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THE ETHICS AND AESTHETICS OF REPRESENTING ANTHROPOGENIC EXTINCTION IN JULIA LEIGH'S NOVEL THE HUNTER: AN ECOCRITICAL READING

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Contemporary Australia is sentimental about the Thylacine as a strange, lost creature destroyed by the ignorance of the past. The irretrievable nature of this lost species is difficult to accept and they reify the Thylacine in various mediums to isolate the barbaric behaviour in the past. The Thylacine is emblematic of both the tragic history of its demise, and of colonizer influence on Tasmanian history. Representations of interdependence between the human and nonhuman world are at the core of my analysis. In accord with ecocritical theory I bring the nonhuman figure Thylacine representation, in Julia Leigh's The Hunter. As a counterpoint to anthropocentric political approaches in literature I emphasise the broader, more inclusive ethical principles and concerns of ecocentrism (a term used almost synonymously with "deep ecology" by Greg Garrard (Ecocriticism25). The deep ecology ethic is generally "the explicit or implicit perspectives of ecocritics" (ecocriticism23).The novel's main protagonist, who calls himself "Martin David, Naturalist", with whom it is difficult to identify, not least because he is in no way a naturalist: "Martin David, Naturalist" is in fact the hunter of the novel's title. The article explores the question of Extinction and ethical issues through this awkward character.
Key words: Nature, Culture, Ecocentricism, Tasmania, Thylacine, Anthropogenic extinction

Introduction

Leigh's narrative centres on a hired mercenary, who assumes the name of Martin David (once introduced to readers by his full name he is then referred to as just "M"). He is searching for the recently sighted, but presumed extinct, thylacine (commonly known as the Tasmanian tiger). M is employed by a Sydney based bio-technology company seeking thylacine DNA for biological weapons (antidote or virus is not specified, and M doesn't care). The narrative timeframe is the 1990s and the main setting is the southern part of the Tasmanian Central Plateau towards the Florentine Valley where the last thylacine was captured in 1936. The Armstrong homestead, at the foot of an escarpment is M's base camp. Lucy and Jarrah Armstrong and their two children Sass and Bike arrived from interstate two years earlier. Jarrah, an academic has been missing (presumed dead) from a field trip for over a year. Lucy, debilitated by grief, exists in a twilight state of prescription drugs and sleep while the children fend for themselves. M pretends to be a university researcher studying the Tasmanian devil. He survives months in the wilderness, eventually kills the thylacine and thus fulfils his mission to harvest the animal's organs. Leigh's bleak narrative ending subverts reader expectations by leaving her "natural man" protagonist unredeemed. Controversially the film version of The Hunter depicts the death of the thylacine as a mercy killing and thus M becomes a reformed hero. This different moral outcome for the protagonist creates a number of ethical implications in terms of representing anthropogenic extinction, which sharpen and deepen the discussion of Leigh's controversial ending.
A sense of desolation and loss from anthropogenic exploitation of natural resources is established from the narrative outset of The Hunter. Leigh's representation of ghost towns introduces the tone of loss and absence. M observes the townships from his airport hire-car as he drives into the south-west of the Island. Stores and petrol stations peter out, the road turns to dirt and grazing land is replaced by: "uniform rows of tiny plantation saplings … then come the vacant concrete plots: Welcome to the dead town, once a logging town. Here, people have picked up their houses and moved on. A whole row of demountable has been abandoned, the windows bagged with bright orange plastic" (TH 4). The effect of industrial impact is amplified when M observes the neglected property which is to be his base-camp. Once a working farm, the weed-infested paddock sprouts rusting car bodies and discarded tin drums. A dilapidated bluestone house and outbuildings offer weather protection for a long gone-to-seed vegetable patch. Possible contamination from a nearby log dump makes M reluctant to drink from the creek.
Leigh's theme of natural resource exploitation continues but narrows from the wilderness to its native animals as neighbour, Jack Mindy, guides M up to the escarpment, where he will commence his hunt. Narrated historical context indicates the vast numbers of native wallabies, possums and thylacines hunted since white settlement. The plateau, a cornucopia for trappers, yielded more thylacine pelts than anywhere else in Tasmania. Brutal conditions were endured by these men who preferred to hunt in the winter when the animals' fur was thickest: "Hard days, yes

but days of plenty" (TH 15). In a later reflection M notes that the early trappers themselves now bordered on "extinction," "one or two perhaps whiling away their nursing-home days in a fog of pleasant fantasies" (TH 38). He is pleased to be part of what he regards as an aesthetic symmetry (TH 38). In startling contrast to contemporary ecocentric sensibilities M finds it comforting that the human hunter is more successful at rendering extinctions than the "sixteen Ice Ages" (TH 31).

M's urban analogies superficially synthesise nature and culture. On the other hand, M's predatory behaviour and survival skills, from his experience as a hunter/mercenary, are apparent when he enters the thylacine's lair and transforms into "natural-man." He "sniffs various levels of the air and determines on smell alone that it is clear an animal has used the lair in the recent past" (TH 159). Both aspects of his persona inform his emotionally detached point-of-view and clinical dialogue (usually internal monologue). Leigh's own restrained linguistic style reinforces an emotional or metaphysical separation between M and nature.

M is constructed as an enemy to the environmental movement and his character does not invite reader sympathies. Chauvinism and ruthlessness are edged with moments of vulnerability. Despite undergoing a series of developments M's character, as Andrew Peek suggests, "lacks credibility" and remains an assemblage, of "masculine stereotypes" both traditional and contemporary (31). M's imaginative capacity to undergo an "alchemical change" attunes his senses to the natural world so he "can see and hear and smell what other men cannot; [yet] the man of delicate touch and sinuous movement" remains emotionally and morally detached from the rest of nature (TH 58). His corporeal self only is transformed and while this is in accord with biological nature it is not in accord with Western expectations of human nature. A further disturbing tension occurs through Leigh's depiction of M's obsessive devotion to "his beautiful traps" (TH 56). Pride in his "handiwork" as he gently lays out the metal "spikes, chains and crushing jaws" of the traps evokes a sense of religious offering for/or sacrifice of his intended victims. Significantly for ecocriticism, a large part of the narrative in The Hunter offers little, in terms of environmental advocacy, for those not already intellectually aware and emotionally engaged with the care and protection of vulnerable species and biodiversity. Rather, Leigh's construction of the Tasmanian wilderness through M's point-of-view tends to reinforce traditional dualism between culture and nature. By superficially representing the wilderness from his perspective of human dominance and as a mere resource Leigh risks rendering it silent.

M and his mission metaphorically represent destruction and exploitation through corporate need and greed which, many would argue is the dominant socio-political position in Tasmania and in the contemporary Western world. Significantly the ecocentric perspective in the novel is represented by the two "absent" and thus, relatively voiceless characters—Jarrah Armstrong and the presumed extinct thylacine. By including competing perspectives and reactions, both from minor and "absent" characters and the protagonist, Leigh constructs some balance for reader responses. Tensions are expressed through M's perceived growing attachment to the Armstrong family; the absent character of Jarrah who provides the moral touchstone; the family tragedy and M's subsequent grief (and reader grief); M's apparent "bonding" with the thylacine; its vulnerable state and finally its death, not only as an individual but as the end of its species. I explore each of these elements in turn.

In his search for the thylacine M makes several trips to the escarpment and during his returns to the homestead a relationship of "strange intimacy" develops first with the children and then with the occasionally lucid mother (TH 71). Effectively objectifying them M refers to Sass as "the girl" and to Lucy as "Sleeping Beauty" (TH 72). Keeping them at an emotional distance while sharing domestic tasks, like making dinner, adds another level of tension to the relationship drama. In addition, M calculatingly resists seducing Lucy deciding to "save her" for after his mission, as a "treat" similar to his buried coffee (his reward to himself after he kills the thylacine). His attitude to the children is also primarily motivated by self-interest. On one occasion, when he discovers Bike has followed him up to the escarpment, he slaps him. Bike becomes hysterical and begins to hyperventilate. In order to calm him down M holds the boy close to him but as soon as the child is quiet M pulls away. His actions are ambivalent. "He'll have to take the boy back. He doesn't want to, but it would distract him to know the boy is wandering around" (TH 111). Is his concern primarily for Bike's welfare or more that the boy will jeopardise the success of M's mission? Nevertheless, as the story progresses M does develop a self-serving kind of affection for the family. M's first attempt to hunt the thylacine fails and he is recalled to Sydney by his employer. Lucy says she will miss him and M too, realises he will "miss her, will miss them, and this feeling doesn't leave him as he drives away" (TH 128).

Reader expectations are manipulated by Leigh to suggest that family love may soften M's character and inspire his empathy for the elusive thylacine. Two months later, as he drives back to the Armstrong house M is anticipating the reunion "like a boy going on a first date" (TH 131). He fantasises about growing old on a farm with loved ones

around him. Suddenly, no longer as sure of himself M is preparing for initial rejection or later disappointment. This point in the narrative, when he returns, is the beginning of Part Two and M appears "humanised" to some degree as Leigh reveals aspects of his vulnerability. In turn this encourages further hope for his redemption and also for his prey's survival.

As narrative counterpart to M's exploitation and destruction Jarrah Armstrong, the absent (presumed dead) father and environmental hero, serves as a shadow figure and a "moral touchstone" against which human activity is implicitly judged. Jarrah's name has connections with the natural world—unique to Western Australia, it is one of the hardest timbers available, resistant to termites and fire. An intellectual, also covertly looking for the thylacine, Jarrah's ethical position is voiced by Lucy and his children during conversations with M. The title of Jarrah's work-in-progress, Bioethics for Another Millennium also reinforces his politics. Shakti, one of the hippie visitors to the Armstrong house is dismissed by M when she reads from Jarrah's book: "At a time when the planet is overrun with man, is it really so unfeasible to question whose life is more …" (TH 108).

Leigh imaginatively associates M's physical and primal grief response with traits of the thylacine: "his chest scooped out. His skin has been peeled from his body. He can dislocate his jaw and fill the universe with a stone-grey roar" (TH 135). Jack Mindy's wife tells him about the fire, and its consequences. Sass is hospitalised on the mainland with critical burns, Lucy has had a complete breakdown and is institutionalised near her daughter and Bike is in local foster-care. M returns to the abandoned house and after a Rohypnol induced sleep he once again climbs to the escarpment. His thwarted plan to usurp Jarrah's vacant position in the family results in anguish and self-pity. He tries to rationalise and diminish his grief as he picks his way through the tree roots and boulders

> I have been forsaken, he thinks, the world conspires against me. I try, I try, and look what happens. I did not ask for much, … He listens to himself: it is disgusting, to feel so sorry for oneself. The whole thing is disgusting; he doesn't want to know about it. Worse things, he thinks, can happen. But can they? Can they really? Even the solace he offers himself is barren. (TH 141)

At this point in Leigh's narrative reader sympathies are secured for Lucy and her children but also for M's personal loss, particularly given his apparent emotional growth into a more empathetic (and thus endearing) man. M's self-pity prevails but some empathy is apparent: "At night, lying on the hard ground, he is plagued by thoughts of the girl, Sass, now condemned to lying down, and of her mother, who knows no better" (TH 142). Again, readers can expect, at least, a potential change-of-heart from the hunter towards his prey but this is not fulfilled. He checks his "creations" (traps and snares) in the hope of finding a thylacine "or what is left of the tiger after the devils have done with it—stripped it of meat and bone, leaving behind only the trapped leg, or perhaps a scrap of skin. Who cares?" (TH 143). The element of indifference: "Who cares?" suggests M's passion for the hunt is flagging but this is more likely due to an overall depressive state (TH 143). He doesn't set any new snares but when his food runs out he is reluctant to leave the wilderness. He adapts to an ascetic existence:

> In those weeks of doing little more than finding food and shelter, of breathing and pumping blood and watching the clouds form and fade, the melancholia deep inside him—the bucolia—works its way to the surface like a bullet or splinter being slowly expelled from a wound. He comes to think of his fondness for Lucy and the children as an aberration, a monumental lapse in judgement. (TH 147)

As Leigh moves to the final stage of the narrative, the hunt and death of the thylacine, M's relationship with the nonhuman world is increasingly governed by his natural-man persona. Weeks pass and he adapts to living alone in the wilderness. Like the native animals, M drinks from the creeks and sleeps in the undergrowth. "To reacquaint himself with the tiger he gets down on his knees and crawls along an open pad with his jaw dropped wide until his rough palms begin to smart" (TH 148). Yet, as Crane points out, his high-tech equipment also separates him bodily from the environment and this result in an unsettling character contradiction (Myths of Wilderness 154). Paradoxically technology brings him closer to and distances him from the nonhuman.

Perhaps the most disturbing anomaly in M's character is that his physical and instinctual adaptability allow him to merge effectively with the nonhuman world but only in a predatory rather than protective way. In the bush "he and his pack move as one" and when he needs to sleep he shuffles under a tree fern (TH 14). Alchemical change is motivated by his needs as a hunter. Through a shamanistic kind of transformation his naturalist personae becomes natural man whose senses are highly attuned to the wilderness sounds, sights and scents. When he occupies the thylacine's lair, waiting weeks for her inevitable return, he thinks, "I could be quite comfortable here" (TH 160). M's corporeal merging with the nonhuman world serves to dissolve some of the initial nature/culture dualism but it

also creates a disturbing tension. Garrard notes that "one of Leigh's major achievements is to associate believably the rhetoric of closeness to nature with … a morally bankrupt individual" (Ecocriticism 178). Despite being close to nature physically M does not develop any higher level of eco-ethical consciousness. While this absence of ecological ethics may be logically consistent in Darwinian terms, (or in the lives of the early trappers) it subverts contemporary human social norms and expectations in the developed Western world. M suppresses his compassion and morality in order to become natural man but self-preservation is part of a much bigger picture for the human animal's evolution (TH 58). M's physical immersion in the nonhuman world suggests a sense of kinship but M does not develop ecological concern.

Conclusion

Leigh frames her representation of the "unfolding disaster" of anthropogenic extinction through a "second chance" for the Tasmanian thylacine. More significantly, this fictional "second chance" creates an opportunity for humans to behave differently while Leigh's narrative creates a "moral laboratory" to observe ethical changes. Ultimately, The Hunter engages readers intellectually and affectively, not only with the demise of the thylacine but with humanity's relationship with nonhuman species, and by extension, the rest of the natural environment.

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