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NOISE AND FRAGILE SYMPHONIES:

ANIMALITY AND THE SOUTH AFRICAN SONIC GENRE IN *THE WHALE CALLER*, *DISGRACE*, AND *NINEVEH*

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NOISE AND FRAGILE SYMPHONIES:

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ABSTRACT

When establishing an interspecies ethics, it is often the gaze that is used to establish the agency of the animal Other in the absence of logocentric speech. However, when considering the physical realities of the nonhuman animal, which is often defined by noise and listening, the sonic genre—speech, music, and noise—is just as fruitful a place to analyze animal agency. While humans can never inhabit the mind of the animal Other, the sonic genre, particularly music, serves to render their experiences as comprehensible, and therefore important to humans. In this paper, I use the sonic genre to analyze three works of post-apartheid South African literature: Zakes Mda's *The Whale Caller*, J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, and Henrietta Rose-Innes' *Nineveh*. In *The Whale Caller*, the sonic genre largely manifests in the form of music, which provides a connection between characters, both human and animal. While this music does inspire an interspecies ethics of identification between the eponymous character and the whale Sharisha, it also leads to a romanticized anthropomorphism—the misconception that she somehow is more than a whale—which ultimately leads to her death. In *Disgrace*, the repeated failure of the language of the colonizer causes the protagonist David Lurie to rely on music as the main vehicle for ethics. Through music, Lurie is able to imagine the experience of the another being: a disabled dog called Driepoot who is soon to be euthanized. While this act of generosity is a relatively small gesture, it is something Lurie is incapable of doing in his human relationships. Finally, *Nineveh*'s primary engagement with the sonic genre is through noise and its ability to permeate boundaries meant to keep the animal Other out. While the protagonist Katya, a pest controller, begins the novel with an interspecies ethics of removal over extermination, by the end of the novel, even this attempt to separate species is suspect. Instead, Katya adopts an ethics of

cohabitation, living nomadically with a dog named Soldier. In these three novels, the sonic genre establishes three distinct forms of interspecies ethics through the protagonists' relationships with nonhuman animals. However, to rely on human interpretations of the noise of the animal Other is not enough to create a positive interspecies ethics. While there is a much to be learned about the nonhuman animal through these works, to act ethically, one must also respect the alterity of the animal Other.

Keywords: sonic genre; interspecies ethics; post-apartheid South African literature; Zakes Mda; J.M. Coetzee; Henrietta Rose-Innes

I. Introduction

Animals in postcolonial fiction have long been fraught figures. Pioneering postcolonial animal theorists Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin argue that this is in part because of the slippage between human and nonhuman animal in the treatment of the colonized and the oppressed; they note that the oppressed across cultures are deemed to be treated metaphorically "like animals," while literal animals often serve to steal attention from the oppressed and are often used as justification to oppress them more (134-137). While the figure of the animal in postcolonial fiction has always been fraught, animal studies dealing with South African cultural production has its own sets of representational challenges. The examination of the animal as an ethical being has only recently become a defining feature of South African fiction, a fact Wendy Woodward attributes to the traumatic history of apartheid in the country.[1] In *The Animal Gaze: Animal Subjectivities in Southern African Narratives*, Woodward notes that most of the works she addresses in her analysis of South African animal literature were written after the end of apartheid in 1994, when writers felt that they could finally address animals as ethical subjects now that human rights were finally being prioritized on a national scale (13).

Yet the allegorical resonances of these animals, particularly dogs, play an important role in post-apartheid South African fiction. In their analysis of the history of dogs in South Africa, Lance van Sittert and Sandra Swart argue that "the settlers' domestic animals were of symbolic as well as practical importance to the survival of the colony…serving as ubiquitous and highly visible markers of the boundaries between culture and nature, human and animal on the outer

[1] While the post-apartheid animal is the focus of this essay, it is important to point out that Africa has a much longer history of ecocriticism connected to indigenous belief systems. In *Natures of Africa: Ecocriticism and Animal Studies in Contemporary Cultural Forms*, F. Fiona Moolla argues that African ecocriticism far predates Anglo-American ecocriticism, and that "recognition of the life of animals and the significance of the natural world…are deeply constitutive of the cultures that together create a strategically essentialized Africa in the postcolonial period" (1-2). While Western notions of animals have long been anthropocentric and hierarchical (Woodward 6), African indigenous cultures have long acknowledged a more complex connection to the nonhuman animal.

edge of a rapidly expanding European world" (6). The colonial use of dogs to enforce boundaries continued into the apartheid era, when fear of black rebellion caused the number of police dogs to increase tenfold between 1960 and the mid-1980s (van Sittert and Swart 28). The South African animal became the embodiment of colonization and apartheid itself, making the relationship between animal and nonhuman animal an impossible space for interspecies ethics.

Theorists seeking to reclaim the connection between the human and the animal often turn to the gaze as a place of interspecies understanding. In "The Animal that Therefore I am (More to Follow)," Jacques Derrida is prompted by the gaze of his cat to reflect on his own nudity, and by extension, the difference between humans and nonhuman animals (372). Woodward's discussion of South African animal ethics is also centered around the gaze, however, where Derrida perceives the cat as an "absolute other," Woodward seeks to build on traditional African knowledges and shamanism to develop kinship with the nonhuman animal (3-4). In both Derrida and Woodward, the analysis of the gaze is used as a way to give animals agency and intention in the absence of speech. However, it is not with sight, but with sound, where I choose to make my intervention. The importance of sight as the primary sense of humans is explored in Hans Jonas' "The Nobility of Sight," where he argues that it is the intentionality of sight that sets it apart as the "most excellent of the senses;" sight can be interpreted instantly and directed and focused in ways that the other senses cannot (507). However, the nobility of sight is largely anthropocentric, as sight is a much less important to nonhuman animals, especially animals like insects and whales that navigate using sound. I hope to open discussion of what I call the sonic genre in South African animal fiction—a particular subspecies of fiction that examines music and noise in addition to logocentric speech. Zakes Mda's *The Whale Caller*, J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, and Henrietta Rose-Innes' *Nineveh*, my three exemplars in this essay, explore the connections

between noise—sound without logic or arrangement—music, and animality within the South African context.

In this study of the sonic genre, I arrange my subjects (and literary objects) by scale, beginning with the large and charismatic whale and ending with the small and alien insect. *The Whale Caller* follows the doomed romantic triangle of a man, a whale, and a love child, shaped by each character's relationship with music. In this novel, the nobility of sight is turned on its head, and sound becomes the main means of communication. While the novel explores an alternative sensory way of being, this anthropomorphic desire to be with the nonhuman animal through music ultimately leads to the whale, Sharisa's, grisly death. *Disgrace* follows the story of a communication professor who throughout the novel becomes more convinced of the hollowness of logocentric speech. Words fail again and again in *Disgrace*, but music becomes a place for meaningful interspecies connection. While *Disgrace* views music as a largely positive space for interspecies connection, *Nineveh* and *The Whale Caller* also investigate the limitations of such connections, and by extension, the limitations of our ability to fully understand the animal Other. In *Nineveh*, the protagonist Katya runs a humane pest removal service. When she is assigned a job in the new development of Nineveh, the distinctions between inside and the outside become blurred, as do the differences between music and noise. Whereas *The Whale Caller* and *Disgrace* examine the relationships between individual animals and music, *Nineveh* analyzes the sound of the swarm.

Through my reading of these three novels, I will explore the bond music forges between human and animal, as well as its limits, and how that bond contributes to notions of interspecies ethics. To do so, I will first define the aspects of the sonic genre, particularly noise and music, as those will be my main points of analysis throughout the essay. Then I will focus on *The Whale*

Caller, which presents a character with a genuine desire to live ethically with the animal Other, but whose reliance on anthropomorphism leads to the senseless death of a whale. From there, I will examine a more positive notion of interspecies relationship through *Disgrace*, which, while it still ends with the death of the animal Other, builds an ethics around that death to endow it with meaning. Finally, in *Nineveh*, I will examine a novel where interspecies ethics does not revolve around anthropomorphism nor meaningful extermination, but rather cohabitation. These three ethical moves form three distinct notions of interspecies ethics in the post-apartheid South African landscape.

II: The Sonic Genre

The Whale Caller, *Disgrace*, and *Nineveh* are ideal for the study of relationships between human and nonhuman animals because they infuse the sonic into the genre of the postcolonial novel. Most postcolonial scholarship revolves around the novel because it is so often tied to depictions of the nation (Edwards 2). In the essay "Genres of Postcolonialism," Brent Hayes Edwards unpacks some of the assumptions and consequences that occur when all non-Western novels are deemed national allegories, because focusing exclusively on allegory as a mode of analysis reduces "the ideological variety of literary production in the non-Western world to the exclusive register of nationalism" (3). *The Whale Caller*, *Disgrace*, and *Nineveh* would certainly fall within this convention of the national novel, as each novel addresses the conflicts apparent in the post-apartheid, neocolonial South African state—such as relocation and violence—through allegories. However, these texts also depart from the codes of the standard allegory with their infusion of sound and music into the text. This interruption of the narrative by what Edwards calls allegory-as-parabasis—defined by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak as "the activism of *speaking*

otherwise"—prevents these novels from becoming fixed in their allegorical roles (Edwards 8). This "(impossible) attempt in a narrative [like *Disgrace*] to incorporate or open itself to lyric, to propel prose towards music" serves to destabilize allegory within these works, making room for alternative modes of analysis (Edwards 7). Rather than analyzing allegories and examining the animals as symbolic foils in these texts to illuminate human truths, I will instead examine the use of the sonic genre as means of forming interspecies relationality with the animal Other, either through establishing similarity or recognizing and respecting alterity.[2]

While speech, orality, and music—which are forms of acoustics imagined to have some organizing structure—are privileged in sound studies as defined by Jonathan Sterne,[3] noise (supposedly unstructured sound) often falls outside the horizons of inquiry. Reason and language are some of the most oft-cited distinctions between humans and nonhuman animals. While both humans and nonhuman animals have voices, animal voices "are inferior because they are not *signifying* voices"—they are, according to Aristotle, pure sound without meaning (Cavarero 34). To the Greeks, the most important aspect of the voice is *logos*, which etymologically refers to a "joining together of words," and is alternatively defined as "language," "discourse," and "reason" (Cavarero 33). Greek philosophers were not interested in the sonic aspect of the human

[2] In this essay about the agency of nonhuman animals I build, implicitly, on postcolonial ecocriticism and Anthropocene studies. Within postcolonial ecocritical works, there is a tension between grappling with the very human crisis of the Anthropocene and respecting the agency of nonhuman animals to impact their own environment. In their introduction to *Climate Without Nature*, Andrew Bauer and Mona Bhan explain this tension in detail. In addition to recentering the human, the project of breaking down the nature/culture divide central to the Anthropocene "relies heavily on a European subject as the locus of history," since such a divide is far from universal across human culture (Bauer & Bhan 12). More pressing for this project, however, is the ways in which some anthropocentric understandings of environment and ecocriticism can ignore the interactions between nonhuman animals and their environment that also impacts the earth's climate (Bauer & Bhan 16). Understandings of nonhuman ethics must allow for nonhuman agency, and my goal in researching *The Whale Caller*, *Disgrace*, and *Nineveh* is to determine how such an agency is displayed through music.

[3] Sterne's focus on the academic aspects of sound studies is necessarily anthropocentric and defines sound as "fundamentally a verbal practice" (4). Sterne justifies this anthropocentrism in his introduction to *The Sound Studies Reader*, arguing that while sound is certainly important in the animal realm, his research will "consider sound as a category defined in relation to ideas of the human before we explode that formulation" (5).

voice—aspects of voice beyond vocalizing concepts were considered excess, an "insignificant remain…disturbingly close to animality" (Cavarero 34). In *A Voice and Nothing More*, Mladen Dolar examines *phone*—the sonic aspect of voice—through Giorgio Agamben's notion of bare life, while *logos* indicates life within the community (106). In this understanding of voice, *phone* is not merely a conduit for *logos*, it "persists at its core, making [*logos*] possible and constantly haunting it by the impossibility of symbolizing it" (Dolar 106). And just as *phone* persists at the core of *logos*, bare life can persist at the core of the community, both in the treatment of humans who are animalized and the treatment of the animal Other (Dolar 117).

In the absence of logocentric speech, noise is often associated with senselessness—it is without inherent meaning, particularly when referring to the noise made by nonhuman animals. This valuation of noise is largely due to anthropocentric understandings of meaning—in reality, noise and music hold varying levels of importance based on the species that is listening. In order to understand these varying experiences of nature without elevating the human one, anthropologist Eduardo Kohn uses "perspectival multinaturalism." Perspectival multinaturalism, drawn from the seminal work of Brazilian philosopher Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, posits that all sentient beings have a notion of the self, but how they are perceived by others is determined by the beings who are observing them (95). This perspectival multinaturalism makes space for conceptions of nature that are less dependent on sight. Humans, for instance, rely largely on vision for understanding, relegating listening and sound to a "shadow sense"—a term that itself relies on visual metaphor to convey meaning (Krause). Yet some theorists argue that even noise plays a more important role in the human experience than once thought; Jacques Attali's *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* equates noise to power, stating "in noise can be read the codes of life, the relations among men" (6). This understanding of noise can also illuminate

relationships between the human and the animal—for instance, dogs in Ávila, Ecuador have an "exhaustive lexicon of canine vocalizations" from which their owners derive a clear meaning (Kohn 72). However, noise is most useful when used to understand animal environments. Whales and other marine animals are reliant on sound for navigation, since their environment filters out light while increasing sound conductivity (Peters 61). Biophonic studies show that within sonic habitats, animals alter the frequency and time of vocalizations so that they may be heard; noise also plays a role in establishing animal territories within their habitat (Krause). Noise, then, plays an incredibly important role in discussing an animal's relationship with said habitat, which in turn makes it vital for turning away from anthropocentric narratives of the nonhuman animal that usually render the beast as "mute."

It is through this noise that the nonhuman animal becomes connected to the musical. Because of its reliance on pattern and connections to the sublime, music is a term that resists clear definitions. Not only does the sonic aspect of music make it difficult to transpose precisely into written language, the broad variety of music found around the world makes it difficult to reach any absolute claims about the subject. In *Music, Myth and Nature*, François-Bernard Mâche outlines three broad requirements of repetition, differentiation of pitches, and connection to dance in his definition of music (60). In an evolutionary study of music, W. Tecumseh Fitch argues that music is complex, generative, and culturally-transmitted (178). Philosophical discussions of music become even more nebulous when they attempt to assign meaning and purpose to music. For instance, St. Augustine thought plainsong was an "opportunity to experience the ineffable" in a connection to God, whereas Rousseau theorizes that melodic music is the vestigial connection to a natural, passionate language that preceded the age of reason (Hadreas 8-9). Music has been theorized by philosophers and psychoanalysts alike to encapsulate

something more than human, "[spanning] the gap between the nameable and the unnameable" (Hadreas 17). The unnameable in Zakes Mda's *The Whale Caller*, J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, and Henrietta Rose-Innes' *Nineveh* is the relationship between human and animal.

While most animals produce noise, music is thought to be a faculty of humans and a few specific nonhuman animals; unlike speech, deemed to be a purely human trait, "man does not have the monopoly of hierarchies of pitches, intensities, and durations," and thus cannot have a monopoly on musical production (Mâche 102). I will be focusing exclusively on animal song, since all of the animal music that is described in my primary texts is a product of vocalizations. Such complex, learned vocalizations are present in certain types of birds, whales, and seals, while the vocalizations of frogs and insects are not learned and thus not considered song (Fitch 182-183). By this biomusicological definition of animal song, *The Whale Caller* is the only one of my primary texts that deals with actual musical animals—*Disgrace* and *Nineveh* attribute music to animals that cannot sing. However, David Rothenberg expands this definition to include insects, pointing out that while birds and whales sing individually by design, insects "are supposed to make sense as a swarm," and thus insect music is more about the combined layering and patterns of different species (3). Indeed, in *Nineveh* the sound of the environment and the swarm is more important than any one animal. This swarm has an alienating effect, illustrating the alterity of the animal Other. By contrast, *The Whale Caller*'s focus on the individual song of a large, charismatic animal causes a profound attachment in the protagonist, to the point that the Whale Caller's partner Saluni sees Sharisha the whale as a romantic rival. Sharisha's gruesome death shows the ecological dangers of a misplaced sense of anthropomorphic identification with the animal Other.

III: *The Whale Caller* and the Dangers of Romanticized Anthropomorphism

At stake in these works are questions of the limits of anthropomorphism—when does one's identification with the animal Other through music become destructive rather than productive? In Zakes Mda's *The Whale Caller*, the charismatic figure of the whale becomes the central focus of analysis. Throughout the novel, the eponymous character projects a romantic relationship onto a southern right whale named Sharisha. When the Whale Caller enters a relationship with the town drunk and love child Saluni, she instantly becomes a rival of Sharisha. All of the major characters have plots defined by music—the Whale Caller spends every summer on the beach, using the horn he made specifically for Sharisha to call the whale to him, while Saluni attempts to land a record deal by singing with two young girls whom she often spends time with called the Bored Twins. After her bid for a record fails, Saluni blinds herself and she and the Whale Caller set off on a journey around the cape of South Africa. Though at first this journey seems to draw the couple together, their return to Hermanus and Sharisha marks the end of their relationship. Distressed by his conflicts with Saluni, the Whale Caller recklessly draws Sharisha too close to the shore with his horn, causing her beaching and eventual death. At the same time, Saluni suffers an equally horrific death at the hands of the Bored Twins, whose songs are so enchanting. In *The Whale Caller*, it is a false similarity established through music—a failure to recognize the differences of the whale before his eyes—that causes Sharisha's death. Rather than a recognition of the animal Other, Mda's novel cautions readers about the dangers of projecting redemptive human qualities of music onto the nonhuman animal.

Whale song evolved in concert with the cetacean capacity for hearing, with the brain stretching due to the investment in producing and receiving sound (Peters 62). Sound is vital in the marine environment, where the dimly lit water creates an environment in which "optics are

discouraged and acoustics are encouraged" (Peters 61). However, a common reliance on sound does not mean that all sea creatures are musical—in this whales and other cetaceans are unique. As with human musical composers, whales, especially humpback whales, have a capacity for improvisation based on a codified set of rules and have the capability to learn new vocal patterns, aligning with Fitch's requirements for animal song (Rottner 519). Beyond biomusicological definitions, whale song also plays an important role in the relationship between whales and North American indigenous peoples, who would sing ritual songs before a whale hunt, asking the whale to give itself up (Langlios). While whales produce literal song, humans project fantasy onto whales in other ways. With the endangerment of whales came the look towards the large mammals for "wish-images of alternative ways of being and being together" (Peters 69). This sort of fantasy of living with the whale is pervasive throughout *The Whale Caller*, projecting an anthropocentric romantic fantasy onto Sharisha and ultimately leading to her death.

While humans in general might fantasize about the communicative capabilities of whales, the Whale Caller fantasizes about one specific whale—Sharisha. Early in the novel, the Whale Caller waits for his favorite whale to return to Hermanus, appreciating the "sublime choir" of other whales in the meantime (Mda 39). Music is the essential medium for the Whale Caller's interactions with all whales, especially Sharisha, a southern right whale skilled in her song and distinctive by the pattern of her callosities. Woodward argues that the Whale Caller's connection to Sharisha is one of "musical shamanist ritual," while also abiding by a particular Christian "code of guilt and self-abasement" (160). When Sharisha returns, the Whale Caller "blows his horn and screams as if in agony," while the whale responds in turn with a "prolonged, pained bellow" (Mda 41). Ostensibly this connection with Sharisha makes the Whale Caller a more conscientious and ecologically aware person. Unlike Saluni, who declares that animals "die so

we can eat them and wear them as shoes" (Mda 173), the Whale Caller seeks to live a semi-nomadic life harmonious with the environment. He eats a largely vegetarian diet, he does not like to fish for fear that marine animals will get caught on his hooks, and he despises the tourist-driven motives of his rival the Whale Crier, who the Whale Caller fears will only serve to disturb the whales of Hermanus.

While the Whale Caller criticizes the methods of the Whale Crier, he too attempts to use his horn as a means of control. When several male southern rights mate with Sharisha, "the Whale Caller tries to save Sharisha from this rape by blowing his horn and creating havoc in a discordant tune" (Mda 48). Because of this musical intervention into Sharisha's mating, the Whale Caller imagines himself as part of a nuclear family with the whale; "He feels like a father already" (Mda 48). After the calf is born, he composes a new song for mother and child. This anthropomorphic imagination of the whale as a sexual and romantic partner projects a human identity onto the whale which ultimately proves destructive to the whale herself and to the Whale Caller's human partner Saluni. This all comes to a head during a prolonged and ritualized dance with Sharisha, when the man's relationship with the whale takes on a sexual and romantic element: "Deep in the night the wails of his horn could be heard…His horn penetrated deep into every aperture of the whale's body, as if in search of a soul in the midst of all the blubber" (Mda 66). This erotic interspecies connection between man and whale is not lost on Saluni, who approaches Sharisha as one would a romantic rival—at one point she laments that one cannot "beat [a whale] up with your stiletto-heel, shouting that it must leave your man alone" (Mda 75). Saluni and the Whale Caller approach Sharisha from entirely different perspectives of the animal Other; where the Whale Caller sees the whale through a lens of intense intimacy based on similarity, Saluni sees only ugliness and alterity.

Saluni makes derisive comments about Sharisha and other whales throughout the novel, even mooning Sharisha at points, motivated by jealousy for the whale. While she does not share the ecological concerns of the Whale Caller, Saluni's own connection with music is just as strong as the Whale Caller's, as she seeks to create a music record backed by the voices of the beautiful and eerie Bored Twins. It is through the Bored Twins that we are introduced to another musical animal, much smaller and less charismatic that Sharisha, occupying the swamp rather than the ocean—frogs:

> They teach Saluni a new song that they have composed at the swamps. It is about the croaking of frogs in their green and brown colors and how the girls caught them and pierced their eyes with sharp sticks and set them free to hop about in wonderful blindness. It was a haunting melody…They won't have to run away from danger, because they won't see it. They will therefore be safe since danger catches only those who run away from it. (Mda 145-146)

This scene is one of the many moments in *The Whale Caller* where the cruelty of the Bored Twins is revealed to the reader: "Impervious to the gaze of animals…they render nature sacrificial" (Woodward 158). The flippant way in which the mutilation of these animals is mentioned, without the gruesome fanfare that would be awarded to Sharisha, shows the power of whales as animals with which people commune. This sacrificial approach to nature leads to Saluni's ultimate demise after her sight returns. Just as predicted in the song of the Bored Twins, she dies running from the girls whilst they stone her to death.

In addition to foreshadowing Saluni's death, the song about the blinded frogs also anticipates Saluni's own self-inflicted blindness late in the novel. Saluni loses her sight after looking directly into a solar eclipse, arguing that after losing her chances at fame and losing the Whale Caller to Sharisha, "there was nothing in the world worth seeing anymore" (Mda 184). Rather than believing in the "nobility of sight," Saluni declares for herself a nobility of blindness, which sets she and the Whale Caller off on a journey around the countryside. On this

journey they meet a shepherd who admires the wisdom that comes with Saluni's blindness, stating that "All the problems of the world emanate from the arrogance of sight" (Mda 198). While the shepherd's later statement that he may blind his herd of livestock reaches the level of parody, Saluni's blindness serves to destabilize the importance of sight and the gaze, leaving an opening for analysis through the sonic instead.

The final, most important infusion of the sonic genre comes at the end of the novel, when the Whale Caller returns to Hermanus after his journey with Saluni. After a relatively peaceful trip, their relationship once again becomes contentious—she accuses him of caring more for Sharisha than for her, while he desires a more supportive relationship. In a fit of self-pity after a fight with Saluni, the Whale Caller blows his kelp horn carelessly, beaching Sharisha: "As he blows his horn furiously and uncontrollably she comes swimming just as furiously…She is too mesmerized to realise that she has recklessly crossed the line that separates the blue depths from the green shallows" (Mda 216). Here we see the consequence of a musical bond exploited, as well as the repercussions of an interspecies ethics overly reliant on anthropomorphism. While the Whale Caller seeks to call Sharisha back to deeper waters, he is unsuccessful in drawing from the Aboriginal tradition he cites in his storytelling about whales, as colonialism robbed him of "an indigenous ecological tradition that can save 'earth others' as well as ourselves" (Woodward 163).

Sharisha's death hangs over *The Whale Caller* from the novel's opening lines: "The sea is bleeding from the wounds of Sharisha" (Mda 3). Yet no amount of foreshadowing can prepare the reader for the grisly spectacle of Sharisha's demise:

> The spectators are ordered to move as far back as possible and to lie flat on the ground. The Whale Caller does not move. He just sits there as if in a daze…

> Like a high priest in a ritual sacrifice, a man stands over a contraption that is connected to the whale with a long red cable. With all due solemnity he triggers the explosives. Sharisha goes up in a giant ball of smoke and flame. (Mda 224)

The tourists who visit Hermanus to observe the live whales are equally enthralled by the prospect of a dead one. Though the Whale Caller was not responsible for the explosives, his music, once a source of connection with the whale, did play a role in luring her to shore. Steinwand argues that *The Whale Caller* and other postcolonial novels that focus on cetaceans offer a corrective on the sentimentalizing impulses of environmentalism based on individual attachment (195). While we can focus on the actions of the sentimental individual animal, we must understand that we do not have access to much of their experience and local knowledge (Steinwand 195). The death of Sharisha reveals the limits of anthropomorphism, because, try as the Whale Caller might, he is unable to truly be with the whale the way he desires to be, and his attempt to do so has dire consequences for the animal Other.

IV: *Disgrace* and the Failure of Logocentric Speech

While *The Whale Caller* uses music to examine the limitations of anthropomorphism, J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* takes a much more affirmative stance on the ethical possibilities of interspecies connection. This could be, in part, because of the seemingly irredeemable nature of its protagonist. *Disgrace* mediates on the sonic genre at length through the—often racist and sexist—musings of its protagonist David Lurie, an adjunct professor of communications at Cape Technical University. The plot begins when Lurie is forced to resign after having an affair with one of his students and sexually assaulting her. After the scandal, Lurie leaves Cape Town to stay with his daughter Lucy on her farm in the Eastern Cape. During his stay with Lucy, Lurie struggles to make meaningful connections with Lucy—language constantly seems to fail. After

an attack on Lucy's farm where Lurie is set on fire and Lucy is raped, any communication becomes infeasible. What connections Lurie does make at the end of the novel is not through words, but through music. As he works on his opera, *Byron in Italy*, he makes a connection with a disabled stray dog, who listens intently to his music. In an ethically bankrupt character, music becomes a means of understanding the animal Other in a way that he could not achieve through logocentric speech. This departure from speech makes a move towards the ethical by acknowledging the similarity between Lurie and the dog.

At the beginning of the novel, Lurie is already questioning the capacity of logocentric speech. Once a professor of modern languages, Lurie is skeptical of his new position as communications professor, not least because of his dispute with the opening statement of his Communications 101 textbook:

> 'Human society has created language in order that we may communicate our thoughts, feelings and intentions to each other.' His own opinion, which he does not air, is that the origins of speech lie in song, and the origins of song in the need to fill out with sound the overlarge and rather empty human soul. (Coetzee 3-4)

Mâche dispels this notion of a pre-speech musical language, arguing that while music and language systems might be affiliated, "one should neither conclude that music proceeds from language nor the other way around" (68). Yet Lurie's romanticized notions of art and humanity will not abide the utilitarian notion of language put forth by his textbook. Lurie understands song and music as Rousseau does—as some passionate form of understanding beyond reason. Starting from a place of skepticism toward logocentric speech, Lurie continues to move away from the logical and towards the musical. However, even in his music he is lacking; according to the disgraced professor, it was not Lurie's abuse of power, but his lack of the lyrical, that held back his relationship with his student, Melanie (Coetzee 171). Part of this shift is due to the

inadequacy of language, specifically English, to provide any meaningful communication in Lurie's life.

In *Disgrace,* the English language is an impossible medium for ethical relations. At a party celebrating the marriage of his daughter's friend, Lurie reflects on the inadequacy of English in the post-apartheid South African context: "The language he draws on with such aplomb is, if he only knew it, tired, friable, eaten from the inside as if by termites. Only the monosyllables can still be relied on, and not even all of them" (Coetzee 129). Earlier in the novel, he reflects that "more and more he is convinced that English is an unfit medium for the truth of South Africa…Like a dinosaur expiring and settling in the mud, the language has stiffened" (Coetzee 117). English, as one of the languages of the colonizer, cannot convey truth in the postcolonial post-apartheid context—just like the old social order on which Lurie reminisces, South Africa has moved past it. Yet English is the only language Lurie has access to, leading to the failure of language apparent in Lurie's attempts to communicate with his daughter. In an attempt to broach the topic of the attack on the farm, Lucy's words completely break down. When Lurie asks to discuss the topic logically, Lucy replies "I can't talk any more, David, I just can't…I wish I could explain. But I can't" (Coetzee 155). Time and again Lurie fails to communicate with his daughter, staging the protagonist as "unable to touch either the racial or gendered other" through language (Spivak 22). The only meaningful connections Lurie makes in the novel is through music.

The first connection made through Lurie's music is with the imaginary figure of Teresa, Lord Byron's mistress and the protagonist of Lurie's operetta *Byron in Italy*. Originally meant to focus on Byron's affair with young Teresa in his middle age, the plot of the operetta shifts based on the music Lurie imagines for Teresa—rather than the soaring arias of a young woman, his

imaginings of Teresa render her old and unattractive, her story intimately connected to the plink-plonk of a toy banjo. Within Lurie's descriptions of his protagonist lie the same sexist assumptions of his relationships with the flesh and blood women of his life, including Lucy, his daughter; Melanie, the student he sexually assaults; and Bev Shaw, the woman who runs the animal shelter with whom Lurie has an affair. At one point he wonders if he can "find it in his heart to love this plain, ordinary woman [Teresa]," but there is also a recognition of the Other that is not present in any of his other relationships (Coetzee 182). As Lurie sings Teresa's vocal lines, he is able to inhabit a different experience, making the music "the mode where he can finally break free from his habitual roles of sexual predator and overbearing father" (Edwards 7). Music provides an ethical space in which Lurie, the protagonist to which *Disgrace*'s focalization is relentlessly confined, can imagine the experiences of the Other (Spivak 22). Limited though it is, the "lyric impulse in Lurie is nonetheless his last hope" (Edwards 7).

Just as Lurie can imagine Teresa's experience through his music, he can also imagine the experience of the dog Driepoot—Dutch for tripod, referencing the dog's deformed back leg—in his music. Lurie is introduced to Dreipoot while working for Lucy's friend Bev Shaw, who runs a rural veterinary clinic. Laurie, composing an operetta which will never be performed, is playing one day when the dog approaches:

> The dog is fascinated by the sound of the banjo. When he strums the strings, the dog sits up, cocks its head, listens. When he hums Teresa's line, and the humming begins to swell with feeling…the dog smacks its lips and seems on the point of singing too, or howling.
>
> Would he dare to do that: bring a dog into the piece, allow it to loose its own lament to the heavens between the strophes of lovelorn Teresa's? Why not? Surely, in a work that will never be performed, all things are permitted? (Coetzee 215)

Though Lurie attempts to keep his distance from the animal knowing that it would soon be put down, the dog, Driepoot, develops an intense affection for Coetzee's protagonist through music.

However, Lurie's canine companion at the end of *Disgrace* is not inherently musical. While it takes interest in the music of Lurie's operetta, he does not actually make a sound. This acceptance of and even affection toward the animal Other is a far cry from when Lurie first arrives at the farm, arguing that while humans should be kind to other species, nonhuman animals are "of a different order of creation" (Coetzee 74). By the end of the novel, Lurie can imagine an animal that is not deprived of voice, despite its lack of logocentric speech (Ciobanu 682). In a situation in which *logos* has failed, *phone* gains new importance, particularly when establishing an interspecies ethics.

However, this connection with the animal should not be taken for granted. Coetzee's novel explores a connection that most readers will be familiar with and recognize—the connection with a dog. Dogs are uniquely positioned as what Donna Haraway calls a "companion species"; they have played many roles throughout their shared history with humans, from pets to herders to "instruments of terror" (104), as they were during the apartheid era that hangs over *Disgrace* like a shadow. Even allowing for a dog's wide variety of connotations, it is a being most have some familiarity with and understanding of. While Lurie's music in *Disgrace* serves to forge a bond between the human and the animal, *Nineveh* and *The Whale Caller* call such bonds into question. The issue, in part, is a question of scale—how does one forge a relationship with a 25-ton mammal that spends its life under water, or an insect that lives hidden one's walls? As Michael Tavel Clarke and David Wittenberg point out in their introduction to *Scale in Literature and Culture*, humans are notoriously bad at conceiving of scale, due to "our reliance on fixed ideas that hamper our understanding of the true significance of the sizes of real objects" (3). For Hugh Raffles, human perceptions of scale in writing culture are further complicated when considering when such culture "is entirely inseparable from life itself, is in

fact, life itself, and, correspondingly, pre-, post-, necessary to, indifferent to, and transcendent of the human scale" (527). Such cross-species connection, especially at the scalar level, is also challenging because of our limitations of our imaginations; as Thomas Nagel argues, our imaginations can only tell us how we might behave as an animal, not how the animal itself experiences the world (439). Even when we interpret the sounds of animals—even a companion species such as dogs—"the all-too-human attempts to define and control these" cannot fully interpret the thoughts at the root of the sound (Kohn 72).

Though the disabled dog at the end of the novel is the only animal to which music is attributed, there are several dogs throughout *Disgrace*, most of which meet a grisly end. The first dogs killed are the ones Lucy houses, who are shot dead one by one during the attack on the farm. Many more dogs are killed in the veterinary clinic, euthanized *en masse* because "there are simply too many of them" (Coetzee 140). Driepoot is also euthanized—the novel ends with Lurie carrying him into Bev Shaw's operating room. It is easy to read Lurie's impulse to "give up" his companion at the end of the novel as just another death, an act of betrayal toward the dog that has shown him such affection (Ciobanu 683). However, the individual connection with the dog, forged by Lurie's music complicates such an interpretation. Rather than interpreting the death of the dog as one in a string of killings, Calina Ciobanu likens Lurie's act cradling the dog to the Pietà—a sacrifice instead of a slaughter (685). Having heard the appeal of the animal Other, Lurie "gives up" the dog as an act of mercy "to an animal that cannot be accommodated in any other way by the world it inhabits" (Ciobanu 683). This distinction between sacrifice and slaughter is important to acknowledge the value of the Driepoot's life, as is Lurie's tender treatment of the dog before it is euthanized. Compared to the senselessness of Sharisha's death in *The Whale Caller*, the death of the dog of *Disgrace* shows a moment of interspecies ethics. Lurie

decides to "give up" Driepoot early, rather than delaying his inevitable death for another week out of self-interest in maintaining his personal relationship with the dog. I am influenced here by Colin Dayan's resonant description of ethics: "To be ethical…is to locate oneself in relation to a world adamantly not one's own. Whereas morality is an austere experience of nonrelation, ethics demands the discomfort of utter relatedness" (xvi). The discomfort of utter relatedness is revealed by the death of Driepoot.

V: *Nineveh* and the Noise of the Swarm

While music in *The Whale Caller* and *Disgrace* acts as a means of recognition between the human and the animal Other, in Henrietta Rose-Innes' *Nineveh*, it becomes a symbol of alterity. *Nineveh* follows Katya Grubbs, the owner of a "humane. Painless. Different" pest company in Cape Town called Painless Pest Relocations, the hallmark of which is that Katya moves rather than exterminates pests (Rose-Innes 17). After meeting capitalist developer Mr. Brand, Katya gets a job attempting to tackle a "comprehensive" pest problem in a new, upscale, gated neighborhood called Nineveh. Despite Katya's best efforts, she is unable to find the pests at first—Nineveh seems impenetrable to the wilderness that surrounds it. However, this distinction between development and wilderness, inside and outside, becomes confused when Katya's estranged father Len, an exterminator himself, returns to Nineveh after being fired from Katya's position the previous year. Soon after Len's return, the goggas (a species of South African beetle) finally swarm, effectively overtaking the new development and rendering Nineveh uninhabitable. The sonic genre is evident throughout *Nineveh*, signifying an animal vitality to contrast the death-like silence of the empty housing development. The noise constantly surrounding Katya morphs into a strange music, reminding readers of a teeming ecosystem in

which humans do not belong. This music of the outside, completely foreign to us, nonetheless points to a greater ethical understanding of interconnected cohabitation within an ecosystem.

The supposed silence of Nineveh is established the first night that Katya spends in the development. Sound and space are intimately connected in *Nineveh,* marking the difference between outside and inside. Anja Kanngeiser in "Sonic Geographies of Voice" describes the ways in which sound shapes space through language, creating what she calls "spaciotemporal linguistic worlds" (338). While most of her work is on the social construction of space through voice, Kanngeiser also describes the way in which the reverberation of sound itself can help us comprehend a space. Quoting Brandon LaBelle, Kanngeiser argues that "sound sets into relief the properties of a given space, its materiality and characteristics, through reverberation and reflection, and, in turn, these characteristics affect the given sound and how it is heard" (345). Sounds help orient us within a space. Not only do the sounds produced within a given space give us details of what inhabits the space—the reverberation itself can give us clues as to how the space might be used (Kanngeiser 345-346). It is for this reason that the silence inside of Unit Two, Katya's temporary housing while she surveys the pest situation in Nineveh, is so unsettling. As she is going to sleep in Unit Two, "she coughs in the dark, just to hear the acoustics of the place, but there are none: sound sinks into the air like a footfall on thick carpet" (Rose-Innes 54). This silence is uneasy—it establishes the emptiness of Nineveh, both of its former animal inhabitants and its intended human occupants. It is also a silence that will be challenged as Katya attempts to find the elusive pests of Nineveh, pressing her ears to the wall to attempt to find the source of a clicking sound—"no wall is ever silent" (Rose-Innes 90). This silence will break down even further as the separation between outside and inside, wild and domesticated, animal and human collapse at the end of the novel.

While the interior of Nineveh's grounds seems to be well-kept and quiet, "beyond Nineveh's perimeter, everything is insistently alive and pushing to enter" (Rose-Innes 59). The vitality of the swamp outside Nineveh is expressed both through its visual vibrance and its sonic prevalence. Compared to the houses within Nineveh, the wilderness outside is downright noisy, the sounds of frogs, dogs, and the sea creating a musical landscape:

> A densely patterned chorus of frog-song is building beneath the human sounds. The waves are a distant bassline. Two dogs start barking at each other, one near and one far…they seem to be tossing the sound back and forth not in hostility, but in playful communication. Then the guard's bicycle wheels sizzle past, the familiar *ting ting* bell…and there it is: a fragile symphony. (Rose-Innes 85)

Just as uneasy silence defines the interior spaces of Nineveh, this fragile symphony comes to define the world outside. Daniel Williams argues that the sonic motifs of *Nineveh* create a "vision of interspecies connection" (18). Biophony research supports this interspecies understanding of this natural music, since animals will adjust the noises they make to be heard within their environment (Krause). The metaphor of the symphony, and with it the orchestra, implies a myriad of voices and instruments, working together to create a musical whole. However, it is an environment that the developers of Nineveh have intentionally walled out—while other species may exist in harmony as part of this natural orchestra, Katya and the other inhabitants of Nineveh cannot partake of it.

While most of the music of Nineveh indicates a complex ecosystem of nonhuman animals creating one collective song, Rose-Innes spends a fair amount of time describing frog song specifically. Unlike the allusions to cruel treatment of frogs in *The Whale Caller*, *Nineveh* uses frogs with some kindness. "The dense conversations of the frogs" is one of the first things Katya notices about Nineveh, and the songs of frogs follow her character throughout novel (Rose-Innes 56). Katya has a particular fondness for frogs, since her father Len often brought

home the small amphibians as “ambiguous gifts” for his young daughters (Rose-Innes 118). While Katya delighted in these frogs, she was not properly equipped to care for them as child, and each “gift of a damp, glossy-eyed creature was also the gift of its corpse” (Rose-Innes 118). Frogs within the novel echo this early relationship with her father, even as Katya attempts to distance herself from Len’s methods. After her initial search of Nineveh for pests proves futile, she uses one of Len’s old tricks, pretending that a frog she found in the development is endangered to buy herself more time. Yet this frog is doomed to die as well, slapped down by a startled Mr. Brand. Just as Katya once mourned the corpses of her father’s gifts, her nephew and assistant Toby mourns this individual frog, holding it “tragically on his palm;” Katya “wants to take the little splayed corpse away from him, clean his fingers and fold them up” (Rose-Innes 145). While the frog song does nothing to save the frog, it gives Katya the opportunity to break old habits and comfort her nephew.

Throughout Rose-Innes’ novel, natural music, as well as the human noise of surrounding Nineveh, foreshadow just how porous the development will prove to be. Unlike the swamp, which at first seems to be held at bay by the man-made barriers to entry, noise from the surrounding area can already permeate Nineveh’s borders. The metaphor of the orchestra returns late in the novel as the goggas appear and begin to swarm, but this time it is used to describe silence rather than a symphony:

> For a brief interval between natural acts, there is a pause, a hush before the orchestra begins. The conductor raises his baton. The creatures of the night wait for the next movement. When it comes, there is no noise. It is rather a change of state – as if the air is charged differently, or has crystallized…a million small things listening, purposeful, on the edge of some great metamorphosis. (Rose-Innes 167)

The metamorphosis in question is not merely a transformation of the beetles of Nineveh—it is the bleed between tenuous segmentations of inside and outside that will transform the

development permanently. According to Williams, once the beetles finally emerge from their hiding place beneath Unit One, noise and space overlap and the sound of the insects "becomes impossible to ignore" (22). The sonic invasion that has been threatening Nineveh for the entire novel transforms into a physical invasion, described by Rose-Innes in a way that is at once unsettling and beautiful: "thousand upon thousand twitching bodies of beetles, jeweled, swarming, flicking their wings, coating the room like crystals and amethyst inside a geode" (180). It is important that Rose-Innes comprehends the goggas not as individuals, but as a swarm. In "Swarm Intelligence," Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt argue that such intelligence is not individual, but rather "fundamentally social" and "based fundamentally on communication" (91). This communication comes through the different orientations the sonic genre provides.

The post-apartheid context of the novel gives these permeable borders of Nineveh a allegorical resonance about the instability of such boundaries. However, Filipo Menozzi resists using such an allegorical reading of pest relocation as apartheid segregation or neocolonial removal (199). Rather, "*Nineveh* presents a zone of becoming, overlap, and deterritorialisation that insists on the aliveness of the city in all human, animal, and vegetal components" (197). The swarm at the end of *Nineveh* exemplifies the futility of human attempts to keep the environment at bay and segregate humans and animals. The ethical moment is *Nineveh* is not an identification with the insect as animal Other—at no point does the swarm become intelligible to Katya. Beyond the frogs of Katya's childhood, there is no individual identification with nonhuman animals. Instead, the ethical impulse in Rose-Innes' novel is giving up the idea of a space segregated from the animal Other. After learning that such compartmentalization of space is a fantasy, Katya loses interest in her work. Rather than relocate into a new apartment after her

home is condemned, she gives up her home to Len and lives in her van with Nineveh's former guard dog, Soldier.

As in *Disgrace*, *Nineveh* ends with a dog as the prime example of forging interspecies ethics. Soldier became a refugee when Nineveh was overrun by the goggas, like his previous owner Pascal was a refugee from the Democratic Republic of Congo. This shift to a nomadic lifestyle proposes new ethical ways of inhabiting Cape Town (Menozzi 195). In this space, Katya can imagine an interspecies dependence that extends even to human bodies—"Even our own skin, Katya has read, is porous and infested, every second letting microscopic creatures in and out. Our own bodies are menageries." (Rose-Innes 201). Here Rose-Innes breaks down even the fantasy of an autonomous body, instead discussing the ways in which humans and nonhuman animals are reliant on outside beings. While Haraway uses *The Companion Species Manifesto* to discuss dogs, she also acknowledges how this companionship over the centuries has affected human biology: "I suspect that human genomes contain a considerable molecular record of the pathogens of their companion species, including dogs. Immune systems are not a minor part of naturecultures; they determine where organisms, including people, can live and with whom" (122). The acknowledgement of the permeable body provides the ultimate ethical moment in *Nineveh*, when all notions of borders have been surrendered. Unlike the solid walls of Nineveh, which attempted to keep the animal Other out, in the back of her van Katya makes space for the animal, giving up two-thirds of the of the floor to Soldier. From Katya and Soldier's truce, we can imagine a future ecological ethics of cohabitation, rather than extermination or removal.

VI. Conclusion

The Whale Caller, *Disgrace*, and *Nineveh* all seek to illuminate the ethical relationship between human and animal through music. *The Whale Caller* explores the danger of an anthropocentric and overly sentimental view of the nonhuman animal. By projecting a romantic and sexual relationship onto a southern right whale, the Whale Caller puts his own needs before that of the animal, ultimately endangering her and causing her death. In *Disgrace*, Lurie effectively uses music as an alternative to logocentric speech, which has failed as a medium of truth in South Africa. Through music, Lurie can not only attempt to inhabit the experience of Teresa, the female protagonist of his operetta *Byron in Italy*—he can also forge a relationship with a disabled dog. Through Lurie's choice to "give up" the dog at the end of the novel, we can see an attempt at personal interspecies ethics that did not exist before, focusing on alleviating suffering over individual affection. *Nineveh* broadens the scope of this animal ethics to a broader ecological concern. Through the sonic aspects of the novel, Katya can perceive the break down between inside and outside, civilization and wilderness, ultimately showing the futility of a project attempting to separate these entities. While *Disgrace* focuses on establishing similarities between human and nonhuman animal, *The Whale Caller* and *Nineveh* insists on their alterity.

In these works, music is not a means of understanding the animal itself, but rather our relationship with the nonhuman animal. And the human impulse to relate to nonhuman animals through music is a strong one. As Rothenberg states, "Music is immediately meaningful even if we cannot translate it, so once heard as music, the world of animal communication is immediately accessible, emotional, and interesting" (11). While humans can never inhabit the mind of the animal Other, the sonic genre, particularly music, serves to render their experiences as comprehensible, and therefore important to humans. However, to rely on human

interpretations of the noise of nonhuman animals is not enough to create a positive interspecies ethics. While there is a much to be learned about the nonhuman animal through these works, to act ethically, we must acknowledge "the vulnerability of our knowledge and relationships to human and nonhuman others in songs and stories that are expressions of a deeper current than reason can articulate or that knowledge can hold" (Steinwand 195). When assessing the fragile symphonies of the animal Other, one must never assume that one may speak for them.

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