, together we co-compose a symphony (43).

Early on in *The Animals in That Country*, Jean imagines that animals see the world through unfathomable 'mists' (45), but later comes to inhabit with alarming intimacy the bubbles or world views of a range of animals. McKay pays particular attention to animal perspectives and senses, forming assemblages of affects in the same way that Grosz describes the tick's conjunction of mammal-twig-sun. In fact, many of the passages of McKay's 'animal language' resemble Grosz's pared-back verbal aggregation, sharing an interest in conveying the intensity of animal drives. But far from von Uexküll's symphony of happy bees and cows, zooflu reveals the *disharmony*, fear and pain that we are surrounded by but have been too self-centred to acknowledge.

*The Animals in That Country* is set in a wildlife park somewhere in Australia's Northeast, where it is hot every day and a never-ending stream of tourists keeps Jean in a livelihood of sorts, as a tour guide. Jean's intuitive way with the animals sets up precursors to the emergence of animal language; long before she is infected with zooflu she already knows that '[d]ingos wear their fur like feelings' (7). Synaesthesia makes an early appearance, the entanglement of the senses alluding to different modes of perception: when Jean is bitten by Sue the dingo-cross while extricating her paw from a fence and the watching tourists roar, Jean feels the sound in her hand (8). Not only is there a mixing of pain and sound, the physical and the audible, but roles and relations keep shifting. Sue had a sore paw, now Jean has a sore hand, and the tourists roar like a collective lion. Who, then, is caged, who the spectator? Inside the cage, does Jean automatically become animal? Or are the ones watching the real 'animals'? In McKay's novel, it seems everything is becoming-animal, even the light 'claws at the sky' (27) and rain 'bites at the windows' (197). Long before Jean is in the grip of zooflu she imagines her mother as being so old 'she's gone reptile – like a snake. No hearing, just the vibration of passers-by to rely on' (44). When fighting the inevitable fever, Jean becomes 'a bat (...) with her wings clutched' (74).

In spite of her instinct for the nuance of animals' interior worlds, Jean insists on dumbing down and debasing this complexity, performing animal voices for the tourists, ignoring the park manual's warnings against anthropomorphism. Angela, Jean's boss (also her ex-daughter-in-law and mother of her precious granddaughter Kimberly) admonishes, 'It's not Disney, here. It's not *The Lion King*'. Indeed, the manual states 'people who anthropomorphise tend not to read cues, and people who don't read cues are dangerous. Dangerous to themselves, dangerous to the animals, and dangerous to visitors' (11).<sup>6</sup> And yet, Jean can't help herself, satisfying the whims both of the visitors and Kimberly, for example she puts on a 'deep and goofy' voice while feeding the whiplays, imagining that they are saying: "Fanx. Fanx, you guys. You got more fish?" (41). Once Jean becomes infected with the zooflu, she realises animal language is far more complex than these banalities, and that her crude form of anthropomorphism is no longer necessary, as all animal life has the capacity to communicate and humans are just one species of animal among the multitudes. This is not to discount anthropomorphism as a valid means of engendering empathy, as advocated for by Jane Bennett, among many others. Anthropomorphism allows for the possibility of isomorphisms; this then allows for the formation of confederations (Bennett, 99), which, paradoxically, work *against* anthropocentrism (120). In McKay's speculative fiction, it has become surplus to requirements, but in our own world, strategic anthropomorphism maintains its necessity.

In McKay's novel, there are as many cases of zoomorphism as there are of anthropomorphism. This blurring between human and animal includes: 'Ange going lulu with the lizards back at the Park. My old mum talking crow' (136). Transformation goes two ways, however, for as Jean notes when she finds her beloved Sue after she escapes her enclosure, 'I see caramel. Meet with a face so familiar it could be mine. Takes a moment for me to understand it's not human' (80).

Dissolution of categories runs rampant throughout the novel. Jean's distracted absorption of the TV news as her own world unravels, includes 'army guys and empty farms and stockyards. Beasts out where they shouldn't be, roaming all over the roads, getting into everything' (26); 'pink-eyed southerners staring at animals. Horses, cows, pet rabbits (...)' Abandoned pets everywhere. Suicides' (33); 'A politician getting in the shit for saying we'll have

to start eating our pets. Farmers topping themselves (...) Chemtrails. Vaccinations. Fluoride. Vegans again' (45). Streams of the 'pink-eyed Southerners' come to the wildlife park begging from outside the locked fences to 'speak to Blondie the python, or Kermit and Miss Piggy the rainbow lorikeets, or Bernie the crocodile' (53).

The first indication that Jean, once infected with the virus, can understand animals, is her conviction that someone has left the gas on. Actually, she can smell the hormones of captive mice being bred to feed the python and birds of prey; this gas is rising 'not from the pipes, but from their bodies. Not squeaking, screaming. They scream bloody murder...' (75). In the Umwelten of mice, a smell can be a scream, just as, earlier on, a roar could be felt as bodily pain. Thanks to the sensory enhancements of zooflu, Jean hears non-sequiturs emanate from shrubbery, like language poetry or fragments of song lyrics: 'I can see its glitter/ give/ it to me' (77). McKay's arrangement of these fragments suggests poetry; the line breaks do not follow conventional phrasing, indicating slippages in translation. Indeed, none of these words are actually spoken by animals but are rather decoded from 'trails of glowing messages' which have been laid in 'stench, in calls, in piss, in tracks, in blood, in shit, in sex, in bodies' (77). When learning to read the signals of her dingo friend, Jean says she tries to 'look and smell and taste the air around Sue all at the same time' (117), an understanding of communication that is both synaesthetic and relational, that hints at neurodiverse slippages in parsing foreground from background, while getting lost in the relational feedback in-between.<sup>7</sup>

Sue speaks in 'odours, echoes, noises with random meanings popping out of them', such as 'My front end/ takes the food/ quality. / Muzzle/ for the Queen/ (Yesterday)' (81). Jean despairs that the baby-talk she has previously indulged in around animals is no longer adequate: 'Pat pat walkies had so much damned power yesterday. Now it seems stupid next to the rippling chorus that's coming off her white furry socks' (83). Jean can now see that Sue has 'electric fur that speaks one hundred ways' (171) and '[h]er body stinks of pictures' (142). For Massumi and many others, it is clear that language has never been the strict purview of *Homo sapiens*, rather, 'Languaging is on a continuum, across the range of animality' (Massumi 280). He pays particular attention to the language of J.A. Baker's *The Peregrine* (1967), through which the author becomes-animal by literary means. Massumi asks if language, 'the traditional (and highly

questionable) dividing line between human and animal’ might actually provide ‘a privileged portal to the becoming-animal of the human?’ He notes that it ‘would have to be a “new” language’ (269) and it seems to me that is precisely what McKay has produced; very few words, strangely juxtaposed, sketch out territories or Umwelten made of gesture, posture, scent and refrain. As Baker does in *The Peregrine*, McKay ‘abstractly awakens the kinesthetic sense... activating the reader’s body’ (Massumi 276), but unlike Baker’s raptor Umwelt, we are not soaring and diving, but feverish, queasy, sticky; we become raw bundles of drunken pain, textural confusion, and stench. Sexuality and obscenity reign supreme. Messages from the trees include ‘Turn around and I’ll stick it/ in. Your/ feet are fucking ancient’ (McKay 79). Jean can smell/hear the ‘stench of the forest, private as an armpit’ (80). She catches ‘a waft from Sue’s under-bits – small talk from a dingo’s bum that’s nothing like reading at all’ (84). But part of the continuum of languaging, nonetheless.

In addition to her inspired encoding and decoding of animal messaging, McKay expresses an array of well-known animal studies motifs through her characters, as if demarcating the territory, both for those who ‘get the message’ and for those new to the field. Jean’s free spirit son Lee, for example, provides a classic case study of vaunting the wild over the domestic. As far as he’s concerned, zoo animals are ‘messed up in the head’ (66) so those with zooflu should be seeking out the wisdom of mammals that ‘aren’t domestic’, that are ‘not in jail’, but ‘wild and free’. These animals, he says are ‘singing. Refrains. Repetitions’ (103). McKay is using the language of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, who say that all art begins with the animal, via the refrains and repetitions of songbirds (*What Is Philosophy?* 183). In their earlier work *A Thousand Plateaus*, they introduce their concept of becoming-animal, which is not a literal metamorphosis, but a dynamic process of qualitative transformation, always with an eye/ear/snout for destabilising the established order of State and familial apparatuses. Becoming-animal is a powerful tool in the anti-capitalist, anti-psychoanalysis ethico-aesthetic politics of Deleuze and Guattari, for whom our relationships with pets offer no ‘lines of flight’ (249),<sup>8</sup> no opportunities to ‘deterritorialise’ or undo stagnant sociocultural formations. They consider that we ‘play Oedipus’ with family pets (233), that is, indulge in ‘narcissistic contemplation’ (240), whereas wild animals ‘draw us into an irresistible becoming’ (233).



Eerily, and appropriately to McKay's text and the times we find ourselves in, Deleuze and Guattari write that becoming-animal is akin to an 'epidemic', and they propose contagion above mimicry or heredity as a mode of metamorphic power. They prefer contagion for its heterogeneity, creating 'unnatural' alliances between kingdoms (242); this is the essence of zoonosis. Contagion, they say, is the 'animal peopling of the human being' (242) which they see as a necessary corrective to the human propensity for 'overcoding' (*Anti-Oedipus* 198). It is perhaps for all these reasons, even without the language to describe these benefits, that Lee considers zooflu to be 'a gift' (McKay 104). McKay's book is full of porous borders and human-animal contagions, where humans are rendered wild by fear, starvation and despair, while animals, thanks to language, are acknowledged as persons. But the most striking becoming is that of the text itself, which continually digs, scratches, and worries away at the boundaries of human sensibility and comprehensibility. Indeed, McKay's text enacts all the 'becomings-rat, becomings-insect, becomings-wolf' that Deleuze and Guattari expect of good literature (*A Thousand Plateaus* 240). Following William Burroughs' esoteric theory that language itself is a virus,<sup>9</sup> it is as though *The Animals in That Country* is an infected (and possibly, infectious) text.

Deleuze and Guattari's concept of becoming-animal, and more specifically the chapter of *A Thousand Plateaus* in which it is introduced, '1730: Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal, Becoming-Imperceptible...', has been critiqued by Donna Haraway for its binarisation of wildness and domesticity, enacting an exoticism she finds unproductive, and ultimately, dangerous. Haraway deplores the philosophers' 'scorn for all that is mundane and ordinary and the profound absence of curiosity about or respect for and with actual animals' (27). As a committed dog companion, she rails against their oppositions between dog and wolf, arguing instead that dogs and humans have practiced interspecies co-becoming for millennia. Haraway's passion for her canine companion Cayenne is quirky (she calls Cayenne a 'Klingon Warrior Princess' no less than six times in *When Species Meet*), and sexy (she revels in describing Cayenne's sexual exploits and calls her 'one turned on little bitch' (193)), nevertheless it cannot escape the inherent power dynamics Haraway is certain she has foiled.<sup>10</sup> Jack Halberstam declares that what Haraway determinedly presents as a 'companionate dynamic' ends up defaulting to the logic and law of the human (160). Like Haraway, we imagine that the elusive

quality of wildness ‘still lives in the family pet’, but, Halberstam warns, ‘it dies there too’ (117). Halberstam’s dispassionate view sees the death-in-life of the pet as a ‘carceral reality in exchange for not being eaten’ (119). This finds parallels with Ghassan Hage’s theory of ‘generalised domestication’ which extends well beyond the human treatment of animals and includes the human treatment of other humans and of the entire biosphere. Hage reminds us that the ‘domus’ of domesticity shares its roots with dominus and domination (92). Against such domestication, and drawing on Black Studies scholarship, Halberstam proposes wildness as an ‘anticivilizational’ force which refuses the category of the human altogether (163). Halberstam declares human-pet relations as ‘zombified’, an appropriate term in relation to *The Animals in That Country*, as zombification is a *contagion*, although it is the human population that are rendered zombie-like under the influence of zooflu, paralysed by the awful enormity of human animal exploitation, including pet ownership.

Deleuze and Guattari’s disdain for domesticity and Haraway’s disdain for the philosophers are merely two poles in a debate which is far exceeded by the vast array of animal life and human-animal interaction, and McKay doesn’t allow her characters, or her readers, to settle on a particular perspective. Sue, as a half-breed dingo, is neither wild nor domestic, but always making zig-zag tracks through the differential in-between. Indeed, Jean herself inhabits this interstitial zone, refusing respectability as an older woman with ongoing appetites for booze and sex. In the world before zooflu, she is considered out of control; in a world without control, however, she proves a survivor. But just as McKay unpicks animal ‘ownership’, so too she makes clear the dangers of romanticising wildness, and particularly wild animals. Zoo manager Angela is deeply enamoured of birds of prey until she can understand their thoughts. As Massumi notes with *The Peregrine*, aesthetics aside, the dominant motif of the raptors’ Umwelt is predation (275). Set free from their cages, the wildlife park’s sea eagles swoop and scratch Angela, saying they’ll be back for her eyes. She realizes the futility of declaring her love for their kind. Just because she has posters of eagles on her office walls doesn’t buy their sympathy. She is desperately afraid: ‘I’m not their friend. I’m their predator. I’m their prey. They’re *hunting me back*’ (87).

Val Plumwood's essay 'Being Prey' details her death-defying escape from the jaws of a crocodile in Kakadu National Park. Angela's encounter with an eagle, and her startling realisation that she is prey, are enough to conjure Plumwood's essay. That Angela then gets chewed up by Bernie the Crocodile (almost, but not quite, fatally), makes the comparison unavoidable. Plumwood's epiphany as she is taken down in the crocodile's 'death roll' is that human exceptionalism is a construction: she is meat, like every other animal. In McKay's novel, Bernie assures Angela that he just wants to play, leaving many unanswered questions about what that might constitute, from an animal perspective.<sup>11</sup> The novel's most fatal animal interactions for humans, however, occur with whales, who are calling their prodigal evolutionary brethren to 'come home' to the sea. This is where Lee meets his end, among hundreds of others, drowning while laughing and sobbing as they remember details of their previous evolutionary lives, including stormy water, plankton falling, and that they once had tails (208).

*The Animals in That Country* makes another reference to a canonical animal studies text when Jean comes face to face with a flying fox, and with her zooflu capabilities, is able to answer the conundrum posed by Thomas Nagel in his much-cited essay 'What is it Like to be a Bat?' Nagel decides that, due to the radical differences in our Umwelten (although he doesn't use that term), we will never know. Difference does not justify indifference, however (441), and so Nagel calls for an 'objective phenomenology' that is dependent neither on empathy nor imagination (449). Nagel's disavowal of these two qualities was critiqued by J.M. Coetzee via his alter ego Elizabeth Costello, who declares that, as a writer, 'If I can think my way into the existence of a being who has never existed, then I can think my way into the existence of a bat or a chimpanzee or an oyster, any being with whom I share the substrate of life' (35). We all share in this life: 'being fully a bat is like being fully human, which is also to be full of being' (33).<sup>12</sup>

While McKay's novel is certainly 'full of being', she plays up to Nagel's categorisation of the bat as a 'fundamentally *alien* form of life' (Nagel 438) by describing a '[t]hing that looks like a rat, a monkey, and a fox got run over together' with a '[s]moky shit, sweet rot' smell (McKay 249). Making the common mistake of confusing microbats and megabats, McKay writes that flying foxes eat insects and use echolocation (they do neither). But her description of the bat's Umwelt is poignant nonetheless, because it echoes (or rather echolocates off) Nagel's

ideas, but with a neat reversal. The bat is unable to map Jean because, from her bat-perspective (and I will address perspectivism shortly), Jean is a fundamentally alien form of life. Nagel's human-misunderstands-bat has become McKay's bat-misunderstands-human. Jean says, 'I'm the only thing she can't map. She lays out her plans and shows me how they all looked the same until I stumbled in. What is me?... She flings out sonar in a net. It bounces off me. Interest blooms in her like a mushroom... When I spread my arms, she spreads her wings' (250-1). This flouts Nagel's pronouncement that humans shouldn't bother imagining they have webbing on their arms, because it is a false correspondence, whereas Elizabeth Costello sees the resonance between a bat's wing and her own 'body with limbs that have extension in space' (Coetzee, 33). A cloud of bats swarms out of the trees, following Jean, crying, 'Draw/ it. Mapless.' (251) This maplessness is the uncharted territory that McKay has attempted to traverse with her own form of sonar, her own linguistic mapping techniques. For bats, echolocation is both sound and sight, map and territory, figure and field, and this entanglement of medium and message is a resonant force throughout the novel. Having explored *The Animals in That Country* in terms of its key trope, language, I want to ask what, exactly, are the animals trying to tell us?

## The Message

In the early days of the spread of COVID-19, waves of misinformation washed over the Internet regarding the virus's origins. A wet market in Wuhan was targeted as the likely epicentre, and bats, or perhaps snakes (or was it pangolins?) were blamed in succession, and sometimes in combination. Western hysteria regarding the consumption of 'weird' meat (Fang), that is, the eating of animals other than cows, pigs, sheep and chickens made a predictable appearance. But so too did certain strains of self-critique emerge among Western commentators who pondered if COVID-19 was a symptom of global systemic environmental and especially animal abuse, and if in fact the pandemic was evidence of Gaia in action. Even after the Wuhan wet market was no longer reported as the site of the virus's emergence, but only of its spread, and even after accusations of Chinese consumption of 'bat soup' (O'Neill) were proven to be false,<sup>13</sup> global 'hot-spots' of contagion frequently included abattoirs, or other places where human bodies collided with animal flesh.<sup>14</sup>

Commentators were at pains to emphasise that animal abuse is global and multifaceted; as Thom van Dooren reminded readers, no country or culture has the monopoly on animal cruelty. Animal agriculture in the West is just as likely to breed disease as elsewhere, a case in point being Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE), better known as ‘mad cow disease’. The outbreak of this zoonotic disease in the UK in the 1990s was caused by forcing herbivores to eat the ‘recycled’ carcasses of other cows – effectively transforming them into, not just carnivores, but cannibals. Claude Lévi-Strauss’s essay on BSE ‘We Are All Cannibals’ wryly notes that cannibalism has no ‘objective reality’ as the rules of the game change depending on which society proscribes it. Some societies deem human flesh a most respectable food, while in others, the eating of any flesh whatsoever is regarded as cannibalism (88). That the mere word conjures all kinds of hysteria, makes its strategic use a powerful tool, which is why some anthropologists and artists (particularly those working in Brazil) mobilise the term.<sup>15</sup> Real cannibals, it turns out, understand ecology, and do far less damage than capitalism, colonisation, and extractivism.

But before we get to cannibalism, I want to think about eating and food in general. *The Animals in That Country* features such prescient details as online shaming, including the subject of who eats what. During a mindless online exchange with a self-declared vegan, Jean tells her virtual enemy that zoonosis ‘isn’t from eating, it’s a virus’ (34). But what the rest of the book signals, in the same way that the animals scream through their scents, gestures, and sounds, is that actually ‘it’ is *all* about eating.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps McKay’s choice of name for her protagonist is our first clue, as Jane Bennett’s chapter ‘Edible Matter’ in her oft-cited book *Vibrant Matter*, argues precisely that, contra to what her namesake Jean thinks, it *is* all about ‘what to eat, how to get it, and when to stop’ (Bennett 51).

All food, according to Bennett, is made up of ‘conative bodies’, referencing Spinoza’s term *conatus* or *striving* for life (39). She finds examples of thinkers who have similarly imagined eating as ‘a profound reciprocity between eater and eaten’ (43), namely Nietzsche, who rails against ‘flatulent vegetables’ (44), and Thoreau, who fantasises about devouring a groundhog raw, to absorb ‘that wildness which he represented’ (46). Instead, Thoreau witnesses the opposite happen – the animal body, once transformed into meat, is no longer vital. Already on

its way to decay, Thoreau feels its consumption can only result in the rotting of his own faculties. He turns his attention, instead, to gathering wild berries which feed his ‘genius’ (Bennett 47).

Thoreau’s intensive attunement to what he puts into his body resonates with concepts coming out of Brazil, where Indigenous cosmologies hold that ingestion is a cosmopolitical act. In her article ‘The Revenge of the Bat People’, Els Lagrou notes that the Huni Kuin (known by their enemies as ‘bat-people’) as well as many other Amerindian peoples, attribute diseases to the eating of animals. The spirits of animals and even some plants take revenge for being eaten, sending *nisun*, ‘headache or vertigo that can result in sickness or death’ (Lagrou).<sup>17</sup> So much for being apex predators; the Coronavirus makes prey of all of us human animals, and many non-human animals too. If the Amerindian association of eating with disease takes on the tenor of prophecy, all the more resonant given that this message emanates from people already in symbolic assemblage with the very species blamed for the Coronavirus’s emergence (‘bat-people’), then you will indulge me another ‘zoognostic’ epiphany: a cryptic crossword during lockdown reveals that *coronavirus* is an anagram of *carnivorous*.<sup>18</sup>

Lagrou contends that our late-capitalist, extractivist societies and economies; the circulation of people, goods and animals; and the reduction of forest areas where pathogens have lived for millennia without movement or spillover, provide the perfect opportunity for diseases new-to-humans to make the cross-species jump. This is not just a problem of wild game hunting (or ‘bush meat’) in developing nations, but it is also, if not even more so, an issue in the industrialised farms of industrialised nations, creating what van Dooren calls the ‘mass production of animal suffering’. In *The Animals in That Country*, McKay’s most hard to stomach (pun intended) sequences are those that feature the incarceration and exploitation of animals, including for food production. One scene features a truckload of farmed pigs who have been abandoned on their way to slaughter. This could be a triumphant moment, except that after lives spent in the ‘heavy squash of cheek by arsehole by infected snout’ they don’t know what to do with themselves (129). As they gingerly make their way out into the world, one injured pig stays behind in the truck, saying what Jean can only interpret as ‘send me a postcard’. She shakes her head at the half-dead pigs, who are ‘stumbling around blind, mad, and fucking *hopeful*’ (130).

Later, Jean has a run-in with a herd of dairy cows begging to be reunited with their stolen children, including an angry one who bellows ‘Fuck my/ clumpy teats where/ are they’ (182-3). What reads as black humour in the retelling is evidence of Jean’s method of coping with trauma; in fact, these windows onto animal suffering are heartbreaking.

Industrial agriculture is not the only locus for animal pain; animal experimentation rears its ugly head, as the race to find a zoonotic cure doesn’t take into account that the researchers can now hear the mice they are experimenting on (132). And then there is accidental suffering, when, for example, Jean’s car hits a kangaroo who is sending messages to her living joey up to her last breath (153), and when Jean can finally understand insects (a symptom of the later stages of infection), she can’t stand anywhere without bodies screaming in pain: ‘HARD. FUCK-HARD’ (250). She apologises to them, and to the grubs she eats in the desperation of starvation, even as she can hear their cries (248).

For Lagrou, the moral issue is not one of whether or not humans should eat animals, rather, it is the way ‘world civilization’ is eating the planet. She is in agreement here with Yanomami shaman and spokesperson Davi Kopenawa who calls white people ‘earth eaters’ and compares them to ‘herds of peccaries’ who ravage resources with ‘the avidity of scrawny dogs’ (Kopenawa 262).<sup>19</sup> In *Ideas to Postpone the End of the World*, Brazilian Indigenous thinker and activist Ailton Krenak compares the Western hunger to consume nature with ‘a similar hankering to gobble up subjectivities’ and to ‘put them on a supermarket shelf’ (37-38). Due to the crass consumption of everything including our very selves, we have stopped listening, says Lagrou, to the ‘revolt’ of animals, plants, and Gaia. As Eduardo Viveiros de Castro interprets Amerindian perspectivism, an environment or ecology is a cosmopolitical arena (151), in which one must learn to see oneself from the point of view of the other (143).<sup>20</sup> Such a world view does not imagine the Amazon as Edenic, far from it, but a complex, and following Bennett, *lively* assemblage of conative bodies, all of whom must be negotiated with.<sup>21</sup> Viveiros de Castro uses the term ‘multinaturalism’ to describe a world in which all natural beings are understood to possess personhood, including animals, trees, rivers, rocks and yes, even diseases. In the inverse of Western scientific evolution, in which humanity is a branch of hominids descended from a common protozoa, Amerindian thought, like many Indigenous cosmologies, understand animals

(and other natural entities) to be descended from humans, and thus, possessing a relationality that requires respect and negotiation. In such a world view, *every* act of eating becomes a kind of cannibalism, hence strict alimentary protocols are in place, even more complex than the paleo-vegan-keto complex we wrestle with in certain privileged pockets of the West today.<sup>22</sup>

Alexis Milonopoulos applies the concepts of Amerindian thinkers such as Krenak and Kopenawa, as well as their anthropologist interlocutors, to food-based ethico-aesthetic practices, most notably *Restauro* (2016-ongoing), instigated by Jorgge Menna Barreto, which takes as its premise that eating is ‘a political act’ (Milonopoulos ‘In-Between’ 4). The first incarnation of *Restauro* transformed<sup>23</sup> the official restaurant of the 32<sup>nd</sup> São Paulo Biennial into an ‘artwork-restaurant, restaurant-artwork’ (Milonopoulos ‘In-Between’ 1), producing a daily plant-based menu sourcing only fresh, local produce. As an ‘environmental sculpture’, *Restauro* proposed that our digestive system doesn’t begin in the mouth and end with the anus, but rather, emerges from the land, while what we choose to eat impacts (sculpts) the land (Menna Barreto). As with Plumwood’s ‘Being Prey’, Lévi-Strauss’s ‘We Are All Cannibals’, Viveiros de Castro’s *Cannibal Metaphysics*, and even *The Peregrine*’s motif of predation, Milonopoulos suggests any eater is a kind of ‘cosmopolitical diplomat’, since all living beings (following Spinoza and Bennett) strive to persevere (Milonopoulos ‘In-Between’ 5).

Milonopoulos suggests that paying attention to the ‘relations of composition with other bodies’ (as with Thoreau’s preference for berries over meat, or the dietary restrictions enumerated by Kopenawa), may give rise to a more ‘potent body’ (Milonopoulos ‘In-Between’ 6).<sup>24</sup> Such a body would be motivated not just by hunger for food, but ‘a hunger for commons, a hunger for compositions, a hunger for socialities, a hunger for relationality’ (7), as well as ‘hunger for collective dreams, an appetite for becoming-other’ (9). These modes of being and becoming are ecological in the broader sense, as the author hopes to rewild appetite (12) beyond the body-envelope (9). This kind of change could be brought about with the revival of functional agro-ecologies, practiced by Indigenous peoples in every part of the globe, centred on caring for Country. Indeed, the word ‘Country’ has much more powerful associations in



Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander world views than it does in settler-colonial vocabularies, raising questions about McKay's title, and whether 'That Country' refers to a nation state, or rather, to an entire cosmology.<sup>25</sup>

McKay's title comes from the name of a Margaret Atwood poem, which is also the title of a collection of Atwood's poems published in 1968. The eponymous poem compares the animals in 'that' country to the animals in 'this' country. While there is no mention of Europe or North America, it plays between an imaginary world of genteel manners, where animals are the stuff of legend and have 'the faces of people', and a world of brute reality where animals get caught in headlights, 'are not elegant' and 'have the faces of / no-one' (2-3). The collected poems imbricate colonial displacement and violence against animals, for example 'The Festival' features hunters who are in both 'the wrong century' and 'the wrong / country' (17). Violence is viscerally enacted against animals in 'The Trappers', who feel guilt 'because / they are not animals' and also 'because they are' (35). In 'Progressive insanities of a pioneer' a would-be settler becomes unravelled by the uncooperative landscape, in which 'things / refused to name themselves; refused / to let him name them' (39). It is clear why McKay would wish to reference Atwood's poems in which a hopeless chasm emerges between animal pain and human understanding.

Atwood's disdain for colonial hunters and trappers seems a result of their unmoored cosmologies, where animal death has lost all meaning, becoming a bloodthirsty reflex rather than a sacrament. McKay demonstrates how much worse violence against animals becomes when it is industrialised. Lévi-Strauss's article on BSE or 'mad cow disease' makes clear his lack of interest in prevention or precaution as ways to safeguard existing modes of agribusiness, rather, he sees the disease as heralding 'the end of the industrial system of meat production and the return to hunters' relations between human and nonhuman animals' (Keck 24). This, we could imagine, might give rise not just to more vital *human* bodies (the potentially self-centred, individualist paleo-vegan-keto complex again) but to a more vital *planetary* body, as the devastation wrought by industrial animal agriculture is slowly phased out.<sup>26</sup>

Milonopoulos suggests that, as we are inhabiting this planetary body, hunger doesn't reside in us, but rather 'we are *in* hunger' ('In-Between' 11), part of a cosmopolitical web of appetites. Such hunger is always-already relational, exceeding the terms of predator and prey (13). In this sense, we never eat alone, and eating is never the end of any *thing* or any *one*, since bodies will continue to mutually transform (14). I am reminded of Haraway's unpicking of the meanings of the word 'companion' in 'companion species'. Like Milonopoulos, she plays with the language of eating; 'Gorging on etymologies, I will taste my key words for their flavors' (Haraway 17). She notes that companion 'comes from the Latin *cum panis*, "with bread."' She uses the term 'messmates at table', meaning, those you choose to eat *with* (but maybe hinting, also, of those you choose to *eat*).<sup>27</sup> She also notes that a companion is a kind of handbook, 'like the Oxford Companion to wine or English verse; such companions help readers to consume well' (17). Booze, poetics, consumption, all form part of the assemblage that is *The Animals in That Country*.

Which brings me to the end and an attempt to conclude the two seemingly disparate parts of this paper: the medium of literary language, and its message, the politics of predation. At first, I thought medium and message might share the mouth in common, as the physical locus of both talking and eating, but then I realised such a thought presupposes that language is oral, or that eating begins in the mouth. As McKay so deftly demonstrates, language emanates from all orifices and surfaces, and as Menna Barreto puts it, eating begins in the land itself.<sup>28</sup>

*The Animals in That Country* attunes readers to the Umwelten of animals, as McKay constructs language from a powerful mixture including stench, calls, piss, and blood (77). As a writer, she enacts a becoming-animal, firstly of herself, then of the text, and then of the reader, each sequentially infected in a viral chain of transmission. Zoognosis offers animal knowledges or animal thought, which in French, *pense bête*, is a phrase meaning a reminder, a memory jogger. Anamnesis is a term used in Gnosticism for the recollection or instantaneous apprehension of lost knowledge. Following this logic, then, to think like an animal is to recall lost knowledges – as McKay's lost souls who listen to whales are doing. The question is, can we hold such

knowledge without suiciding, or, as with many of McKay's characters, self-medicating into stupor? Can we ride the waves of this information overload instead in a state of awe and wonder as well as shock and horror?<sup>29</sup>

The message we receive from McKay's zooflu, and from COVID-19, is that a radical reordering of our senses is required, in order to radically re-vision the world. Rather than lose ourselves in transcendent narratives of a Gaian apocalypse, where nature as sublime 'other' overwhelms us, let us instead use the invitation of COVID-19 to re-attune to the *Umwelten* of the more-than-human world. McKay offers us tools for the redistribution of personhood precisely by *dehumanising* it (Massumi 272). This is part of our training as cosmopolitical diplomats in a multinatural earth. With this knowledge, this viral download, and with animals as our interlocutors, we can postpone the end of the world, as Krenak begs us to do.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Having written about bats (Laird 2018), I was already familiar with this term, and with the hysteria it often provokes, including animal scapegoating and in worst-case scenarios, mass murder euphemistically referred to as ‘culling’. For information on the scapegoating of bats in relation to COVID-19 see: Merlin Tuttle, ‘Are Bats Really to Blame for the COVID-19 Pandemic?’ *The School for the Future of Innovation in Society*, Arizona State University, 2020, <https://vimeo.com/423694755>; and Merlin Tuttle, ‘A Viral Witch Hunt’, *Issues in Science and Technology*, 27 Mar. 2020, <https://issues.org/a-viral-witch-hunt-bats/>

<sup>2</sup> Perhaps less linguistically convincing, but interesting all the same, was a discussion between Tarek Eilhak and Frédéric Keck on the relation between ‘cogitation’ and ‘contagion’, COGITATION #2, On *Avian Reservoirs* with Frédéric Keck, <http://www.antimagelab.com/cogitations-imagelab-radio/>, April 2020. A discussion with my colleague Edward Colless revealed the etymological and conceptual connections between the Christian communion with communication and communicable diseases, as well as the ‘host’ being both the body of Christ and a body which incubates disease. Truly, information and infection seem as intertwined as the medical Caduceus symbol.

<sup>3</sup> The term ‘zoognosis’ was also inspired by Erik Davis’s cult classic *Techgnosis: Myth, Magic and Mysticism in the Age of Information*, Three Rivers Press, 1998.

<sup>4</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari write in *A Thousand Plateaus* that writers are ‘responsible’ to animals (240), and in *ABC Primer; The Deleuze Seminars* with Clare Parnet, he says writers write ‘in the place of’ animals (see transcription here: <https://deleuze.cla.purdue.edu/seminars/gilles-deleuze-abc-primer/lecture-recording-1-f>).

<sup>5</sup> While I am aware of Canadian media theorist Marshal McLuhan’s famous injunction that ‘The Medium is the Message’, and that all good art blurs the boundaries between the two, it is useful in this instance to separate medium from message before acknowledging that they are mutually in-forming.

<sup>6</sup> Werner Herzog's *Grizzly Man* (2005) might serve as a case in point here: it tells the true story of Timothy Treadwell, a grizzly bear enthusiast who thinks he is in communion with wild animals, and is eventually eaten.

<sup>7</sup> For a beautiful example of seeing otherwise from the (more-than) human world, see Erin Manning and Brian Massumi, 'Coming Alive in a World Full of Texture: For Neurodiversity', *Thought in the Act: Passages in the Ecology of Experience*, University of Minnesota Press, 2014.

<sup>8</sup> McKay uses the term 'lines of flight' to describe the warnings wallaroos whisper to each other as humans approach (105), indicating her awareness of, although not necessarily allegiance to, Deleuze-Guattarian concepts.

<sup>9</sup> 'The word may once have been a healthy neural cell. It is now a parasitic organism that invades and damages the central nervous system' (Burroughs 49). It is worth noting here that 'viral chatter' is also a technical term for 'the spatial and temporal contingencies that can lead to the emergence of a disease and its establishment in a human population' (Ann H. Kelly, Frédéric Keck and Christos Lynteris, editors, 'The Anthropology of Epidemics', *The Anthropology of Epidemics*, Routledge, 2019, p. 9).

<sup>10</sup> I say all of this with much love for Haraway, as she makes public her own contradictions with fierce intelligence and humour.

<sup>11</sup> For more on animal play, see Brian Massumi, *What Animals Teach Us About Politics* (2014), although the book doesn't cover disingenuous crocodiles.

<sup>12</sup> It is worth noting here that, following a different series of understandings to both Coetzee and Nagel, Massumi argues vigorously for sympathy over empathy in 'Becoming-Animal in the Literary Field' (277), while Deleuze and Guattari deny imagination as a force for becoming-animal, as they are not interested in metaphor but actuality (*A Thousand Plateaus* 238).

<sup>13</sup> It is worth pointing out here that Bram Stoker's 1897 novel *Dracula* has been frequently critiqued for its racialisation of disease, not to mention its unscientific association of disease transmission with bats (Laird 2018).

<sup>14</sup> While I am primarily concerned here with the consumption of animal flesh, mink farms in Europe, the United States and Canada have been another disastrous casualty of the virus. As usual, the 'culling' of masses of animals has been ordered, exceeding 1 million in the Netherlands and 17 million in Denmark – where dead minks in shallow graves started expanding with gases and rising out of the earth. Could there be any more potent and visceral sign of the madness of industrial animal exploitation?

<sup>15</sup> This has a historical legacy stretching all the way back to Brazilian modernist writer Oswald de Andrade and his *Cannibal Manifesto* (1928), inspired by the specifically Brazilian-inflected modernist paintings of his wife Tarsila do Amaral. During the Tropicalia period in the late 1960s and early 1970s artist Lygia Clark created propositions for group interactions that mimicked ritualised cannibalism. It should be noted that none of these artists was Indigenous, and that young Brazilian Indigenous artists, such as Denilson Baniwa, who was featured in NIRIN, the 22<sup>nd</sup> Biennale of Sydney, 2020, are interrogating the narratives of the Brazilian avant garde.

<sup>16</sup> 'It' here refers to life, to everything, but I have used scare quotes in reference to a fantastic extrapolation of 'it' in relation to its near homophone 'eat', see Alexis Milonopoulos, 'eat (it)', *Art + Australia*, 'Multinaturalism', vol 57, no. 1, March 2021, pp. 68-73.

<sup>17</sup> In *Avian Reservoirs*, Frédéric Keck likewise suggests public health officials might learn something from Indigenous science, comparing pathogens emerging from 'changing relations between humans and animals', to 'supernatural' beings (22).

<sup>18</sup> In another prescient work, heavily influenced from Indigenous thought, this time emanating from the Northern Territories of Australia, we find Elizabeth Povinelli using the figure of 'Virus' as an 'active antagonistic agent built out of the collective assemblage that is late liberal geontopower' (Povinelli, *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism*. Duke University Press, 2016,

19). Yet, while the Virus appears as ‘Ebola and the waste dump, the drug-resistant bacterial infection stewed within massive salmon and poultry farms, and the nuclear power’, it is equally present whenever someone suggests ‘that human extinction is desirable and should be accelerated’ (19). And while the Virus seems to offer opportunities for deterritorialization (‘the radical exit from geontopower’) it is in reality ‘subject to intense abjection and attacks’ indeed, ‘to live in the vicinity of the Virus is to dwell in an existential crisis’, something that McKay’s narrator, and most people living through COVID-19, would agree with.

<sup>19</sup> Tellingly, here and elsewhere in *The Falling Sky*, Kopenawa refers to the ‘epidemic fumes’ the white people bring with them.

<sup>20</sup> Grosz notes von Uexküll’s theory of the Umwelt necessitates ‘an extreme perspectivism’ (41) in that it entails entry into a world view completely different from one’s own.

<sup>21</sup> For a hilarious view of a despairing white man in the jungle, see Werner Herzog’s monologue on the Amazon’s violence and obscenity, in a documentary about the making of *Fitzcarraldo*, Les Blank’s *Burden of Dreams* (1982), excerpted here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zTVlifTAdlM>

<sup>22</sup> It is worth noting here, though, that Australian Indigenous author Bruce Pascoe says it is ‘hipsters’ who will insist on the uptake of Indigenous grain farming in Australia, which will ultimately heal Country (‘Brave Old world’. *The Saturday Paper*, 6-12 March 2021, pp. 6-7).

<sup>23</sup> Milonopoulos prefers the term *transformed* which directly references agro-ecologies and food farming practices which have shaped Brazilian rainforests for millennia, see Milonopoulos, ‘eat (it)’, *Art + Australia*, p. 72.

<sup>24</sup> As a shaman, Kopenawa undergoes strict fasting regimes. He is deeply critical of white people’s gluttony, stating, ‘They are prey to dizziness because they constantly eat the meat of their domestic animals who are sons-in-law of *Hayakoari*, the tapir-like being who makes people turn other’ (313).

<sup>25</sup> Examples of use of the term Country are countless, but a recent example be found in *Song Spirals* by Gay'Wu Group of Women, which says 'Country is alive for us, it cares for us, communicates with us, and we are part of it', as well as 'Country has awareness, it is not just a backdrop', and 'Country is the way we mix and merge, the way we are different and yet become together, are part of each other' (Gay'wu Group of Women. *Song Spirals: Sharing Women's Wisdom of Country through Songlines*. Allen & Unwin, 2019, ix, xxii)

<sup>26</sup> Pascoe's 'Brave Old World' article (see note 23) is a case-study in fabulating a better future.

<sup>27</sup> In a footnote, Haraway riffs, 'Companion species, *cum panis*, breaking bread, eating and being eaten, the end of human exceptionalism' (322), which is more or less what was going through Plumwood's head as she was in the crocodile's jaws, which she details in 'Being Prey'.

<sup>28</sup> Language and land are also 'inextricably woven together', as Lou Bennett AM emphasises, from a Yorta Yorta and Dja Dja Wurrung perspective in her work on language rematriation (Lou Bennett, 'The Need for Truthing in Language Rematriation.' *Faculty of Fine Arts and Music, University of Melbourne*, 2019, <https://finearts-music.unimelb.edu.au/about-us/news/lou-bennett2>). For Bennett, language emanates from Country itself, and reengaging with languages that have been forcibly silenced by colonisation necessitates being on Country.

<sup>29</sup> See Stacy Alaimo on the 'ecodelic' as an appropriate way to be ecologically attentive, 'Your Shell on Acid: Material Immersion, Anthropocene Dissolves', *Anthropocene Feminism*, edited by Richard Grusin, University of Minnesota Press, 2017.



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