

Theorising Loss and the Nonhuman:  
Melancholia and Trauma in Contemporary  
Texts

By

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Sheffield  
Faculty of Arts and Humanities  
School of English

October 2017

## Abstract

Since Freud's 'Mourning and Melancholia' was published in 1917, many theorists have expanded upon as well as critiqued his work in order to think through questions of grief and subjectivity. In this thesis I argue that such questions are generally framed in relation to the human, and suggest that our contemporary moment is increasingly producing literary texts that are particularly concerned with imagining the relationship between loss and the nonhuman. Following David Eng and David Kazanjian (2002), I use 'loss' as a theoretical term that 'names what is apprehended by discourses and practices of mourning, melancholia, nostalgia, sadness, trauma and depression', and I argue that this term is able to usefully open up such discourses and practices beyond anthropocentric narratives.

This thesis is organised into two sections. Each focuses on a particular instance of loss, the first being 'Mourning and Melancholia' and the second 'Trauma.' In the first section, I begin with an extended reading of Peter Carey's 2012 novel *The Chemistry of Tears*. Here I examine Carey's text in relation to the 'critical agency' Freud identifies as one of melancholia's symptoms, exploring the ways this manifests in the novel as a form of 'unworking' that reorients the protagonists' relationships to humans, nonhumans, and 'things.' In the two remaining chapters of this section, I firstly examine de-extinction projects in relation to recent theoretical work that identifies melancholic attachment as the basis of subject formation, and then undertake a reading of Chloe Hooper's *A Child's Book of True Crime* (2002) that explores the text's portrayal of children and extinction in the light of recent work on queer negativity.

In the second section I undertake a set of three linked readings that explore the relationship between trauma theory and interpretation. All three of the literary texts in this section feature ghostly animals as guiding elements of the plot, and my interest here is in exploring how hospitable their authors are to these uncanny subjects. I briefly examine Evie Wyld's novel *All the Birds, Singing* (2014) as a depiction of PTSD, then move on to read Suzanne Berne's *The Dogs of Littlefield* (2014) alongside critical work that is concerned with the concept of immunity. Finally, I undertake an extended reading of Fiona McFarlane's novel *The Night Guest* (2014). Here, I trace the relationship between 'inside' and 'outside' as it manifests in both trauma and hospitality theory, suggesting that McFarlane's text offers an important disruption of this binary.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Wolfson Foundation for awarding me the scholarship that allowed me to complete this research. Their interest in and support for the humanities in a difficult climate is hugely encouraging and I am extremely grateful to them. Thanks also to the School of English at the University of Sheffield for making me welcome, and to Emma Bradley in particular. I am also grateful for the company and insight of all the attendees at 'Academia and Affect,' as well as to its co-organisers, Maryam Jameela, Ethel Maqueda, and Richard Woodall. The biggest of thanks, however, must go to my supervisors Robert McKay and John Miller. They have supported me with patience and kindness through some difficult times, and the thoughtful consideration they have given to my research has been invaluable.

Although my name is the only one on this thesis, it is no exaggeration to say that it only exists because of the overwhelming love and support I have been lucky to receive from my family and friends. I could not have done this without them.

To my incredible Jessop Folk: Jess Hannington, Sarah Jackson, Hannah Leach, Sarah Lund, Jess Norledge, and Rosie Shute. Thank you so much for everything, you have dragged me through this thesis with your kind words and great hugs. I am in awe of you all.

To my generous, kind, and patient team: George Bradley, Jon Emberey, Maryam Jameela, Selina Thompson, and Charl Williams. Thank you a million times. I love you all so much. Thanks also to the furry pals in my life: Ronnie, Toby, Mal, and of course the spectacular Harris James Tweed. A special thank you goes to Ben Markham for his support, hugs, and great tea-making skills in the last few months of writing this thesis, and also to Elspeth Kenny and Ruth Hawthorne.

A special thank you also to two incredible pals, Helen Drake and Julia White. Helen, I don't have words for how grateful I am to you for your unwavering support and kindness, and for making me snort laugh when things feel hard. You are the best lad I know. Jules, this thesis would most certainly not be here without you! You are just amazing. Thank you for everything, it really means more than I can say.

To my ones, my mum Julie Thew, and my sister Charlotte Thew. You keep me going, always. I love you.

Throughout the time spent working on this thesis I have had in mind Joyce Dobby, Derek Thew, and Shirley Thew, I miss them very much. Most of all, and most painfully, I miss my amazing dad, Chris Thew. This thesis is for him, with all my love.

## Declaration

Chapter two of this thesis appeared in *Journal of Environmental Philosophy*, 14.1 (2017).

*For Chris Thew*

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## Introduction

### Monstrous Metaphors: Theorising the Nonhuman in Loss Narratives

Belief is half of all healing. Belief in the cure, belief in the future that awaits.

*-A Monster Calls (2016)*

If it's in a word, or it's in a look, you can't get rid of the Babadook.

*-The Babadook (2014)*

#### Letting go

Conor O'Malley is twelve years old and he keeps having the same nightmare. He is leaning over the edge of a cliff, holding tightly on to his mother's hand to stop her from falling. He has this nightmare because in waking life his mother is very ill: she is dying. One night the yew tree that stands in the cemetery behind his house starts to uproot itself from the ground; its branches twist into the shape of limbs and it grows tall and monstrous, then walks slowly and heavily towards his window, shaking the ground. 'I have come to get you, Conor O'Malley,' it says. The monster has a proposal for Conor; it will tell him three stories, over three nights, and then Conor will have to tell a story in return: the story of his nightmare. When it comes time for Conor to do this he refuses because the nightmare he keeps having, where he can hold on no longer and his mother falls, has a terrible truth at its heart. The monster knows this, of course; it has always known. 'Speak the truth,' it roars, 'it will kill you if you do not!' So Conor reveals the true story of his nightmare: he wants it all to be finished. 'I let her fall,' he tells the creature. 'I let her die.' Conor has been brave, the monster says, and together they travel for the last time

to the hospital where his mother is dying. This story, the creature explains, 'ends with a boy holding on tight to his mother, and by doing so he can finally let her go.'

### **Hanging on**

Amelia's husband was killed in a car crash. He was driving her to the hospital to give birth and the baby that was born that day is now seven years old. His name is Samuel, and he sees monsters everywhere. He is difficult and needy and Amelia struggles to look after him because she is still paralysed by grief. When Samuel finds a pop-up picture book about a monster called 'the Babadook', he becomes certain that it is in the house and wants to hurt them both. Amelia tries to destroy the book. She hides it, rips it up, and sets it alight, but it keeps coming back somehow, just as the story says it will. 'If it's in a word, or it's in a look, you can't get rid of the Babadook.' Soon she starts hearing the monster in the house at night, whispering and knocking on doors. She follows it down to the cellar where she keeps all of her husband's belongings and finds it there, dressed as him. Then, somehow, the monster is inside Amelia and she is filled with its anger and its violence. It makes her kill her little white dog and then it turns its rage towards her son, although she tries her best to fight it. 'I haven't been good since your dad died', she tells Samuel. 'I'm sick, Sam. I need help.' He is determined to protect her from monsters at all costs. He ties her up in the cellar and there is an exorcism; she vomits the Babadook out in a flood of black bile. After this their lives are a little calmer. They gather up worms together in the garden and Amelia takes them down to the cellar where the Babadook lives, where Samuel is not allowed to go. She feeds it every day.

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The sketches above present the plots of two recent films, *A Monster Calls* (2016), and *The Babadook* (2014).<sup>1</sup> Although they belong to different genres – *A Monster Calls* is a film for children,<sup>2</sup> and *The Babadook* a horror – they share a striking similarity in that they both tell stories about the way grief comes to inhabit and change family relationships. This is where the similarities end, however, because the ways that both films imagine the effects of this grief are vastly different. *A Monster Calls* tells a story about letting go and moving on from grief, with this process of letting go presented as an imperative that will prove fatal if ignored. *The Babadook* takes as its theme the effects of such a failure to let go, with Amelia's inability to move on after her husband's death resulting in the arrival of a monstrous presence that even as the film closes remains dormant. In this sense, despite their differences in approach, the films can be understood as sending a particular moral message in that they both position the idea of 'hanging on' to grief as damaging. In *A Monster Calls* this damage is positioned at the level of the grieving subject themselves because Conor's failure to 'speak the truth' and acknowledge that he needs (and wants) to let go of his mother will, the monster says, kill him. Conversely, in *The Babadook*, the risks of Amelia's longstanding relation to her grief extend outwards to endanger not only her but also her child.

In telling these stories about holding onto and letting go of grief, *A Monster Calls* and *The Babadook* set up an opposition that replicates the distinction made by Sigmund Freud a hundred years earlier in his influential essay 'Mourning and Melancholia.' Here Freud theorises responses to grief in psychoanalytic terms by contrasting 'the normal affect of mourning' to its pathological opposite, melancholia.<sup>3</sup> The mourner, in Freud's terms, undergoes a process of detachment from the

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<sup>1</sup> J.A. Bayona, *A Monster Calls* (IFC Films, 2016); Jennifer Kent, *The Babadook* (Screen Australia, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> The film is adapted for screen by Patrick Ness from his book of the same name.

<sup>3</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud. Volume XIV (1914-1916), On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works* (London: Vintage, 2001), p. 243.

lost love object instigated by 'reality-testing' that identifies this object as no longer being in existence (p. 244). *A Monster Calls* stages this process by the monster repeatedly emphasising the importance of Conor speaking the 'truth' at the heart of his nightmare. This 'reality-test' allows Conor to recognise the imminent loss of his mother and to begin to detach from her, an action expressed literally in the film through the powerful visual image of him letting go of her hand.

By contrast, this process of detachment, after which 'the ego becomes free and uninhibited again,' fails to work properly in melancholia. Instead, the melancholic refuses detachment by forming an identification with the lost love object and incorporating it into their ego. In doing so they make the lost object a part of themselves and merge with it, so that previously held attitudes toward that object can now be shifted back onto their own person. Because, as Freud explains, 'the loss of a love-object is an excellent opportunity for the ambivalence in love-relationships to make itself effective and come into the open', and because he sees one of the possible preconditions for a melancholic response as the grieving subject's already unusually ambivalent relationship to what has been lost, the orientation to the object that becomes shifted back onto the self is often one characterised by feelings of 'being slighted, neglected, or disappointed.' The result of this is that the melancholic exhibits 'a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings' (pp. 250-251). In *The Babadook* the appearance of the monster is associated with Amelia's late husband and her continuing attachment to him, a connection made clear by the monster choosing the cellar where Amelia keeps all her husband's possessions as its den. The cellar in the film suggests the space of Amelia's ego into which the lost love object (her husband) has been incorporated, and her identification with the monster by means of its possession of her allows all the ambivalent and destructive energies associated with melancholia to emerge and turn back upon her and Samuel. Ultimately in *The Babadook* the moment of reality-testing does not result in Amelia's detachment from

her husband. Although she exorcises *The Babadook* by claiming it is ‘trespassing in her home’ – a phrase that suggests the ejection of the incorporated object from the ego – as the film closes the monster remains dormant in the cellar and her feeding of it shows she is invested in keeping it alive.

In its simplest terms this distinction between mourning and melancholia manifests in these narratives as a means of identifying and opposing healthy and pathological responses to loss, and of making visible the negative consequences of the latter. In this sense they provide examples of the antagonistic relationship between ‘hanging on’ and ‘letting go’ that this thesis will argue is still identifiable in contemporary representations of loss. As looking at the reviews of both films makes clear, however, something strange happens when people watch (and then write about) these two stories of loss; strange because although the presence of a monster is vital to each tale, responses to the film seem to be intent on making these monsters disappear. The *Empire* review of *A Monster Calls*, for example, suggests that the titular monster is in fact not ‘the Neeson-voiced creature’ but rather ‘grief itself.’<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the *Independent* praises the film for not being ‘scared to let the monster out’, with the true meaning of monster here being ‘the boy’s rage and guilt as well as his grief.’<sup>5</sup> Reviews of *The Babadook* are even firmer on this point, with *Pop Matters* claiming the reason it is so frightening is because ‘it is not a movie about a monster’, but about ‘a mother.’<sup>6</sup> *Vulture*’s reviewer even goes so far as to defend the film against the idea that its metaphor is

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<sup>4</sup> Dan Jolin, ‘A Monster Calls’, *Empire*, 2017 <<https://www.empireonline.com/movies/monster-calls/review/>> [accessed 11 October 2017].

<sup>5</sup> Geoffrey McNab, ‘Review: A Monster Calls Isn’t Afraid to Let the Monster out’, *The Independent*, 2016 <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/reviews/a-monster-calls-review-film-liam-neeson-tree-felicity-jones-a7500131.html>> [accessed 11 October 2017].

<sup>6</sup> “‘The Babadook’ Isn’t a Horror Movie About a Monster, But a Mother’, *PopMatters* <<http://www.popmatters.com/review/192938-the-babadook/>> [accessed 11 October 2017].

'too close to the surface, and the film too *obviously* a parable of motherhood' by explaining that he 'didn't mind that "obviousness."<sup>7</sup>

The problem that arises here, then, is that the nonhuman vanishes from the narrative; or perhaps more accurately, is pushed out of the frame. Rather than suggesting that because this occurs such interpretations of the films are incorrect in some way (certainly, both *The Babadook* and *A Monster Calls* invite this kind of analysis) I am interested instead in a question that would be phrased more positively. What would a review of these films look like that took these monsters seriously? How might a response be formulated that approached the questions of loss raised by both texts without feeling the need to erase their nonhuman presences?

It is here that my thesis intervenes. In the chapters that follow I examine how the figure of the nonhuman enters narratives about loss, particularly focusing on tracing the ways that this figure interacts with the hanging on/letting go opposition that I see as still key to the way that loss is formulated in contemporary texts. As such, my thesis aims to take nonhuman presences seriously when they appear in narratives of loss, a task I take up in two particular ways. Firstly, I examine how space might be opened up for the nonhuman in contemporary texts by drawing attention to its presence in these narratives and prioritising its meaning in the readings that I undertake. Secondly, I address the question of how, once this space is opened up, it might be kept open. As such, I look closely at the ways contemporary texts might be hospitable to nonhuman presences without seeking to erase them or reduce their meaning. When using the term 'nonhuman' here, I include in that definition all 'bodies' that would usually be understood as distinct from the human. In doing so I do not exclude 'things' or 'objects' that are conventionally categorised as nonliving (or nonsentient) such as machines, chemicals, and buildings,

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<sup>7</sup> 'Australian Horror Movie The Babadook Is In the Running For My Favorite Movie Of the Year', *Vulture*, 2014 <<http://www.vulture.com/2014/11/movie-review-the-babadook.html>> [accessed 12 October 2017].

whilst also using the word nonhuman to refer to presences that might be more easily understood as embodied, like animals (or monsters). In using this umbrella term I do not mean to flatten the important distinctions between these different bodies, and each chapter in this thesis seeks to evaluate the particular nonhuman presence that it focuses on in all its proper complexity. However, it is useful to me here (and at other times in my thesis) as shorthand for the kinds of bodies that stand in opposition to the humanist subject.

In the remainder of this introduction, then, I first identify some of the contemporary work that has been done on loss, specifically theories that have addressed the concepts of mourning and melancholia. I then turn to look at work done by scholars whose primary interest is the theorisation of the nonhuman – most significantly the fields of animal studies, new materialism, and environmental humanities – in order to explore some of the ways that this body of work has figured the nonhuman in relation to loss. Finally, I lay out some of the scholarly work that has most influenced my thinking in order to explain my approach to the questions of this thesis in more detail, finishing with a brief description of the themes that will be addressed in each chapter.

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Although the concept of melancholia has a long history, this thesis uses Freud's 1917 essay 'Mourning and Melancholia' as its starting point. This is because Freud's essay can be understood as initiating the conflict between normal and pathological ways of mourning understood here as part of the hanging on/letting go formulation that inhabits theories of loss.<sup>8</sup> As such, in this thesis I tend to use the word 'grief' or 'grieving' as a

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<sup>8</sup> One of the most influential studies of the evolution of melancholia as a concept is *Saturn and Melancholy: studies in the history of natural philosophy, religion and art* by Raymond Klibansky (London: Nelson, 1964)

more neutral term to indicate an instance of loss, with 'mourning' and 'melancholia' used specifically in their Freudian psychoanalytic sense.

Whilst Freud's essay can certainly be understood as instantiating this opposition, he himself came to doubt that an ultimate separation of the two terms was possible. In his later work this led him to reconsider one of the central claims of 'Mourning and Melancholia'; namely that the identification of ego with abandoned object was a pathological response to loss. Instead he came to understand this process as not only 'typical' but also a vital component of subject formation, with the ego made up of 'a precipitate of abandoned object-cathexes.'<sup>9</sup> Walter Benjamin and Jacques Derrida have also sought to complicate these terms and undermine their oppositional logic,<sup>10</sup> Benjamin in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* and Derrida as part of a substantial body of work on mourning, most notably in *Memoires for Paul de Man*.<sup>11</sup> However, as an analysis of the two films above shows, the oppositional logic of healthy/pathological mourning persists in cultural forms that deal with loss, as well as in the political sphere.<sup>12</sup> In this sense melancholia and mourning still operate, as Sara Ahmed has argued, as diagnostic categories.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Sigmund Freud, Sigmund Freud, and others, *The Ego and the Id*. Translated by Joan Riviere. Revised and Newly Edited by James Strachey. (London: Hogarth Press, 1962), p. 18.

<sup>10</sup> For an analysis of this in Benjamin's work see Ilit Ferber, 'Melancholy Philosophy: Freud and Benjamin', *E-rea*, 4.1 (2006) and in Derrida's see Sam Durrant, *Postcolonial Narrative and the Work of Mourning*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), pp. 23-51.

<sup>11</sup> Walter Benjamin and John Osborne, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (London ; New York: Verso, 1998); Jacques Derrida, *Memoires for Paul de Man*, trans. by Cecile Lindsay, Rev.ed (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).

<sup>12</sup> We might think here of the former British Prime Minister David Cameron's differing attitudes to historical episodes of violence. Cameron gave a speech in 2014 where he emphasized the importance of ensuring 'the the memory and lessons of the Holocaust live on for generations to come.' This is in contrast to comments made on a 2015 trip to Jamaica where he said that the country should 'move on' from the painful legacy of slavery. (Rowena Mason, 'Jamaica Should "Move on from Painful Legacy of Slavery", Says Cameron', *The Guardian*, 30 September 2015 [accessed 13 October 2017].; PA, "'We Must Never Forget The Holocaust'", *HuffPost UK*, [accessed 13 October 2017].)

<sup>13</sup> Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham [NC]: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 139.

In recent decades there has also been an emphasis in humanities disciplines on retaining this opposition by theorising melancholia as an ethical response to loss. Such approaches have increasingly come to think of melancholia in political terms and particularly as it relates to subject formation, an argument made most familiar by Judith Butler with regard to the disavowal of queer experience.<sup>14</sup> In the introduction to their edited collection of essays on loss, David L. Eng and David Kazanjian similarly suggest that the themes of the included work illustrate the fact that ‘melancholia at the turn of this century has emerged as a crucial touchstone for social and subjective formations.’<sup>15</sup> For Eng and Kazanjian melancholia provides a particularly ethical means of engaging with questions of memory and history in the contemporary moment. Their argument that ‘mourning abandons lost objects by laying their histories to rest,’ whilst ‘melancholia’s continued and open relation to the past finally allows us to gain new perspectives on and new understandings of lost objects,’ reverses the orthodox narrative of mourning and melancholia by aligning mourning with, if not pathology, certainly a kind of immorality (*Loss*, p. 4). Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands makes a similar argument when she suggests that melancholia is ‘a potentially politicized’ way of preserving and subscribing value to a lost object ‘in the midst of a culture that fails to recognize its significance’, a notion Sara Ahmed also addresses in relation to what she argues is British society’s failure to engage with its racist history (*The Promise of Happiness*, p. 121-159).<sup>16</sup>

Eng and his colleague Shinhee Han also number among the theorists who have found the concept of melancholic identification (the ego’s incorporation of and merger with its lost love object) useful for

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<sup>14</sup> Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power : Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997).

<sup>15</sup> David L. Eng and David Kazanjian, *Loss : The Politics of Mourning* (Berkeley ; London: University of California Press, 2003), p. 23.

<sup>16</sup> Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands, ‘Melancholy Natures, Queer Ecologies’, in *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), pp. 331-58 (p. 333).

exploring issues of identity in social, political, and cultural terms. They see the melancholic model as particularly applicable to an analysis of race (specifically the experience of Asian Americans), suggesting that it can be understood as ‘underpinning our everyday conflicts and struggles with experiences of immigration, assimilation, and racialization.’<sup>17</sup> Anne Cheng has also found melancholia valuable as a means of theorising the operation of racialization in the USA, where she sees (white) national identity as taking shape by incorporating the abandoned object of the racial ‘other.’<sup>18</sup> Douglas Crimp and Ann Cvetkovich similarly find a melancholic framework helpful for thinking through questions about queerness, identity, and grief in relation to the on-going legacies of the AIDS crisis.<sup>19</sup> Whilst recognising the usefulness of melancholic thinking for analyses of subjectivity, these theorists tend to be more sceptical about its ethical dimension. Ranjana Khanna and Paul Gilroy in particular have drawn attention to the ways that melancholia often functions as a colonial cultural formation, Khanna by situating psychoanalysis in its historical context as a ‘colonial discipline’, and Gilroy by coining the term ‘postimperial melancholia’ to refer to British national attitudes to the violent legacies of empire.<sup>20</sup>

A related but separate strand of inquiry focusing on the political and ethical implications of theorising loss, best represented by Judith Butler’s work in her books *Precarious Life* and *Frames of War*, focuses on exploring how certain lives come to be figured as ‘grievable’ whilst others

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<sup>17</sup> David L. Eng and Shinhee Han, ‘A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia’, in *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, ed. by David L. Eng and David Kazanjian (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), p. 344.

<sup>18</sup> Anne Anlin Cheng, ‘The Melancholy of Race’, *The Kenyon Review*, 19.1 (1997), 49–61.

<sup>19</sup> See their contributions to Eng and Kazanjian’s volume *Loss* (2003) as well as their own monographs: Douglas Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2002); Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

<sup>20</sup> Ranjana Khanna, *Dark Continents: Psychoanalysis and Colonialism* (Durham, N.C.; London: Duke University Press, 2003); Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia*, The Wellek Lectures (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).



do not. For Butler this question emerges most urgently out of the rise in global violence post-9/11, and leads her to posit the affective experience of loss as a powerful means of imagining new kinds of community in these difficult times. The fact that ‘all of us have lost somebody’ suggests, Butler argues, that it is possible to ‘appeal to a “we” united by shared vulnerability to this condition’ (*Precarious Life*, p. 22). A community gathered together under the sign of loss would thus be well placed to refuse to accept ‘the differential distribution of grievability on which war depends’ (*Frames of War*, p.xix). This imagined community, however, does not extend outwards in her work to include, for example, animals. Although Butler states that she is interested in asking ‘whose lives count as lives’ by way of exploring who gets to be called human, she focuses on this question by limiting herself to exploring the ethical potential of broken attachments only as they occur between subjects she already assumes to be human. ‘Perhaps it should come as no surprise that I propose to start, and end, with the question of the human,’ she writes, ‘as if there were any other way for us to start or end!’ (*Precarious Life*, p. 20)

I certainly would not want to suggest here that such an omission invalidates Butler’s project, which I find compelling. Rather, it is useful to note that the theoretical move she makes here – emphasising the inclusive or expansive potential of loss, whilst at the same time remaining within what can be understood as the orthodox limits of that concept – is one that often characterises contemporary scholarship on this issue. Melancholia in particular is often imagined as having what Eng and Kazanjian call ‘an extended capacity for representation’ due to its ‘flexibility as a signifier’ (pp. 4-5), a claim that comes out of Freud’s dual assertions in ‘Mourning and Melancholia’ that mourning and melancholia may occur as reactions not only to the loss of a loved person, but also to that of ‘some abstraction [...] such as one’s country, liberty, an ideal, and so on’ as well as his suggestion that in melancholia the lost object is hard to pin down, so that ‘one cannot see clearly what it is that has been lost’ (pp. 243, 245). It is striking then, that the idea that melancholia offers a ‘capaciousness of

meaning' in relation to loss is not really pushed to its full potential, whereby the attachments and forms of subjectivity engendered by experiences of loss might be seen as extending beyond the human, or at least beyond human agency and interest. To think further about how the nonhuman might come to be included in such formulations, it is useful to turn now to the scholarly field that has perhaps most consistently prioritised the decentring of the human- animal studies – in order to briefly examine how this scholarship has moved beyond anthropocentrism in its theoretical discussions of loss.

Susan McHugh describes animal studies as 'an interdisciplinary field of inquiry that coalesces around questions of agency and the social and [...] insists that readings of animal representations inform and are informed by axiological and other "unnatural" histories.' The sub-discipline of literary animal studies, she argues, has to reckon with the ways that literary criticism has traditionally operated around the figure of the animal, and if considered at all, 'representations of animals have been seen first and foremost as dissembling humans, as at best metaphorically speaking.' Literary animal studies, then, in line with the project of animal studies as a whole, pays attention to 'animal traces' as they appear in narratives.<sup>21</sup> Responses to loss in this field (specifically in the disciplines of literature and philosophy which are my focus here) have predominantly reflected the aims of Butler's work in *Precarious Life* and *Frames of War* in that they focus on expanding the sphere of the grievable to include the animal, largely by theorising how forms of community gathered under the sign of loss might be structured by a recognition of human-animal attachments. Cary Wolfe, for example, suggests that Butler's scholarship 'runs aground on the question of nonhuman animals' in its failure to include them in the definition of persons that she uses to theorise interdependency, an omission he finds in need of address, not least

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<sup>21</sup> 'One or Several Literary Animal Studies? - Susan McHugh | H-Animal | H-Net'

<<https://networks.h-net.org/node/16560/pages/32231/one-or-several-literary-animal-studies-susan-mchugh>> [accessed 14 October 2017]. n.p..

because ‘clearly, some nonhuman animals have their own social relations of interdependency, and still others live in relations of interdependency with human beings’.<sup>22</sup> Alternative models for such kinds of community are set out in the work of Ralph R. Acampora, Cora Diamond, and Anat Pick, who suggest that humans might be moved to treat animals more ethically by recognising their shared corporeality as bodies exposed not only to loss, but also to death.<sup>23</sup> This approach is also echoed in the newly emergent field of the environmental humanities, where scholars such as Donna Haraway and Thom van Dooren have focused on the idea of ‘multispecies community’ as offering an opening onto more ethical thought in a time of rising levels of nonhuman extinction.<sup>24</sup> Van Dooren’s approach in particular also involves drawing attention to the way that nonhuman animals have their own mourning practices, a fact that anthropological studies of animal grief like those of Barbara J. King, Jeffrey Masson, and Susan McCarthy have also attended to.<sup>25</sup>

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My thesis aims to find ways to think about nonhuman presences in narratives of loss by bringing contemporary scholarship on this topic into conversation with work that has sought to theorise the nonhuman. In doing so, my focus is not primarily on analysing how the nonhuman might

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<sup>22</sup> Cary Wolfe, *Before the Law : Humans and Other Animals in a Biopolitical Frame* (Chicago ; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), pp. 18–19.

<sup>23</sup> Ralph R. Acampora, *Corporal Compassion : Animal Ethics and Philosophy of Body* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006); Stanley Cavell and others, *Philosophy and Animal Life* (New York ; Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2008); Anat Pick, *Creaturely Poetics : Animality and Vulnerability in Literature and Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

<sup>24</sup> Donna Jeanne Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, *Experimental Futures: Technological Lives, Scientific Arts, Anthropological Voices* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016); Thom Van Dooren, *Flight Ways : Life and Loss at the Edge of Extinction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), p. 5.

<sup>25</sup> Barbara J. King, *How Animals Grieve* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013); Jeffrey Masson and Susan McCarthy, *When Elephants Weep : The Emotional Lives of Animals*, New edition. (London: Vintage, 1996).

come to be understood as a lost object (although at times I do consider it in this way) or folded into communities of loss, but rather on attending to nonhuman textual presences as an interpretative problem. As such, I aim to explore how certain texts either enable or foreclose the possibility of taking nonhumans seriously in narratives of loss, and also try to seek out forms of analysis that push back against the tendency to erase nonhuman bodies which often characterises such stories. This is an important task, I argue, at a time when our contemporary moment is increasingly producing texts that are particularly concerned with imagining the relationship between loss and the nonhuman.

In bringing questions of interpretation to bear on the figure of the nonhuman as it appears in loss narratives, I do not assume interpretation to be a neutral term. As Robert McKay has noted in relation to textual animal bodies, by interpreting a text 'one must always consume and silence the animal that it is the text's apparent point to present.'<sup>26</sup> In trying to make space for nonhuman bodies in my analysis, then, I try to maintain a critical relationship to the kinds of interpretative modes that I suggest are able to accommodate the nonhuman, most specifically in the second section of this thesis where I address debates about interpretation in the field of trauma theory. This is particularly important because the texts that I choose to analyse here all exhibit an ambivalent relationship to the nonhuman, and as such part of my task in this thesis involves drawing attention to these often liminal presences in order to examine the ways they shape how loss is imagined in each text, whilst also trying to avoid flattening their meaning. Equally, I also aim to keep open the potential and varied meanings of 'loss'. In doing so, I follow Eng and Kazanjian by seeing 'loss' as naming 'what is apprehended by discourses and practices of mourning, melancholia, nostalgia, sadness, trauma, and depression' (p. 2). I find this particularly useful as a term because I see it as moving away from more specific practices of naming that have been developed with the

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<sup>26</sup> Robert McKay, 'BSE, Hysteria, and the Representation of Animal Death: Deborah Levy's Diary of a Steak', in *Killing Animals*, by The Animal Studies Group (Urbana: University of Illinois Press), p. 166.

human in mind (Freud's mourning and melancholia being a prime example of this). As such, I see it as a generous term able to envelop nonhuman relationships to loss as well as to recognise the inevitable intersections between the specific strands of experience that Eng and Kazanjian identify here.

This thesis draws on scholarly work that follows the challenge to the linguistically conceived subject set out by poststructuralism in further calling into question humanist ideas of sovereign subjectivity. In animal studies, for example, this has included intellectual projects like Jacques Derrida's that have sought to thicken and complicate the designation 'animal' and challenge the ways it is introduced as a limit to the human. Derrida instead advocates for a more heterogenous kind of thought that would 'envisage the existence of "living creatures," whose plurality cannot be assembled within the single figure of an animality that is simply opposed to humanity,'<sup>27</sup> and Matthew Calarco takes this project even further when he argues that 'the human-animal distinction can no longer and ought no longer to be maintained'.<sup>28</sup> Jane Bennett has taken a similar stance in arguing for a focus on the shared materiality of humans, animals, objects, and things as a means of ecological thinking that would minimize 'the difference between subjects and objects' in order to attribute agency to the nonhuman in the form of what she calls 'thing-power'.<sup>29</sup>

Yet, whilst Wolfe justifies the need to rework the human/animal distinction by noting its implication in oppressive structures that have used it as a 'discursive resource' in order to lopsidedly ascribe value to different lives, I do not follow him or others in aligning my work with the field of 'posthumanism.' This is because, as Zakiyyah Iman Jackson has

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<sup>27</sup> Jacques Derrida and Marie-Louise Mallet, *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), p. 47.

<sup>28</sup> Matthew Calarco, *Zoographies: The Question of the Animal from Heidegger to Derrida* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), p. 3.

<sup>29</sup> Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 13.

noted, it is important to ask ‘what and crucially *whose* conception of humanity are we moving beyond?’ For Jackson, calls to move beyond the human often ‘reintroduce the Eurocentric transcendentalism this movement purports to disrupt, particularly with regard to the historical and ongoing distributive ordering of race.’<sup>30</sup> Alexander G. Weheliye makes the same point in his brilliant discussion of the gaps in Michel Foucault’s and Giorgio Agamben’s theories of ‘biopolitics’ and ‘bare life’ from the perspective of black studies. He argues that questions of race, and specifically what he calls ‘racializing assemblages,’ should be at the heart of debates about human subjectivity and valued life, with racialization understood ‘not as a biological or cultural descriptor but as a conglomerate of socio-political relations that discipline humanity into full humans, not-quite-humans, and nonhumans.’<sup>31</sup> My work in this thesis is not about dissolving human/nonhuman difference, then, in the sense that I have described above, but rather takes as its central concern more general questions about the refiguration of subjectivity through loss, a problem I engage with specifically as it relates to colonialism and its legacies in Chapters One and Six. In this sense, I think of my project as operating in the way Erica Fudge suggests historical engagements with the figure of the animal should do when they refuse a humanist approach. ‘By refusing humanism, and, implicitly anthropocentrism,’ she writes, ‘we place ourselves next to the animals, rather than as the users of the animals.’<sup>32</sup> In line with this idea, my theorization of the nonhuman proceeds by examining the ways that nonhuman presences can be examined ‘next to’ those of humans in narratives of loss.

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<sup>30</sup> Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, ‘Outer Worlds: The Persistence of Race in Movement “Beyond the Human”’, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 21.2–3 (2015), 215–18 (p. 215).

Wolfe does just this when he states that ‘it is understandable of course, that traditionally marginalized peoples would be skeptical about calls by academic intellectuals to surrender the humanist model of subjectivity, with all its privileges, just at the moment when they are poised to “graduate” into it.’ (*Animal Rites*, p. 7).

<sup>31</sup> Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), p. 4.

<sup>32</sup> Erica Fudge, ‘A Left-Handed Blow: Writing the History of Animals’, in *Representing Animals*, ed. by Nigel Rothfels (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), pp. 3–18 (p. 15).

I have also found the concept of 'affect' exceptionally useful in undertaking this critical investigation, primarily because in thinking of loss as an affect I see it as able to trouble cognition in ways that allow encounters between human and nonhuman bodies to exceed or inhibit interpretation. In their introduction to *The Affect Theory Reader*, Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg describe affect as arising 'in the midst of *in-between-ness*: in the capacities to act and be acted on', a formulation I find particularly valuable for my work here in the sense that it allows for an analysis of encounter and relationality that is not premised on the prior fixing of subjectivity.<sup>33</sup> As such, to think of experiences of loss in terms of affect is already to be in a relation to loss that is expansive enough to allow space for the nonhuman. A foregrounding of affect works to redress some of the more rigid intellectual structures of psychoanalytic thought, (my approach to which I will end with here).

Critical approaches that use psychoanalysis now commonly recognise it as, in Linda Ruth Williams' words, 'interdependent with the cultural forms it is often said simply to inform.'<sup>34</sup> In this thesis I treat psychoanalytic work on mourning, melancholia, and trauma as textual in this way. That is, I read these diagnostic categories as cultural formations, and an analysis of their workings extends across all of the chapters in this thesis. I also see this critical approach to psychoanalysis as necessary because, as Stephen Frosh points out, it has 'ambitions to be a 'general' theory'', with this drive toward universal validity giving it something of a "colonising' tendency.'<sup>35</sup> It is this propensity, I would suggest, that ties the conclusions and structures of psychoanalysis so closely to the Eurocentric humanism in which it has its historical roots, and which also make its

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<sup>33</sup> Melissa Gregg, *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham, NC ; London: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 1.

<sup>34</sup> Linda Ruth Williams, *Critical Desire : Psychoanalysis and the Literary Subject* (London ; New York: E. Arnold, 1995), p. 1.

<sup>35</sup> Stephen Frosh, *Psychoanalysis Outside the Clinic : Interventions in Psychosocial Studies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 17.

theories of loss overdue for an analysis that would acknowledge the place of the disavowed nonhuman in this thought.

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This thesis is organised into two sections, divided thematically and also by the particular instances of loss that they address. Both of these sections take as their broad theme a troubled site in contemporary thought that I see as having relevance to the questions of subjectivity and relationality that necessarily grow out of an analysis of loss. In Section One this theme is global ecological crisis, with a specific focus on extinction, and in Section Two it is the discourse around borders that has emerged most strongly post-9/11. These themes function as a means of loosely grouping the texts in each section together with regard to their global and political context, and are addressed only indirectly in the work that follows. Instead, the more important organisational principle of these two sections is the particular formation of loss that each addresses, conceived as presenting an example of the hanging on/letting go opposition that I have suggested characterises loss narratives. Section One focuses on mourning and melancholia, and Section Two on trauma, with Section One exploring the nonhuman attachments that are opened up in narratives that engage with mourning and melancholia, and Section Two looking at the ways that such attachments might be maintained in a set of linked readings that investigates the relationship between trauma theory, interpretation, and hospitality.

Chapters One, Two, and Three focus on theorising some of the different ways that melancholic attachment might come to involve the nonhuman. In Chapter One I read Peter Carey's novel *The Chemistry of Tears* (2013) as an example of melancholic 'critical agency', bringing the text into dialogue with new materialist work that seeks to extend agency to nonhuman objects and 'things.' In Chapter Two, the only chapter in which I do not look at a literary text, I analyse de-extinction projects as a



melancholic cultural formation, examining how Freud's later insight that melancholic attachments form the basis of subjectivity might be extended to include the nonhuman. Concluding this section, Chapter Three turns to theories of queer negativity that reject futurity in order to investigate the ways that human children and endangered/extinct animals come to be figured as precarious subjects in two novels, *The Hunter* by Julia Leigh (2001), and *A Child's Book of True Crime* by Chloe Hooper (2002).

In Chapter Four I turn to an analysis of trauma theory in order to explore how attachments to the nonhuman, once opened up, might be continued. This chapter sets out the project of the second section of my thesis, which is to conduct a set of three linked readings that examine how hospitable contemporary trauma texts are to nonhuman presences; specifically spectral animals. In order to set out the critical context for these readings, Chapter Four gives a theoretical overview of interpretative debates in trauma theory, demonstrating how these can be understood to replicate the hanging on/letting go conflict that characterises mourning and melancholia in the ways that they oppose working-through to aporia. This chapter ends with a brief reading of Evie Wyld's novel *All the Birds, Singing* (2014) as a depiction of PTSD. Chapter Five engages with Roberto Esposito's work on immunity in order to read Suzanne Berne's novel *The Dogs of Littlefield* (2014) as a trauma narrative that ironically figures working-through as a means of reinforcing bounded subjects. Finally, in Chapter Six I conduct an extended reading of Fiona McFarlane's *The Night Guest* (2014), which I suggest is able to remain hospitable to nonhuman presences due to its refusal to either work through or negate their meaning.

## Chapter One

### **‘Any who sees the truth will be called mad’: Melancholic Critical Agency in *The Chemistry of Tears***

#### **Introduction**

Let us dwell for a moment on the view which the melancholic’s disorder affords of the constitution of the human ego. We see how in him one part of the ego sets itself over against the other, judges it critically, and, as it were, takes it as its object. Our suspicion that the critical agency which is here split off from the ego might also show its independence in other circumstances will be confirmed by every future observation. We shall really find grounds for distinguishing this agency from the rest of the ego. What we are here becoming acquainted with is the agency commonly called ‘conscience’; we shall count it, along with the censorship of consciousness and reality-testing, among the major institutions of the ego [...].

Freud, *Mourning and Melancholia*, (1917 [1915])

This chapter examines Peter Carey’s exploration of grief, *The Chemistry of Tears* (2010), in the context of melancholic ‘critical agency’. I bring together theoretical perspectives on mourning and melancholia alongside some thoughts from the relatively recent area of theory known as ‘new materialism’, a branch of criticism that seeks to displace the centrality of the human by focusing on the different kinds of agency that may be at work in ‘things’. I argue that bringing some contemporary critical

interpretations of mourning and melancholia into dialogue with new materialism invites reflection on the ways that grief might extend beyond and disrupt the realm of the human. Specifically, I argue that Carey's novel situates melancholic critical agency (which Freud saw as a kind of conscience) as reorienting vision in order to open up perspectives on how ideas of subjectivity might be distributed or withheld, so that grieving subjects might be able to imagine and enact new ethical relationships with humans, nonhumans, or even 'things'.

Carey's novel follows the horologist Catherine Gehrig as she grieves the sudden death of her lover, Matthew. At the same time, she works on restoring a nineteenth century swan automaton modelled after Jacques Vaucanson's 1739 duck automata. In the process of the restoration her twenty-first century world is merged with the nineteenth century one of the automaton's commissioner, Sir Henry Brandling, whose diaries are included with the machine. The text conducts an extended examination and critique of what might be called the boundaries of life; that is, the ways in which different bodies come to be understood as variously living, nonliving, dead or somewhere in between, as well as the ways these bodies or 'things' might be understood to exhibit agency, drawing on scientific and cultural anxieties about the animate and inanimate that can be traced from the creation of Vaucanson's duck automata to the present day. In asking these questions against a backdrop of grief, the text demonstrates how ideas about 'who' or 'what' counts as a subject are also irrevocably tied to the ways that certain bodies become grievable whilst others do not. As such, my reading of this text brings together theories of mourning and melancholia alongside new materialist work that seeks to understand the networks of relationships that work to produce certain subjects as more animate, or lively, than others.

## I. Critical Agency

For Freud, the evidence that a melancholic reaction to loss saw the birth of a 'critical agency' within the psyche was to be found in the tendency to self-beratement he posited as characteristic of melancholia. The melancholic, Freud wrote in 1917 in *Mourning and Melancholia*, 'represents his ego to us as worthless, incapable of any achievement and morally despicable; he reproaches himself, vilifies himself, and expects to be cast out and punished.'<sup>36</sup> These reproaches against the self, Freud theorised, occurred as a result of the melancholic's identification with their lost love object, toward which they had previously held an ambivalent relation. As such, feelings of hatred or rage aimed at the lost object became necessarily turned against the melancholic's own ego, now identified with that object. In order for this to happen, Freud surmised, it was necessary for the ego to go through a process of splitting, so that one part of it (the 'critical agency') became able to set itself against and judge the other. He identified this critical part as one of the major institutions of the ego: conscience.

Writing a few years later, in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, Freud referred again to this melancholic splitting, whereby the ego becomes 'divided, fallen into two pieces, one of which rages against the second.'<sup>37</sup> This first piece of ego, full of rage, he described as 'not unknown to us' and comprising 'the conscience, a critical faculty within the ego, which even in normal times takes up a critical attitude towards the ego, though never so relentlessly and unjustifiably' (pp. 68-9). He goes on to associate this critical faculty of conscience with the concept of the ego ideal that he had first written about in his 1914 paper *On Narcissism*, understood as both an individual and social ideal of perfection against which the ego must be constantly measured. Conscience, he had suggested, might be the psychic agency doing that measuring, and in *Group*

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<sup>36</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', p. 246.

<sup>37</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, The International Psycho-Analytical Library ; no.6 (London: Hogarth Press : Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1922), p. 68.

*Psychology* he formalised this idea through the topographical image of the split ego, with the ego ideal the first 'piece' of ego, set against the second piece 'which contains the lost object' (p.68).

Finally in 1923 in *The Ego and the Id* Freud revisited his work on mourning and melancholia once more. In this later paper, he associated the ego ideal with a new term: the super-ego. Whilst Freud still understood the super-ego to be an agency of conscience, in this new paper he associated this agency with a kind of domination over the ego, one that reinforced its adherence to social norms in the former manner of the person's parents.

As a child grows up, the role of father is carried on by teachers and others in authority; their injunctions and prohibitions remain powerful in the ego ideal and continue, in the form of conscience, to exercise the moral censorship. The tension between the demands of the conscience and the actual performances of the ego is experienced as a sense of guilt.<sup>38</sup>

It is apparent, then, that whilst always remaining a psychic institution associated with morality or ethics, the concept of melancholic 'critical agency' as Freud understood it transformed over time. In *Mourning and Melancholia* he linked this critical agency to the undoing of social norms in the sense that it manifested in erratic behaviour on the part of the melancholic person, whose insistence on publicly voicing their sense of moral failure was described by Freud as an 'insistent communicativeness which finds satisfaction in self-exposure.' In his opinion, the workings of this critical agency were evidence that the person's conscience had become 'diseased' (p.247). However, when this concept of critical agency evolved first into that of the ego ideal, and then later the super-ego, it took on more of a normative function. Freud now understood it as a crucial

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<sup>38</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'The Ego and the Id', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud. Volume XIX (1923-1925) The Ego and the Id and Other Works* (London: Vintage, 2001), pp. 1-66 (p. 37).

component of the ego, deployed, it seems, in the service of social control by psychically enforcing the 'injunctions and prohibitions' instituted by authority figures.

Yet recently both Ranjana Khanna and Judith Butler have sought to rehabilitate what might be considered the more radical aspects of melancholic critical agency as envisaged by Freud. Khanna is quite explicit about how such a project of rehabilitation stands in relation to the history of the concept in Freud's work.

If Freud would eventually transfer the critical agency found in melancholia into the normalizing function of the superego, I would salvage it, putting the melancholic's manic critical agency into the unworking of conformity, and into the critique of the status quo.<sup>39</sup>

Whilst for Khanna this critical agency retains its association with morality, the ethical project to which it contributes is the disruption of repressive authoritarian structures, rather than the reification of them. Her argument is made in the context of her own discipline, postcolonial studies, where she argues for colonial melancholia as a critical reading practice that makes visible 'the psychical strife of colonial and postcolonial modernity' (p.x). Furthermore, Khanna rejects the view of melancholia as a 'disabling affect', arguing instead that its critical agency provides 'an ethico-political gesture toward the future.'<sup>40</sup> The radical potential of critical agency, which she theorises as a remainder unassimilable to the normalizing project of the super-ego, means that it seeks to undo rather than perpetuate 'social mechanisms of control' ('Post-Palliative', npn).

Similarly, in her recent work Butler has argued for understanding the rage that the critical agency turns back against the self as signalling a dissatisfaction with and push-back against certain forms of social power, so that 'we might well ask whether the situation in which the ego is, as it

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<sup>39</sup> Khanna, *Dark Continents*, p. 23.

<sup>40</sup> Ranjana Khanna, 'Post-Palliative: Coloniality's Affective Dissonance', *Postcolonial Text*, 2.1 (2005), n.p.. <<http://www.postcolonial.org/index.php/pct/article/view/385>> [accessed 10 May 2017].

were, berated by the ideal is not the inversion of a prior situation in which the ego would, if it could, have berated the ideal' (*Psychic Life of Power*, p.185). Specifically, Butler sees the violent actions of the critical agency upon the ego as related to the hidden origin of loss in melancholia, the 'object-loss withdrawn from consciousness' to which Freud attributed the melancholic response (*Mourning and Melancholia*, p.245). For Butler, however, the opacity of loss in melancholia (and the violent reaction it engenders in the conscience) is produced not by individual pathology but rather by a societal distribution and management of the grievable; what she calls the 'social foreclosure of grief'. She draws attention to the ways that 'forms of social power emerge that regulate what losses will and will not be grieved', and suggests that lost objects that beget a melancholic response may have been situated as un-grievable in this way (p.183).

In this chapter I will follow both Khanna and Butler in exploring the ways that melancholic critical agency might be understood as potentially subversive. In doing so I take a particular insight from each of these theorists. Firstly, I am interested in the 'unworking of conformity' Khanna suggests appears as a function of this critical agency, and specifically in this word 'unworking.' I apply this in the chapter that follows by paying attention to the ways that Carey's novel presents a critical melancholic gaze as focused on taking things apart in order to expose the historical-relational processes that have brought them into being. As such, I situate the melancholic in this text as maintaining a questioning relationship to losses that might be hidden or disavowed. In order to make this case, I focus on explicating the ways in which such an 'unworking' process can be seen at work in *The Chemistry of Tears*. I do this firstly in relation to time, drawing on theoretical material that proposes a connection between melancholia and asynchronicity, and secondly more literally with regard to the sense in which Carey's use of 'steampunk' tropes focuses attention on the visible workings of mechanical objects.

Following on from this, I take Butler's insight that the violent actions of the critical agency may gesture toward socially prohibited losses

in order to examine the ways that Carey's text asks questions about which losses become grievable, at what times, and for whom. Whereas Butler's analysis focuses on the human, and in particular on the relationship between melancholia, gender, and sexuality, I expand this enquiry here in order to think through the ways that grievability extends beyond a reified idea of the human and is related to questions about 'who' or 'what' gets granted subjectivity in the first place. In doing so, I engage with the theoretical field of new materialism in order to draw out some of the ways in which nonhuman bodies, objects, and things might be understood as exhibiting the same kind of 'material vitality' as humans (Bennett). My ultimate aim in this chapter is to theorise this new materialist work alongside the 'unworking' of vision that I argue is brought about through the action of critical melancholic agency. I do this in order to suggest that a recognition of human/nonhuman mutual enmeshment should remain attentive to the oppressive structures that have historically allowed certain bodies to emerge as lively whilst leaving others exposed to death.

## II. 'Normal' Mourning

As will have become apparent, the analysis of *The Chemistry of Tears* that I present here is reliant on upholding and working with a distinction between mourning and melancholia that is perhaps no longer relevant. In *The Psychic Life of Power*, the same text in which she posits melancholia as a symptom of the stratification of grievable life, Butler argues persuasively for the ultimate inseparability of the two terms, claiming 'there is no final separation of mourning from melancholia' and Freud's attempts to distinguish them are 'challenged not only in his own essay by that name, but explicitly in *The Ego and the Id*' (p.193). For Butler, Freud ultimately came to understand a melancholic reaction to loss as constitutive of subjectivity, rather than pathological, acknowledging in *The Ego and the Id* that identification with a lost object was in fact a 'common and typical' reaction to loss.



Butler's analysis, however, follows Freud's own in focusing on processes of mourning and melancholia as they occur psychically; that is, as they operate internally within the ego. Therefore, although Butler is interested in the social in the sense that she sees melancholic loss as reflecting and drawing attention to social restrictions that govern the grievable, her focus is on the ways in which these foreclosures, and the melancholic reactions they engender, establish and maintain subjectivity. As such, melancholia and mourning are able to converge in her analysis because she works from the inside out. By this I mean that although she sees the melancholic action of identification with the lost object, and the disavowed rage this causes, as symptomatic of the kinds of social injustice that sees some lives valued differently to others, she still assumes that melancholia (and mourning) are relatively stable concepts. As such, she understands a melancholic reaction to loss as inhabiting a kind of psychic reality whereby changes to the ego occur within the subject as a result of their identification with the lost object, with these changes then being expressed outwardly in the form of visible behaviours that are reflective of the topographical changes that have occurred internally. This is in contrast, for example, to the work of Sara Ahmed, who understands melancholia as a diagnostic tool imposed onto a grieving subject (from the outside in) rather than as expressive of any real psychic changes occurring within that subject.

The distinction between good and bad ways of dealing with loss survives at the level of cultural diagnosis. The melancholic may appear *as a figure* insofar as we recognize the melancholic as the one who "holds onto" an object that has been lost, who does not let go, or get over loss by getting over it (*Promise of Happiness*, p.139).

In contrast to Butler, then, Ahmed suggests that melancholia is only able to appear as such when it is contrasted to mourning. Her work focuses on the affective communities that are 'produced by sharing objects of loss', which also means 'letting objects go in the right way' (p.141). This work of collective mourning, or collective letting-go, produces melancholics as

'affect aliens' who have failed to move on from loss in this way. For my purposes here, the important thing that Ahmed's work makes clear is that it matters less how mourning and melancholia might be distinguished (or not) at a psychic level (i.e. in the way that Butler and Freud theorise) because ultimately a diagnosis of mourning or melancholia – or 'normal' or 'pathological' – is made socially. Therefore even if the process as it would be understood psychoanalytically unfolds in the same way within the psyche (identification with an object, incorporation of that object), diagnoses of mourning or melancholia are decided externally depending on the way that the behaviours of the grieving person are received in the world. Although Carey never uses the psychoanalytic terms 'mourning' or 'melancholia' in his text, it is clear that he is interested in the cultural diagnoses of loss that Ahmed suggest ultimately maintain a separation between these two states. In order for melancholia and its critical agency to emerge as not only ethically productive but also radical in its orientation to loss, Carey juxtaposes it against a 'normal' model of mourning, imposed from the outside in and presented as socially appropriate in just the terms that Ahmed describes. He shows this primarily through the complex and changeable relationship between the protagonist of the novel, Catherine Gehrig, and her manager and friend Eric Croft.

Catherine is a horologist working at the Swinburne Museum, a fictional institution that closely resembles the Victoria & Albert. The novel begins in London, 2010, and we meet her as she finds out that Matthew, her lover of thirteen years, has died suddenly after suffering a heart attack on the tube. Their relationship has always been a secret one. Matthew is married, and as he also works at the Swinburne Museum Catherine isn't able to discuss her grief with anyone that knew him. It is apparent that she has few friends, her affair with Matthew having been the main, perhaps only relationship in her life. The one person who apparently has been (unbeknownst to Catherine) aware of the affair is Eric Croft, the head curator of the horology department, who immediately assigns her to a new

project in the museum's private Annexe which involves the restoration of a nineteenth century swan automaton modelled on Jacques Vaucanson's grain-eating duck. When Catherine begins reading a set of notebooks that are included with this machinery, she becomes involved in the story of their author, Sir Henry Brandling, the commissioner of the automaton, which he intends to be a cure for his critically ill young son.

Catherine's assignment to this new project is explicitly situated by Eric as a curative measure: "I thought you might like to know that there is a future. Perhaps you should peek at the object that will be waiting for you when you finally come back to work."<sup>41</sup> Her labour will be a form of working-through, a process of libidinal detachment from Matthew and reattachment to her new love object: the swan automaton and its fabulous story. She will be a mourner, not a melancholic. Catherine is initially resistant to and bewildered by the task she has been given, with all the connotations of fixing, healing, patching up and repairing which so overtly mimic a process of mourning work that she feels estranged from and opposed to. Her eventual agreement to the project (which is also a partial acceptance of the imperative to mourn 'normally') is brought about predominantly because of social pressure from Eric. When she initially refuses his offer to work on the swan, his reaction changes her mind.

I saw the blood rising from his collar. He was cross with me. How could he be?

And then in the stinging focus of his gaze I understood that he had pulled a lot of strings, had pissed off a lot of people in order to get the backstreet girl set up where her emotions would not show. He was looking after me for Matthew, but for the museum as well (p.16).

As will be the case throughout the novel, Catherine modifies her emotional behaviour in response to being reminded of the uneven power dynamic that exists between her and Eric, with this being expressed particularly

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<sup>41</sup> Peter Carey, *The Chemistry of Tears* (London: Faber and Faber, 2012), p. 12.

through his position as a representative of her elite workplace. As such, Eric effectively manages Catherine's affective responses in the same way that he oversees her work at the museum, and he situates the imperative for her to mourn well (that is, privately, without interruption of labour) as necessary to the museum's successful functioning. The swan automaton, Eric hopes, will become a 'profit centre' for the museum, and the project of mourning that will see Catherine choose this mechanical beast as a new love object is simultaneously a necessary and useful expenditure of labour that benefits the Swinburne financially. Mourning 'normally', then, also appears here as a way of maintaining worker efficiency.

Further to this, however, Eric also animates the museum into a desiring entity. Catherine has to work privately in the Annexe building, he says, because they 'must placate the edifice', a turn of phrase that suggests there is a sacrificial element to Catherine's withdrawal from the main museum building. 'The museum' as an idea is used here as a kind of governing principle standing in for social power and the norms of affective behaviour that this requires. This 'edifice' demands that Catherine be exiled from within its walls until she has completed her mourning process – the restoration of the automaton – after which she may rejoin the sphere of the social; or, more specifically, the main museum community. Indeed, in the closing pages of the novel when the restored swan is 'on BBC and CNN and television sets around the world', Catherine is rewarded by Eric with dinner at the Ivy ('fabulous flinty Chablis and oysters') her adherence to the needs of the edifice having granted her not only re-entry to the social but also introduction to a scene of particular privilege. In part, Catherine accepts her social banishment as appropriate, if not necessarily desirable, and her grief is predominantly enclosed by small and restrictive spaces: the Annexe; the tube; her room at home; a taxi; a rented room at a nearby pub. She is equally intent on completing the restoration without disruption, and even though her reading of Henry's diaries reveals the possibility that the automaton may be carrying a secret, she refuses to yield to repeated requests from her assistant to investigate this possibility

further by x-raying the nineteenth-century chassis that holds the machine's mechanism.

Henry Brandling's diaries show that there are many convergences between his situation and Catherine's own. For them both, the automaton promises to be an object of recovery, a future-oriented object, just as mourning is a future-oriented process, moving forward toward healing and completion. Also for them both, being in proximity to the automaton requires a kind of looking away, a refusal to engage with or seek to uncover the secrets that may quite literally live within its mechanism. Henry has commissioned the automaton in the hope that it will enchant his critically ill young son Percy back to health. In order to do so he has travelled from England to Karlsruhe in Germany to seek out a clockmaker expert enough to build a copy of Jacques Vaucanson's famous duck automaton, notorious at the time of its creation for its apparent ability to eat grain and then promptly defecate. Henry's relationship with his wife is in tatters, and he has embarked on the expedition mainly due to her insistence that he travel away from their marital home. When he finally reaches Karlsruhe he is laughed at and thought strange by the various people he meets, most of whom are unable to understand him. Eventually, he encounters the 'giant' Sumper, who along with his female companion Frau Helga and her son, Carl, insists on transporting Henry to the isolated village of Furtwangen where he vows to construct the automaton to Henry's specifications.

Although Henry's son is still living when he leaves home, he becomes less and less certain that this is the case after receiving no communication from either Percy or his wife. Just as Eric hopes will be the case for Catherine, the automaton becomes Henry's replacement love object, identified, as it is for Eric and Catherine, with the promise of recovery. Henry is intent on remaining distant from the supernatural goings-on involving his companions and their relationship to the automaton and its construction, which he soon learns, contrary to his wishes, will be a swan rather than a duck. Unlike Eric, who encourages

Catherine to abstain from investigating the automaton and its secrets, Sumper is enraged by Henry's refusal to question some of the strange objects and events that he encounters. These are many: copper cables running from the roof of the mill house where the workshop is located into the surrounding earth; the young Carl playing with a makeshift battery that reanimates a dead mouse; the appearance of a 'tiny engine' with one large and one small wheel. Whilst Catherine understands these things to be anachronistic, Henry simply dismisses them, his main concern being that they take time away from the manufacture of his duck.

Sumper is inspired in his mission to build the automaton by his London mentor, Sir Albert Cruickshank, whose life and inventions (the mathematical 'Cruickshank engine') are clearly based on those of Charles Babbage and his analytical 'Difference' engine. Sumper refers to Cruickshank as a 'Superior Being' and reads to Henry from his book '*Mysterium Tremendum*,' which appears to be an account of a visit to another realm or planet, inhabited by "creatures far superior to any idea your human imagination can conceive" (p.170). To look upon these beings, Cruickshank suggests, is to refigure the very nature of seeing, to find oneself "in the same state as a fly whose microscopic eye has been changed to one similar to a man's" (p.170). This, Sumper suggests, is the position Henry also finds himself in, suffering from a 'blindness' that prevents him seeing what he has already judged to be 'impossible' (p.153).

As the passage above makes clear, seeing (or not-seeing) is associated in the text with limitations to human vision, not only in the sense that there might be (and indeed is) a practical limit on what the 'normal' human eye is able to perceive, but also in terms of the willed blindness that comes into play when the centrality of a certain kind of humanness in the order of things is called into question. For both Henry and Catherine, the automaton and its potential secrets threaten just such a disruption. In the present day, however, Catherine's eagerness to look away from the machine she is building is troubled by her proximity to a melancholic who insists on retaining a questioning relationship to the

hidden and lost, a relationship that prioritises 'unworking' over recovery and repair.

### III. Amanda Snyder

I can't say how unusual it is when you find a young conservator with this degree of will. I saw it would now be my job, not only to reconstruct the swan, but to harness all this dangerous energy (p.20).

So says Catherine when she begins work with her new assistant, the young and brilliant Amanda Snyder. Whereas Catherine, fascinated as she is with Henry's diaries, is inclined to a scepticism similar to Henry's regarding Sumner's grand claims ('I could not possibly accept that Cruickshank was a superior being or that animals might have a higher mental life'), Amanda becomes obsessed with the wooden hull that formerly housed the mechanism of the swan, believing that it contains a dark secret (p.201). As is apparent from the utterance above, Catherine believes it is necessary to manage (or 'harness') Amanda's affective responses, just as Eric has done in her own case. This leads to a battle of wills between the two women, with Amanda pushing Catherine to x-ray the wooden hull and reveal anything that might be held inside.

Amanda is also grieving. Every day, Catherine discovers, she watches live webcam footage of oil flooding into the waters of the Gulf of Mexico after the explosion of the Deepwater Horizon drilling rig. The distant origins of this contemporary oil spill, Amanda believes, are to be found in the automaton's wooden hull, which she considers to be 'a kind of wooden horse whose double skin had been produced to smuggle [...] the 'secrets' of an internal combustion engine' (p.268). The components of this engine were planted, Amanda insists, by 'ghosts, fabulous beings' intent on destroying humankind, the machinery having been unwittingly transported to England by Henry Brandling in the hull of his automaton.

Although Catherine is aggrieved as well as unnerved by Amanda's claims, they also affect her in more complex ways. She feels an 'awful chill' when Amanda suggests the contents of the hull might be 'totally anachronistic', and is similarly sickened by the webcam images of the oil spill, which she goes home and watches 'for hours on end' (pp.206, 162). She describes the disaster as 'an 'accident' in inverted commas, and it leads her to reflect on the relationship between the oil spill and all the 'bright and poisonous invention' that Henry has described in his diaries (p.164). In contrast, Eric Croft is intent on denying any weight or urgency to Amanda's grief ('there was a big feature in *Slate* [...] about the psychological damage caused by the oil spill. Her feelings are normal. She's upset.') as well as specifically situating her affective responses as symptoms of an illness that might be managed medically (p.210). He describes Amanda's time spent watching the webcam of the oil spill as an 'addiction', and when she strikes Catherine after being denied an x-ray of the hull, Eric puts it down to 'a mess-up at Boots, apparently. [...] Now she has her pills again, she's fine' (p.236). In this way, Eric situates Amanda's affective responses to both the oil spill and the automaton as pathological, suggesting that they might qualify as symptoms of melancholia's more contemporary heir, depression.<sup>42</sup> Once again, Eric's description of Amanda works at the level of cultural diagnosis to identify good and bad ways of responding to loss, even down to the fact that his analysis of Amanda's behaviour is drawn straight from a *Slate* article. Both Eric and Catherine are able to diagnose Amanda's behaviour as pathological because the site of loss she identifies – the internal combustion engine hidden within the automaton – is understood by them both to be, quite literally, empty.

For Freud, neither melancholics nor those around them are able to 'see clearly' what has been lost. This suggests, he argues, that the object-loss suffered is 'withdrawn from consciousness', as opposed to mourning, where 'nothing about the loss [...] is unconscious' (*Mourning and Melancholia*, p.245). Ahmed sums this up bluntly: for Freud, melancholics

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<sup>42</sup> For more on this see Darian Leader: *The New Black: Mourning, Melancholia and Depression*



'do not know what they are missing' (*Promise of Happiness*, p.140). The point she makes about this claim is that it involves a judgment made by others who are not able to see, or share in, the object that has been lost.

To read others as melancholic would be to read their attachments as death-wishes, as attachments to things that are already dead. To diagnose melancholia would become a way of declaring that their love objects are dead. Others would be judged as melancholic because they have failed to give up on objects that we have declared dead *on their behalf*. The diagnosis of melancholia would thus involve an ethical injunction or moral duty: the other must let go by declaring the objects that we declare dead as being dead in the way that we declare (p.141).

In Ahmed's terms, then, the sustained and struggling relationship with the lost object that characterises melancholia is only made visible as such because other members of an affective community do not share the loss; that is to say, they have let it go. In *The Chemistry of Tears* a melancholic response to loss is reframed as an imperative to understand certain losses as empty or absent. In other words, other members of the affective community understand the loss being grieved by the melancholic as necessarily unavailable to consciousness because, rather than having taken place and then 'let go', they would deny that it ever took place at all. Amanda's attachment to and engagement with the automaton and its history is understood to be a melancholic one because the loss she identifies as having occurred (the Industrial Revolution weaponised as a means of ensuring human species death) counteracts an Enlightenment narrative that sees this historical moment as an affirmation, not unravelling, of the human. In Amanda's version the human is completely decentred, humanity's perceived agency in this age of invention revealed to be as mechanical as the engines it brought into being. This vision is described in an extract Amanda claims to have come from Henry Brandling's diary, but which Catherine decides she must have written herself.

And the filth shall spew forth from the depths, like black bile, like gall, and the ocean shall be as a mother giving wormwood from her breasts. The truth will be like a razor no tongue dare touch. A multitude of idiots shall flee back and forth on rivers of tar, an awful honking like generations of geese. [...] The cruel famines, the drought – all will be enigma and injustice. And any who sees the truth will be called mad. Is it you unlucky woman? Then you will be stoned and thrown into a moat.

*Mysterium Tremendum.* There were ghosts, fabulous beings, but they were our enemies and we died, not knowing what had happened, all and every one (p.270).

In this apocalyptic vision, given in biblical terms, humans are ‘idiots’ speaking a language as unintelligible as the ‘honking’ of geese, killed ‘all and every one’ by the intervention of the fabulous beings both Amanda and Sumper believe in. Amanda’s attachment to the automaton’s hull and its secrets is conceived by those around her as a kind of madness, not because the present-day effects of the Industrial Revolution (the oil spill, climate change, mass extinction) are denied as sites of grief – on the contrary, Catherine in particular is as troubled and moved by these as Amanda is – but because her narrative of loss decentres the human. The hull must necessarily be empty of the kind of machine Amanda envisages might lie within because, rather than having been ‘declared dead,’ the kind of story she wants to tell about ‘superior beings’ should not exist at all. It is a misunderstanding, an error, an imaginative madness: there is nothing to be found here.

Amanda’s attachment to this narrative of murderous ‘supreme beings’ has a particular relationship, then, to visibility and ways of seeing. The diary extract reminds us of the way that the melancholic, with their problematic attachment to a lost object not shared as such by their affective community, is understood as seeing the world differently – that

is, as seeing things that aren't there. In the apocalyptic times to come, the diary explains, 'any who sees the truth will be called mad'. Amanda labours throughout the text to flag up the automaton as a site of loss that she believes to have been mistakenly identified as empty, and the text explores this idea in literal terms through Amanda and Catherine's fierce disagreement over whether the large hull should be x-rayed. Therefore in *The Chemistry of Tears* melancholic critical agency presents a drive to make loss visible, primarily through persistent work that seeks to show that a site or object of loss has been hidden, or kept secret. In this sense, Freud's suggestion that melancholic object-loss is 'withdrawn from consciousness' can be refigured in more radical terms. The melancholic struggle which asks questions about the identity or specificity of that which has been lost (the validity of which is always decided, as Ahmed has shown, from outside) can instead be understood as the productive identification of a site of conflict, a site where loss is contested or suppressed in some way.

In *The Chemistry of Tears*, then, melancholic attachment means maintaining a questioning relationship to loss, a relationship that asks both the melancholic and those who would diagnose them as such to *look again*. This involves the taking apart of objects both literally (the proposed x-ray of the hull) and via reading practices that would seek to expose the historical and cultural workings of these same objects. This happens primarily in two ways; firstly, by reimagining the relationship between certain objects, loss and time, and secondly by contesting the limits of human vision in order to challenge the idea that visibility, or the visible, might have an unproblematic relationship to truth.

#### **IV. Time**

Carey's novel is animated by questions about time, particularly regarding the ways that it might be measured or experienced. Catherine, of course, is a horologist, and as such her day-to-day work focuses on the maintenance

and repair of clocks, a family occupation first taken up by her grandfather and then her father. The fact that this family tradition began as a patriarchal one gestures to the fact that clocks in the text are identified with conservatism; indeed Catherine is the first female horologist the museum has ever had and as such is viewed as something of a 'freak' (p.4). Michelle Bastian points out that the association of clocks with the maintenance of the status quo is a common one across various cultural forms, where 'the clock continues to symbolise capitalist forms of control and domination, as well as the constraining of progressive impulses more generally.'<sup>43</sup> For Bastian, Western philosophical inquiries focusing on the nature of time have also tended to portray clocks as devices that 'obscure more complex understandings of time' because they are understood as focusing on a linear progression that does not represent the authenticity of lived experience (p.8). In this sense, there is an element of cruelty present in cultural representations of clock time. As Bastian puts it:

Their relentlessly turning hands have become a familiar way of representing the cruel disconnects between the 'time of experience' and the 'time of the world' – the hand that continues on even though a loved one has died, refuses to pause when we are late, or rebuffs plans to skip ahead when we are anxiously waiting (pp.9-10).

This viewpoint on clock time is certainly represented in the novel. For Catherine, the steady ticking of clocks that had previously always been a source of comfort torments her now that Matthew is dead, culminating in her putting three of them inside her fridge at home, a 'frightening' decision that she sees as 'an extremely violent act (p.147). 'I had spent my entire life foolishly seduced by ticking clocks,' she explains, 'never bothering to hear the horror underneath (p.148). In losing Matthew, Catherine has found herself out of synch with clock time as she has always understood it. In this sense, she inhabits a new kind of temporality, a melancholic time governed by loss.

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<sup>43</sup> Michelle Bastian, 'Liberating Clocks: Developing a Critical Horology to Rethink the Potential of Clock Time (Forthcoming)', *New Formations*, p. 2.

Eng and Kazanjian identify an ongoing engagement with the past as one of the defining features of melancholia as Freud originally conceptualises it. They oppose this to the same relationship in mourning, where they argue the past is declared 'resolved, finished and dead' Melancholia's relation to the past, in contrast, is 'ongoing and open' and leads to an ethically productive 'continuous engagement with loss and its remains' (*Loss*, p.4). Similarly, Martin Middeke and Christina Wald identify a 'sense of temporal difference' as one of two seminal manifestations of melancholic loss (the other being object loss). This comes about, they argue, as a result of a kind of awakening to the reality of the loss of one's own life, so that a loss of time occurs in addition to a loss of object.<sup>44</sup> Ahmed also describes this effect in spatial terms, suggesting that the failure of the melancholic to 'get over' loss leaves them 'facing the wrong way', with the consequence of this being that they must be 'redirected, or turned around' (p.141). As is apparent, then, melancholia is commonly understood to coincide with a sense of temporal asynchronicity in the sense that the melancholic imagines and experiences different ways of being in as well as out of (clock) time.

Bastian, however, draws attention to the ways that Western clock time is produced rather than existing as an objective, eternal truth, suggesting that telling the time by a clock should be understood as a statement of faith, rather than of fact.<sup>45</sup> Rather than flowing without interruption, Bastian argues that clock time is subject to 'gaps and breaks' (*Liberating Clocks*, p.9).

Clocks are late, they are fast and they can fail to match up with each other. We change them when we shift time zones, for daylight saving time (DST) or even when we just want to trick ourselves into getting up earlier. Further, clocks do not represent a single line of time. The

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<sup>44</sup> M. (Martin) Middeke and Christina Wald, *The Literature of Melancholia : Early Modern to Postmodern* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, UK ; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 4.

<sup>45</sup> Michelle Bastian, 'Fatally Confused: Telling the Time in the Midst of Ecological Crises', *Journal of Environmental Philosophy*, 9.1 (2012), 23–48.

time that we currently call clock time is Universal Coordinated Time (UTC) which is itself derived from an effort to coordinate two other time standards, namely International Atomic Time (TAI) and Universal Time (UT1). Along with others such as GPS Time (GPST), these time standards produce different kinds of time that are derived from different phenomena, flow in different ways and do not always match up (p.10).

The consequence of this, Bastian explains, is that clocks in the West cannot be seen as apolitical or immune to relationships of power. She calls for the development of a 'critical horology' that would pay attention to the ways that both clocks and clock time are produced, as well as exploring who might be able to do that producing (p.15). Sarah Sharma has done something similar in a recent ethnographic study of individuals and communities whose lives frequently intersect with or are shaped by notions of time (examples include taxi drivers and followers of the slow food movement). Sharma uses the word temporality to refer to an 'awareness of power relations as they play out in time.'<sup>46</sup> Although she describes the clock as 'only one chronometer' of the ways in which time might be produced through relationships of power, she argues that the problem of time more generally is a site of 'biopolitical intervention', not only for traditional institutions of power like the state, market and military, but also for 'pharmaceutical companies, airlines, wellness enterprises, and the hospitality and tourism industry' (p.18). Bastian makes this same point with regard to the ways that subjects (or non-subjects) might be able to come into contact with one another, arguing that time is not a quantitative measurement, but rather 'a powerful social tool for producing, managing, and/or undermining various understandings of who or what is in relation with other things or beings' (*Fatally Confused*, p.25).

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<sup>46</sup> Sarah Sharma, *In the Meantime: Temporality and Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), p. 4.

In this way, then, time can be understood as one of the forms of power governing judgements about the social undesirability of melancholia. If time is focused on managing communities and the ways that they relate in the sense that Bastian and Sharma describe here, then it is not surprising that the main way in which melancholia is diagnosed is as a kind of temporal lag, so that the melancholic is understood to be behind or out of synch with others around them, in need of being ‘turned around.’ Their refusal to coordinate with the social time of non-melancholic subjects would also be understood as a threat to the collective ‘statement of faith’ that sees most daily activities and ways of being in the world governed by an adherence to time as it is measured by the clock. Bastian points out that ‘individual and collective judgements about significance and relevance are utilized in the process of recognizing what counts as a change that is significant enough to produce a “before” and an “after”’ (*Fatally Confused*, p.28). This might easily be a description of the way in which melancholia is produced and diagnosed; a lost object imagined as either already dead or never born (that is, insignificant) is seen to lock the melancholic into an endless ‘before’ relation, never able to move to the ‘after’ which is the completed work of normal mourning and the accompanying return to the social. Asynchronicity, then, is another way in which melancholia might flag up or point toward a site of conflict with regard to loss, in particular by exposing some of the ways in which time is produced and deployed in order to foreclose the possibility of certain kinds of losses remaining engaged with a disruptive ‘past.’

To return to *The Chemistry of Tears*, Catherine’s violent decision to put her clocks inside the fridge means more than a grief-fuelled reaction against the conservatism of clock time. Clocks in the novel have more to do with instability than constant measurement, and their presence is wrapped up with the asynchronicity of melancholic time in the ways that they exceed or disrupt the meaning of time-keeping. Whilst the clocks Catherine places inside her fridge are easily identified as such (they are of the traditional wind-up kind), there is another timepiece in the novel that

is not so immediately recognisable: the swan automaton. This is officially categorised, it turns out, as a 'Sing-song' (Eric Croft's particular area of expertise); this is the general eighteenth-century term for the elaborate clocks and watches which the English East India Trading Company sold in large quantities to China, the name coming from the music boxes with which many of them were fitted.<sup>47</sup> The categorisation included mechanical toys that relied on the same kinds of mechanism as clocks, such objects being 'one of the very few classes of goods which the West could offer, before the age of full industrial production, of interest to the East';<sup>48</sup> or, as Catherine puts it 'those perfect imperial misunderstandings of oriental culture we so successfully exported to China in the eighteenth century' (Carey, p.6).

Whilst the swan automaton might not be easily recognisable as the more elaborate relative of clocks and watches, it certainly acts to measure time, albeit unconventionally. The internal combustion engine that Amanda believes is housed in the automaton's hull is the site of an anachronism that calls into question the kinds of 'befores' and 'afters' that tell a particular story about human progress and the Industrial Revolution. Similarly, the copper cables on Sumper's house; Carl's voltaic battery; the 'engine' he rides and play with: all of these have arrived anachronistically in the pages of Henry's diaries, and Catherine knows it. The building of the automaton in eighteenth-century Switzerland and the twenty-first century Gulf oil spill become dislocated in time so that both Catherine and Amanda begin to question a linear narrative that would see one as necessarily following the other. If, as Amanda believes, the purpose of the oil spill (the environmental self-destruction of the human species), precedes – indeed demands – the creation of the internal combustion engine, rather than being an unintended result of that act of invention, then time and history

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<sup>47</sup> J. M. Braga, 'A Seller of "Sing-Songs" : A Chapter in the Foreign Trade of China and Macao', *Journal of Oriental Studies*, 6 (1961), p. 69.

<sup>48</sup> Joseph Needham, Ling Wang, and Derek J. de Solla Price, *Heavenly Clockwork : The Great Astronomical Clocks of Medieval China*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 150.



are both out of synch. Catherine and Amanda's, ability to make connections between these events, and to think critically about them, is presented here as the result of their ability to participate in a kind of melancholic vision. If, the novel posits, melancholia itself disrupts the meaning of 'before' and 'after', then something about the experience of this gives the melancholic subject a capacity to 'see', or try to make perceivable, other moments that also work in this way. Specifically, Carey's text indicates that the melancholic experience of being out of or behind time gives the individual melancholic subject insight into how that same situation might be playing out on a species level, the context of which here is ecological disaster.

As Bastian points out, in terms of climate change 'humans are failing to coordinate with some of the most important changes shaping the current world', and unless different ways of telling the time are found the effect for the human species will continue to be that of 'not being in time, of being out of synch and uncoordinate' (*Fatally Confused*, p.33). For Bastian, the standard form of time told using UTC (Coordinated Universal Time, which integrates both solar and atomic time by adding additional 'leap seconds') is not up to the task of measuring or recording the dramatic changes taking place across the planet, predominantly as a result of global warming.

It does not provide us with a measure of the time before and after the mass extinction event currently taking place, before and after resource depletion, before and after dramatic changes in sea levels, before and after climate change. Rather than representing the urgency and danger of these changes, clock time emphasizes continuity and similarity across all moments and projects an empty and unending future (p.33).

In this sense, then, the human species also finds itself 'out of time' (perhaps literally), in the same way that the melancholic subject is considered to be, and Carey's novel combines these two experiences in

order to suggest that melancholic ways of being in the world might open up a critical dialogue about how humans relate to the planet as a love object, and how this attachment might work *in time*.

In his recent study of the rise of steam power, *Fossil Capital* (2016), Andreas Malm has also drawn attention to the fact that thinking about climate change also means thinking about time, arguing that 'at its core [...] climate change is a messy mix-up of time scales.'<sup>49</sup>

For every year global warming continues and temperatures soar higher, living conditions on earth will be determined more intensely by the emissions of yore, so that the grip of yesteryear on today intensifies – or, put differently, *the causal power of the past inexorably rises*, all the way up to the point when it is indeed 'too late.' The significance of that terrible destiny, so often warned of in climate change discourse, is the final *falling in of history on the present* (p.9)

Malm is keen here to highlight the accumulative dangers of atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub>, the release of which in the present day is rendered more dangerous due to the 'billions of tonnes already out there' (p.7). In this way, the burning of fossil fuels in Britain during and after the Industrial Revolution (which accounted, Malm explains, for more than half the world's emissions for a large part of the nineteenth century) only reveals its full historical and ecological significance by way of the impact it will have on future generations and the 'warped ethical structure' that this creates (p.8). Again, I would argue that this resembles a melancholic relation whereby the past comes to dominate and inform the actions of subjects in the present by way of the kind of sustained engagement that contemporary theorists associate with melancholic critical agency. Put simply, the past *cannot be declared dead*.

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<sup>49</sup> Andreas Malm, *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam-Power and the Roots of Global Warming* (London: Verso, 2016), p. 8.

Malm's words here also conceptualise the Industrial Revolution and the accompanying birth of what he calls the 'fossil economy' as a kind of Doomsday device. Made most famous by Stanley Kubrick's *Dr Strangelove* (1964), the term refers to a machine that theoretically has the power to wipe out all human life on the planet at once – hence 'doomsday.' Clare Colebrook points out that the nuclear bomb is the classic example of such a machine, being the 'archetypal' or 'exemplary' Doomsday device:

If we take the classic figure of the Doomsday device, particularly looking at the concept of device, it has a notion of 'techne' or technology, which is something that one develops to enhance life or extend life. It also has the capacity to then take on its own momentum and turn back and destroy life.<sup>50</sup>

In Malm's work the fossil economy plays just such a role in the fate of the human species, even despite the fact that his concentration on the workings of capital in this arrangement emphasises that this 'enhancement' of life was intended for the bourgeois, rather than, for example, Britain's industrial workers.<sup>51</sup> His description above, and indeed his book as a whole, emphasise what Colebrook refers to as the 'tragic narrative quality' of the Doomsday device idea. This is to do, Colebrook suggests, with the 'intentionality' at work in the story of these devices. 'Humans devise or intentionally create something,' she explains, 'but that very act of their own intentionality or mastery has this tragic quality of coming back and destroying their own mastery.'

In *The Chemistry of Tears* the swan automaton would seem to exemplify the idea of a Doomsday device as Malm understands it, literally signifying the birth of the Industrial Revolution via the internal combustion engine it may or may not hold inside. In its disruption of 'befores' and 'afters' it also draws those around it into a melancholic

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<sup>50</sup> HKW Anthropocene, *Cary Wolfe and Claire Colebrook | Dialogue | The Anthropocene Project. An Opening* <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y LTCzth8H1M>> [accessed 26 April 2017].

<sup>51</sup> Malm argues that Britain is the 'incontestable birthplace' of the fossil economy. (13)

relation with the past that demands critical reflection on the meaning of history as it relates to the present moment. It is only through a kind of melancholic vision, the text suggests, that the swan really makes any sense. This vision, it seems, involves and necessitates a process of tracing relationships of causality that may not be linear or chronological but must still be understood as 'living' in the present moment, despite the ways in which they may have been declared empty or dead. Anne Enderwitz's description of how Freud imagines melancholia to relate to time is useful here; she explains 'the way in which Freud determines the relation between past and present in melancholia implies a complex temporal framework that might best be described as "synchronicity of the non-synchronic."<sup>52</sup> This phrase, she clarifies, explains the way that Freud's melancholia 'entails the co-existence of objects and desires from different time periods in the present self' (p.174). Enderwitz refers here to the incorporation of the lost object within the melancholic ego, asking us to imagine the melancholic psyche in topographical terms just as Butler does. In these material terms, Amanda's version of the swan automaton might be understood as literally embodying this idea of the 'synchronicity of the non-synchronic', holding within itself (the hull that ostensibly should house the mechanism) components of a machine that should not exist until much further in the future, a machine the ecologically devastating effects of which can only be comprehended in the present moment.

To put Amanda's interpretation of the automaton and its purpose aside for a moment, however, even without this speculative version of events the swan's body still tells a story about invention and desire that brings it into dialogue with industrialisation and the contemporary oil spill. Catherine experiences this affectively when she reads Henry Brandling's diaries, unable to shake the feeling not only that they are written with some knowledge of the twenty-first century, but also that

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<sup>52</sup> Anna Enderwitz, 'Modernist Melancholia and Time The Synchronicity of the Non-Synchronic in Freud, Taylor and Conrad', in *The Literature of Melancholia Early Modern to Postmodern*, ed. by Martin Middeke and Christine Wald (Houndsmills: Palgrave, 2011), pp. 173–86 (p. 174).

they are meant for her in particular. 'Might Henry Brandling have anticipated Catherine?' she wonders. 'He anticipated someone would watch him through the wormhole, that was clear' (p.167). The 'wormhole' is Catherine's term for the feeling of temporal shrinkage she experiences when reading Henry's story; indeed, she believes that rather than simply reading, she has in some way been there building the swan with them all, a witness (p.163). Catherine's use of the wormhole concept seems to me to be another manifestation of the 'synchronicity of the non-synchronic' that Enderwitz describes. Rather than using wormholes as an analogy for her reading process, for Catherine the wormhole idea seems instead to express the affective relationship she has with the diaries, and once again it does so in temporal terms (the compression of spacetime) that might properly be conceived as melancholic. In recent years there has been some slippage between the terms 'wormhole' and 'black hole', with black holes being posited as possible entrance to and exit from this tube-like passage through spacetime.<sup>53</sup> Both Catherine and Amanda consistently describe the Gulf oil spill in terms that call to mind a black hole, particularly as it appears through satellite images on the webcam that they both watch, 'a dense black centre with a rim of rusty red surrounded by a coral blue' (p.224). For Catherine, this image shows the fulfilment of the 'bright and poisonous invention' made visible through the 'wormholes in time' cut by 'Henry's sawtooth penstrokes'. The oil spill functions as a horrifying 'exit' point for the development of ideas she has encountered in the diary, one that she considers to be 'the end of history itself' (p.162).

Catherine's melancholic ability to trace relationships of causality through time and space is not necessarily indebted to Sumper and his 'supreme beings' for its linkage of the automaton and the Gulf disaster, however. We know she is highly distinguished in her field, and must assume that she has some expertise in the history of the mechanisms on

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<sup>53</sup> David Shiga, 'Could Black Holes Be Portals to Other Universes?', *New Scientist*

<<https://www.newscientist.com/article/dn11745-could-black-holes-be-portals-to-other-universes/>> [accessed 3 July 2017].

which she works. Jessica Riskin has written extensively about the machine Henry commissions Sumper to build (but which he does not receive), the grain-eating duck designed by Vaucanson in 1739. This duck – a popular sensation when it went on display – is one of the most famous of an experimental group of machines that first became fashionable at the end of the seventeenth century: automata that sought to closely reproduce the natural functions of the human and animal subjects on which they were based.<sup>54</sup> Riskin points out, however, that the development of these automata took place alongside the rise of a different kind of machinery, devices like the automatic loom that were beginning to be used as a substitute for human labour in industrial settings (p.115). Vaucanson himself, it turns out, used the skills he had acquired making human and animal automata to build his own automatic loom, on which Charles Babbage in turn modelled his analytical engine (Riskin, pp. 146, 149). (Recall that the character of Arthur Cruickshank, designer of the Difference Engine, one of Sumper’s ‘Supreme Beings’ and possible mastermind of the hidden internal combustion engine, is a thinly veiled depiction of Babbage.) In this sense, then, the swan’s body does hold the key to the automated manufacturing world of the future; not literally in terms of mechanical parts but rather in the sense that the mechanisms that allow it to eat, swim, and play are the very same that will allow the development of industrial machinery. Both Amanda and Catherine, in their own way, work to trace these connections across time and to think critically about their meaning.

So far, then, I have attempted to identify points at which the text positions the melancholic subject as gaining access to a critical vision that functions to ‘unwork’ and identify some of the relationships (both human and more-than-human) that govern a contested site of loss. Up to this point I have concentrated on exploring how this might work in relation to time, but I want to extend this line of enquiry now to ask how the text

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<sup>54</sup> Jessica Riskin, *The Restless Clock: A History of the Centuries-Long Argument over What Makes Living Things Tick* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), p. 114.

imagines 'unworking' in terms of the objects or 'things' that its human protagonists encounter.

## V. Seeing & Steampunk

When Catherine polishes the tarnished swan's beak with methylated spirits and cotton buds, she reveals words inlaid in silver on its underside: *Illud aspicias non vides*. At a loss, she is forced to call Eric Croft to translate. It means, he explains, "you cannot see what you can see" (p.253). These words get to the heart of the novel's fraught relationship with the visible, in particular the ways in which the text asks questions about what it means to associate the visible world with authenticity, or truth. For Sumper in particular this is a source of frustration, especially when it comes to Henry, whom he believes to be invested in a selectiveness of vision that remains unreceptive to phenomena beyond his understanding, and which Sumper sees as related to the different kinds of what we might call *lifeliness* that Henry is prepared to accept into his worldview. Most urgently, Sumper demands that Henry expand this perspective with regards to the 'Superior Beings' his mentor Cruickshank describes in *Mysterium Tremendum*, beings which most closely resemble seahorses in their scheme of movement but are also made up of 'numerous convolutions of tubes, more analogous to the trunk of the elephant than to anything else' (p.170). Henry records the question Sumper addresses to him in his diary: 'What if I walked along this road and it was suddenly illuminated by blazing sea horses? Would I be able to see what I judged impossible?' (p.154) Here the possibility of seeing, and in particular seeing differently, is dependent on a recalibration of worldview for the viewing subject.

Sumper, however, is also infuriated by this problematic as it unfolds from the other side; that is in the sense that the 'seen' might be accepted without question. This frustration manifests itself particularly strongly in relation to the duck automaton Henry initially requests. Sumper refuses to

reproduce Vaucanson's machine due predominantly to the fact that the famed process of digestion and excretion did not actually 'work' because "its anus was not connected to its bowel" (p.170). For Sumper, this firmly brands Vaucanson a 'fraud' whereas he himself is not a cheat and refuses to dabble in 'false digestive systems' (p.154). Sumper's ire in this matter seems to be directed less at the engineering limitations that prevented Vaucanson's duck from actually swallowing, digesting and excreting grain than at the steps taken by Vaucanson to trick his audience into believing in the success of this process by making the unique selling point of his duck its transparency, enabled by the fact that 'its gilded copper feathers were perforated to allow an inside view' (Riskin, p.133). Controversially, however, just as Sumper describes, the illusion of digestion was dispelled a year after the duck was first exhibited:

A close observer of the Duck's swallowing mechanism found that the food did not continue down the neck and into the stomach but rather stayed at the base of the mouth tube. Reasoning that digesting the food by dissolution would take longer than the brief pause that the Duck took between swallowing and expulsion, this observer concluded that the grain input and excrement output were entirely unrelated and that the tail end of the Duck must be loaded before each act with phony excrement (Riskin, p.135).

Not only does the text ask questions about the relationship between human bodies and machine bodies, then, but it also suggests that these relationships only become truly visible or identifiable through a process of unworking that would critically examine the conditions that enable or preclude this kind of 'seeing.' Once more the text presents this as the prerogative of a melancholic vision that would be drawn to and invested in sites of loss that are yet-to-be-made-visible; that is, constellations of ungrievability.

Carey focuses his novel's enquiry into visibility by playing with genre; specifically, by leaning into some of the generic conventions of



steampunk. Steampunk as a genre first emerged through works of late 1980s fiction that imagined alternate Victorian universes, defined predominantly by anachronistic kinds of technology. Such technological advances were posited as able to ‘radically alter the course of history and open up possible future techno-cultural worlds’, with these alternate universes indebted to the earlier fiction of H.G Wells and Jules Verne.<sup>55</sup> Following this, steampunk has also become a lifestyle subculture whose followers are interested in crafting practices that ‘produce fanciful Victorian gadgets [...] or refurbish contemporary technological objects to make them look and feel “Victorian” in order to challenge contemporary technological design’ (Forlini, p.72). The subculture encompasses a wide range of practices, including perhaps most famously the donning of neo-Victorian costumes that are accessorised by the mechanical devices adored by steampunks, such as ‘top hats that hide or support technological gadgets’ and ‘crinolines and corsets that leave part of the construction bare.’<sup>56</sup> Carey’s novel draws on and plays with several of these identifying features of steampunk in order to flag up its participation in the genre. Henry is of course writing in 1854 at the height of the Victorian Age, and Sumper’s anachronistic mechanical creations certainly offer an alternative historical moment where technology is working out of time. Catherine’s occupation as horologist also gives a nod to steampunk and its love of timepieces, with ‘cogs, springs, sprockets, wheels and hydraulic motion’ fetishized in the subculture. Even more explicitly, *The Chemistry of Tears* refers to what Rebecca Onion describes as a ‘favourite steampunk speculation’: that Charles Babbage successfully completed work on his Difference Engine, resulting in considerable social change.<sup>57</sup> This idea is the subject of one of the genre’s defining novels, William Gibson and Bruce

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<sup>55</sup> Stefania Forlini, ‘Technology and Morality: The Stuff of Steampunk’, *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 3.1 (2010), 72–98 (p. 72).

<sup>56</sup> Jenny Sundén, ‘Steampunk Practices: Time, Tactility, and a Racial Politics of Touch’, *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology*, 2014, n.p. <<http://adanewmedia.org/2014/07/issue5-sunden/>>.

<sup>57</sup> Rebecca Onion, ‘Reclaiming the Machine: An Introductory Look at Steampunk in Everyday Practice’, *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 1.1 (2008), 138–63.

Sterling's *The Difference Engine* (1990), and is represented in Carey's text in the persona of the 'Genius' Albert Cruickshank, designer of an enormous calculating engine and also, Amanda believes, of the internal combustion engine secreted in the hull of the swan automaton.

For many of the people who participate in this subculture, the various ways they interact with steam technology (writing, wearing, making) are viewed as a 'highly liberatory counterculture practice (hence, the addition of the world "punk")' (Onion, p.139). Importantly for my analysis here, this is primarily due to the fact that their interest in exposing the mechanisms of technological objects is presented as essentially democratising in the sense that it makes 'tinkering' accessible to the non-professional, critiquing the 'fundamental opacity of contemporary technology' (Forlini, p.81). In this sense, steampunk cultures are deeply concerned with examining ideas of (in)visibility, and with developing practices that seek to 'unwork' objects in order that their histories of creation might be seen, or read, by those that encounter them. A conflict manifests here, however, between the ways in which this might be understood as an ethical practice – one that, in Stefania Forlini's view, directs attention to the human subjects' enmeshment in networks of relationality in order to 're-envision radically our relationship to technology and morality' – and the concomitant sense in which steampunks are invested in a conception of 'complete' knowledge that they see as nostalgically rooted in the past (Forlini, npn;Onion).

Steampunk scholar Cory Gross uses the word 'melancholic' to describe the kinds of steampunk practice that he sees as being properly critical, and for Gross this has much to do with visibility in terms of the ways certain histories are variously obscured or revealed by steampunk texts. Melancholic steampunk, he suggests, drawing on Celeste Olalquiaga's work on kitsch, is intent on 're-experiencing' rather than 'reinterpreting' the historical Victorian moment fetishized by this subculture. For Gross, this is in opposition to the second category of steampunk that he names as 'Nostalgic', in which 'we find the creation of

the Victorian Era as a Romantic myth infused with utopian desires and generally ignoring the more uncomfortable genuine history of that era.<sup>58</sup> Nostalgic steampunk, Gross suggests, ‘revels, much like Victoriana itself, in the elegance and the spectacle of the Empire. It forgets, or chooses not to remember, the dirtiness and imperialism of this same Empire’ (p.62). In Gross’s analysis, then, the functioning of ‘nostalgic’ steampunk is contingent on a kind of deliberate forgetting that is also simultaneously a refusal to make certain subjects visible.

To give an example of this kind of historical ‘forgetting’ within the steampunk genre we might turn to Eric Williams, who in 1944 argued that the Atlantic slave trade was indispensable to the developments of the Industrial Revolution, a claim that insisted on the relationship between capitalism and slavery and which has famously become known as the ‘Williams thesis.’ Despite numerous attempts to refute his claims there now seems to be a critical consensus on the broad accuracy of his arguments; or as Guy Emerson Mount puts it, ‘few doubt any longer that an intersection, or at least a set of shared coordinates, exist between slavery and capitalism.’<sup>59</sup> As Robin Blackburn explains:

The connections between triangular trades and textiles were so close that in some periods (e.g. 1770 or 1790) an investment in one was tantamount to an investment in the other. It is, perhaps, significant that when the slave trade became a centre of controversy in British politics, leading textile manufacturers were willing to defend it on the grounds that it was a valuable component of national trade.<sup>60</sup>

This means, then, as Jenny Sundén points out in her article on the politics of touch in steampunk as they relate to different racialised bodies, that by

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<sup>58</sup> Cary Gross, ‘Varieties of Steampunk Experience’, *Steampunk Magazine*, 2007, 60–63 (p. 62).

<sup>59</sup> Guy Emerson Mount, ‘Capitalism and Slavery: Reflections on the Williams Thesis’, *Black Perspectives*, 2015, n.p. <<http://www.aaihs.org/capitalism-and-slavery-reflections-on-the-williams-thesis/>> [accessed 8 July 2017].

<sup>60</sup> Robin Blackburn, *The Making of New World Slavery: From the Baroque to the Modern, 1492-1800* (London ; New York: Verso, 2010), p. 550.

returning to the Industrial Revolution as a site of celebration – and indeed, *play* – nostalgic forms of steampunk necessarily operate by ‘obliterating the black bodies underpinning the machinery of the Industrial Revolution’ so that ‘the pain of slave others is what lies beneath the steampunk fantasy’ (nbn). Sundén’s language here (‘what lies beneath the [...] fantasy’) intentionally engages with the politics of visibility that is so important to the steampunk project, pointing out that their demand for transparency in engineering occludes as well as actively seeks to repress the violent histories contained in the objects they so fetishise. In other words, ‘you cannot see what you can see.’ In his characterisation of melancholic steampunk Gross similarly relies on the language of visibility in order to elucidate the ways in which this aspect of the genre moves away from the utopian conceptions of its nostalgic counterpart. In melancholic steampunk, he writes:

We see the very things Nostalgic Steampunk tries so hard to ignore brought out into the glaring sun. We see the corruption, the decadence, the imperialism, the poverty and the intrigue. And we see them not as much as an indictment of the Victorian era but as an indictment of our own, whether directly or by chopping away at our society’s Victorian roots (p.63).

For Gross this is the way in which melancholic steampunk prioritises ‘re-experiencing’ over ‘reimagining.’ Melancholia in this analysis, then, draws on the same collapsing of synchronicity that I have argued Carey presents as peculiar to a critical melancholic vision: the past infiltrates and reorganises the present in order to make ethical demands on the experiencing subject. However, whilst Carey’s text ostensibly belongs to the category of ‘melancholic steampunk’ in the sense that it engages critically rather than fetishistically with steampunk tropes, the novel offers a more complex politics of visibility than is accounted for in most theories of steampunk. This is evident, for example, in the critical perspectives on steampunk that I have engaged with here; whilst both Sundén and Gross advance critiques of the movement that address the

lack of political or social consciousness in many elements of the subculture, they are both still reliant on a language of visibility that assumes the 'seen' and the 'unseen' to be stable concepts that might be unproblematically moved between. In this sense, both Sundén and Gross fall into the very trap they are seeking to avoid by investing in the 'striving for complete comprehension' that characterises steampunk engineering. Furthermore, as Onion points out, this kind of thinking is not socially radical but instead colonial in nature, because 'the idea that such a type of comprehension may indeed be possible [...] enthusiastically echoes aspects of Victorian thought.'

In contrast, what Carey's novel makes clear in the way it talks about the visible world and kinds of 'seeing' is that it is necessary to remain critical about what 'full' visibility might mean (the truth 'brought out into the glaring sun') because there are always already structural conditions in existence that prohibit and police the kinds of bodies/things/objects that are able to become visible in the first place.<sup>61</sup> As such the text does not offer the reader a 'reveal' that would solve once and for all the mystery of the contents of the automaton's hull. Instead, Catherine and Amanda (the novel's two present-day melancholics and female versions of steampunk's traditional 'gentleman-scientist and/or tinkerer' figure) argue over the possibility of x-raying the vessel, a fierce disagreement that culminates in Amanda slapping Catherine's face (Onion, p.144). As the novel ends, although Catherine declares 'I will X-ray the damn thing [...] why not?' the reader never knows the outcome, and as such the conflicting narratives that surround the automaton and its secret are held in abeyance. In this sense, Catherine, Amanda and also the reader remain in a relationship with the site of loss that is the hull and its violent history that manifests melancholic critical agency in the sense that I have argued for here, by pointing to a place of undeclared loss without investing in the idea that this same loss might easily become known. Rather, the hull of the automaton is set up as a site of conflict that demands attention be paid to

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<sup>61</sup> Onion, p. 144.

the conditions that have kept it unseeable, rather than to efforts that would reveal its imagined 'true' nature.

Carey's decision to engage with the steampunk genre, then, is one that makes apparent both the possibilities and limits of 'unworking' as a critical model, and the nature of his subject material (Catherine's bereavement) is such that this conversation about visibility also becomes one about grievability: who or what can become grievable? However, the text also folds this inquiry into another, similar question, one to which steampunk as a genre ostensibly has more to contribute: who or what gets to become human? Stefania Forlini has argued that steampunk practices ultimately disrupt the ontological categories that separate humans from the technological objects they make or use. Drawing on Bruno Latour, she sees this as engendering a redistribution of agency that leads to an abandonment of the 'thing/human poles' and opens on to 'a more nuanced understanding of the intimate relationships between persons and things (p.73). She sees this decentring of the human as part of a morally productive project promising that by developing more ethical relationships with 'things,' humans will in turn develop more ethical relationships with each other (p.82). For Forlini, this process takes place through a practice of 'reading' that bears similarities to the act of melancholic 'unworking' I have foregrounded in this chapter.

In both its literary and material manifestations, steampunk is about learning to read all that is folded into any particular created thing – that is, learning to connect the source materials to particular cultural, technical, and environmental practices, skills, histories, and economies of meaning and value (p.73).

This takes place, Forlini suggests, through an affective and material engagement with technological objects that is predominantly environmental in nature, so that this 'reading' process encounters things by asking 'where their component materials came from, by what means they are made, by which persons and corporations, and with what

environmental impact' (p.92). For Forlini, this is not only a key skill for green movements, but also fosters 'ethical ways of being in the world' (p.92) Promising as this might seem, even Forlini herself seems to be having a hard time believing that the animating principle of steampunk might be so radical. The barrier to such a 'socially responsible' steampunk practice, she warns, is that 'their idealisation of mastery risks re-inscribing the values of liberal humanism onto posthumanism and may instead perpetuate a fantasy of control and domination as old as technology itself' (pp.73-4). She offers this caveat several times more during the course of her argument, ending by suggesting that it is only in recognising their fundamental 'lack' of this mastery that humans (and presumably steampunks) will be able to move beyond these 'relationships of domination' (pp.91-2).

The issue that Forlini comes up against, I would suggest, is that steampunk as a genre has a certain investment in a particular kind of 'humanness' that means it will always shy away from truly interrogating what the 'human' might mean. The reading or 'unworking' process that Forlini argues steampunks apply to 'things' and their history of creation is one that must necessarily also be applied to the concept of humanness that animates steampunk texts and leads to the condition of their emergence being the foregrounding of white, colonial, rational, 'Man.'<sup>62</sup> If, as Onion suggests, steampunks are 'enamoured of technology and convinced of its ability to endow man with a stronger sense of his own humanity and his interconnections with the material world', then the 'unworking' of things that Forlini ascribes as a radical possibility of the genre might be understood as simply taking place in order to reify the very humanness that she would posit it as subverting (p.143).

Carey's novel, instead, both inhabits and rejects the steampunk genre in order to stage a conversation about grievability, humans, nonhumans and things that utilises melancholic agency as a critical tool

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<sup>62</sup> This is the term used by Sylvia Wynter to describe this formation

that is *always against completion*. In this way, his melancholic protagonists always assume that there is a kind of lack embedded in bodies, objects and moments that might seem to offer a sense of fullness, and they maintain an interest in taking these things apart in ways that may or may not be literal. This critical perspective can be seen at work in Amanda's (and Catherine's) obsession with the contents of the hull, in their uncanny encounters with automatons that disrupt humanness, and in the way that life in the novel is never far from, or sometimes even distinguishable from, death. What this brings about in the text is predominantly an unsettling of subjectivity; this means that the problem of loss, or of grievability, comes into focus alongside an enquiry into how this subjectivity might be distributed unevenly between bodies, objects, or things. In order to explore the ways that these problematics shape the narrative of *The Chemistry of Tears*, the remainder of this chapter will focus on reading the novel alongside the recently popular theoretical formation known as new materialism.

## VI. Whos & Whats

*The Chemistry of Tears* begins with Matthew Tindall's death, so as readers we never get to meet him. Instead, we come to know the dead man only through Catherine's fragmented recollections, which revolve without exception around the completeness and perfection of his physical body. She tells us he was 'tall and slender' with 'the most gorgeous legs', 'physically graceful' with 'thick' hair and a mouth that 'was large, soft and always tender' (pp. 51, 138, 4). Her obsessive recourse to a selective reimagining of Matthew's body, depicted as a site of almost excessively vital life, perhaps appears only reasonable in the event of his sudden, traumatic absence. Yet, given that the opening timeframe of the novel is also that of Matthew's mortality, this compulsion is also a recursive performance of abjection displaying her simultaneous repulsion by and fascination with the real-time degeneration of this same body.



This pattern first manifests itself in a section of the text that gives us Catherine's thoughts on waking the morning after Matthew's death and trying to come to terms with the transformation that has taken place: 'Matthew was completely gone forever. His poor body was lying somewhere in this stinking heat. No, in a refrigerator with a label on his toe. Or perhaps he was already trapped inside a coffin' (p.17). There are a few things going on in this passage, all of which work to express a conflict in Catherine's thinking that sees her imagined Matthew shift between being a 'who' (vital and alive) and a 'what' (passive, trapped object). Immediately, she wants to enact a separation between Matthew and the body that once hosted him; whilst Matthew is 'gone forever' his 'poor body' remains behind, discarded and devoid of agency (it is 'lying somewhere', or perhaps 'trapped' in a coffin). This separation of body from 'Matthew' isn't working properly here for her, however, because her words still endow the body left behind with animacy; Matthew's body is only able to be 'trapped' by the coffin she imagines it placed inside because it maintains a certain aliveness that makes this imprisonment unbearable. This is expressed in the shift from possessive pronoun ('his poor body') to personal pronoun 'he was already trapped.' Lying in a refrigerator 'with a label on his toe', Matthew's corpse also recalls one of the mechanical objects that Catherine works to restore; categorised, preserved and filed away to be repaired at some point in the future. This passage is exemplary, then, of perhaps the major problem that guides and shapes the novel: how might different kinds of bodies (and this is not limited to the organic) inhabit liminal spaces between life and nonlife – or, to put this less precisely but more usefully – whoness and whatness?

I borrow the terms 'who' and 'what' here from Jacques Derrida and his posthumously published final seminar series, *The Beast and the Sovereign*. The seminars focus on what Derrida describes as the 'reciprocal haunting' of the figure of the 'sovereign' by the 'beast', and vice versa, and continue the theoretical interest in the animal that can be traced throughout his work, emerging most notably in *The Animal That Therefore*

*I Am*.<sup>63</sup> Derrida is particularly interested in the ways that the human/animal species line is compulsively drawn and redrawn as part of what he calls 'our dogged determination to hunt down what is proper to man' (p194). In *The Beast and the Sovereign*, as David Wills points out, his critique of speciesism extends beyond the question of the animal to 'include the relation of living to nonliving' so that he advances a more radical ethical argument 'involving the status of what lives [*le vivant*].'<sup>64</sup> It is in this sense that Derrida uses the terms 'who' and 'what' in order to argue that death undoes and makes unimportant the distinction between the two.

What if, at bottom, the distinction between *what* and *who* came to sink into indifference, into the abyss? To die, basically, just as the common condition of both beast and sovereign, qua living beings, is to be exposed to death, and to a death that always risks coming back from *who* to *what*, to reduce *who* to *what*, or to reveal the "what" of "who." Is to die not to become "what" again? A "what" that anybody will always have been. (*Beast and Sovereign*, p.137).

In this sense, Derrida moves the conversation away from attempts to define human against animal, subject against object. Rather than focusing on the cultural and ontological structures that might lead to beings and things being labelled as any of these terms, or how these may be rethought, he focuses instead on the way that death undoes this distinction at the level of matter. It is this unravelling of whoness and whatness, living and nonliving that confronts and obsesses Catherine every time that she engages with Matthew's death and the terrible return to whatness of his body. What Carey's novel does then, which is of particular interest to me here, is suggest that this moment of unravelling is affectively experienced by those who are exposed to death through loss.

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<sup>63</sup> Jacques Derrida and others, *The Beast & the Sovereign. Vol. 1* ( London: University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. 17.

<sup>64</sup> David Wills, *Review of The Beast and the Sovereign, Volume 1*, by Jacques Derrida, *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, 2010, p. n.p.

Namely the novel implies that grief, and specifically melancholic responses to loss, reorient a bereaved subject's understanding of what it means to *have life*, and that this disrupts binary oppositions like who/what and living/nonliving, as well as that subject's own interpretation of their relationship to these concepts. The corollary of this is that the question of who or what gets to be seen as grievable in the first place is also troubled in the text, a question that of course incorporates anxieties about which bodies and beings are to be understood as 'human.'

Much of this anxiety is focused on the other body occupying a disproportionate amount of Catherine's attention; the damaged and ambiguous swan automaton that is set to become brighter, stronger, and more whole as Matthew slowly disintegrates. The giving to life that Catherine offers the swan in her daily ritual of caretaking and recovery is shadowed by Matthew's death and the physical changes taking place in his body. She is repulsed by imagining 'bacteria, fungi, the protozoa, the way our bodies attack themselves when we die', preferring instead 'to think of us as something dry and crumbly, with no relation to the moisture-laden sheen of our decay' (p.25). For Catherine, the bodies of both Matthew and the swan shift at various times and places between different ontological states, so that the contrasting relation she describes above between a kind of mechanical dryness and an organic decay is broken down and ultimately unable to be maintained. As such, distinguishing between the 'mechanical' and the 'biological' not only becomes more and more difficult for Catherine, but essentially less useful as a means of defining what the changes taking place in both these strange bodies mean for her. This is particularly evident in a passage in which she gives a description of the moment the restored swan is displayed and made to work at a publicity event for the museum's benefactors:

No one moved or spoke. Every eerie movement was smooth as a living thing, a snake, an eel, a swan of course. We stood in awe and, no matter how many hundred hours we had worked on it, this swan was never, not for a moment, familiar, but uncanny, sinuous, lithe, supple, twisting, winding, graceful. As it twisted to look into one's eyes, its own stayed darkest ebony until, at that point when the sun caught the dark wood, they blazed. It had no sense of touch. It had no brain. It was as glorious as God (pp.261-2).

Although throughout the passage the swan is described as an 'it', Catherine can only contextualise the automaton by referencing the various living bodies and organic adjectives that she sees as coming closest to capturing its substance. Thus, the swan is fish, bird, reptile and wood all at once, 'sinuous,' 'supple,' 'winding' and 'graceful', with these sense impressions gathered together in an effort to find a manner of expressing the swan's slippery being that shifts away from a binary relation where it might be either a living, moving, biological being or an extraordinarily effective mechanism but never both. As such, Catherine's vision of the swan, mediated as it is by her newly painful attentiveness to the lifeliness and deathliness of bodies, manages to find some kind of middle way through a problem that Jessica Riskin argues was dramatized in the eighteenth century by automatons like Vaucanson's defecating duck. Riskin suggests that in building the Duck, Vaucanson achieved a kind of 'masterful incoherence' that brought together and refused to resolve two contradictory and competing claims – 'that living creatures were essentially machines and that living creatures were the antithesis of machines.'<sup>65</sup> This, Riskin explains, is a dilemma that consistently shapes the course of modern science after the seventeenth century and gives rise to the development of two rival traditions of thought. On the one hand there is the 'mechanical clockwork' model that banishes sentience and agency from nature, thereby paradoxically relying on an argument from

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<sup>65</sup> Jessica Riskin, 'The Defecating Duck, Or, the Ambiguous Origins of Artificial Life', *Critical Inquiry*, 29.4 (2003), 599–633 (p. 612).

design that presumes the existence of ‘a supernatural divine intelligence’; whilst on the other there is an alternative ‘active-mechanist tradition’ that prefers to consider the idea of agency or vital force as innate (*Restless Clock*, p. 337). For Riskin, Vaucanson’s Duck is crucial to this history of ideas, to the point that in contemporary times humans are still invested in the ‘continual redrawing of the boundary between human and machine and redefinition of the essence of life and intelligence’, a project ‘whose rudiments were established two and a half centuries ago by the defecating Duck that didn’t.’<sup>66</sup> She goes so far as to argue that Vaucanson’s Duck and the other automatons displayed alongside it launched a ‘taxonomic dynamic’ that continues today in any conversation about artificial life and involves ‘sorting the animate from the inanimate, the organic from the mechanical, the intelligent from the rote, with each category crucially defined, as in any taxonomy, by what is excluded from it.’

Whether you agree with Riskin about this or not, Carey’s text is also interested in the ways that taxonomic exercises like this work, and his choice to use the Duck (reborn as a swan) to focus his enquiry into lifeliness suggests that he also sees Vaucanson’s automaton as a useful starting point for such questions. Indeed, Carey has Catherine refer directly to the thinker whose intervention into the debate about mechanical life is perhaps most well known: René Descartes.

Really, truly, anyone who has ever observed a successful automaton, seen its uncanny lifelike movements, confronted its mechanical eyes, any human animal remembers that particular fear, that confusion about what is alive and what cannot be born. Descartes said that animals were automata. I have always been certain that it was the threat of torture that stopped him saying the same held true for human beings (pp.18-19).

I would disagree with Catherine here, as it seems to me that the separation of human soul (and mind) from physical body that Descartes argued for

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<sup>66</sup> Riskin, ‘The Defecating Duck, Or, the Ambiguous Origins of Artificial Life’, p. 633.

(with nonhuman animals understood as living machines without this extra 'soul') rather depends on a distinction being made between (rational, thinking) humans and (mechanical) animals in order to work properly; that is, it involves the kind of definition by exclusion that Riskin posits as central to taxonomies. As Catherine makes clear here, however, she is more than happy to consider the human body in mechanical terms, explaining 'neither Matthew nor I had time for souls. That we were intricate, chemical machines never diminished our sense of wonder (p.19). Yet after her bereavement this decisiveness leaves her, and as we have seen she struggles to articulate the meaning of Matthew's physical body as it moves through the world after his death. In this sense, what begins to trouble the grieving Catherine is not primarily the human/animal distinction that preoccupies Descartes, but the more general problem of how different bodies might be identified as living or dead; 'who' or 'what'. Essentially what happens for Catherine is that after Matthew's death something about the taxonomic process that theoretically should distinguish between living and dead bodies goes wrong, or stops working properly for her. She experiences this as a primarily visual sensory disruption that makes itself known in affective encounters with strange bodies; encounters that are principally to do with feelings of loss in relation to these bodies, and that as such refigure and complicate her understanding of the grievable.

This is particularly evident in her interactions with the swan automaton, and I will talk about this in some detail presently. However, she also experiences this sensory/taxonomic disruption in other more minor ways; she describes Henry Brandling's notebook as having 'died in mid-air' after she throws it across the room in frustration, its shattered remnants becoming Henry's 'crumbling ashes [...] Henry Brandling's bones and ashes...' (p.90). A blue cube is found hidden in the hull which seems to be the same one Henry describes Sumper's young assistant Carl making all those years ago and Catherine describes it as 'deeply evasive, sad and melancholic, a study in blue but also something like a small boy's slippers

placed beneath his bed three thousand summer nights ago' (p.148). Objects or 'things' seem to take on life and then lose it again; they live and then die, or both at once, or the other way around. In this way Catherine's interactions with her environment proceed through affective glitches as she forms melancholic attachments to strange bodies that, to return to Ahmed's argument, might seem improper in the sense that they trouble conventional taxonomies of liveness; that is, Catherine refuses to declare 'the objects that we declare dead as being dead in the way that we declare' (Ahmed, p. 141). However, these improper attachments would be understood as such not because, as Ahmed suggests, an affective community would insist that they relate to losses that have already been mourned (love objects that have already been declared dead) but rather because this community would dispute the idea that they might have ever lived in the first place.

## VII. New Materialism & Melancholic Vision

In order to make sense of these 'improper' attachments that Catherine forms, and to think through some of the ways that these moments of sensory disruption also bring into focus questions of grievability, I turn now to new materialism. The types of scholarship that fall under this label are wide-ranging and interdisciplinary, but all are interested in prioritising attentiveness to matter as it moves through the world, whether this means thinking through human and nonhuman bodies in the conventional sense or excavating bits of 'liveness' from 'what might seem to be most inert: rocks, machines, dead bodies.'<sup>67</sup> Perhaps most crucially, new materialists see matter as having agency. Diana Leong points out that although the disciplinary projects of these theorists are 'appropriately diverse,' they collectively insist on understanding matter as

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<sup>67</sup> Chad Shomura, 'Exploring the Promise of New Materialisms', *Lateral*, 2017, p. n.p.

<<http://csalateral.org/issue/6-1/forum-alt-humanities-new-materialist-philosophy-promise-new-materialisms-shomura/>>.

'lively, self-directed, agential, creative, and always in the process of becoming.'<sup>68</sup> In a recently published collection of essays, Diana Coole and Samantha Frost similarly describe the way that new materialists see matter as 'possessing its own modes of self-transformation, self-organization, and directedness, and thus no longer as simply passive or inert.'<sup>69</sup> Jane Bennett, arguably the most visible of the theorists currently working on new materialism, uses Latour's term 'actant' to refer to both human and nonhuman materiality, and she is likewise interested in the 'vitality' of matter, 'the capacity of things – edibles, commodities, storms, metals – not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own' (p.viii). Bennett's shorthand for this is 'Thing-power' (p.xvi).

One of the reasons this branch of theory is so useful is because, as will be apparent from the Bennett argument above, new materialism puts pressure on the category of the human. Not only is this work interested in drawing out what Kyla Wazana Tompkins calls 'the thingness of the human', but as she explains, it is also 'interested in speculating about a world in which the human subject is not centered, or even central.'<sup>70</sup> Coole and Frost agree, arguing that new materialist work 'disturbs the conventional sense that agents are exclusively humans who possess the cognitive abilities, intentionality, and freedom to make autonomous decisions' [...](*New Materialisms*, p. 10). In this sense, then, reading Carey's novel alongside new materialism allows for an analysis of grievability that does not insist on (or at least prioritise) humanness as a prerequisite for affective attachment, and therefore loss. This is certainly not to argue that

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<sup>68</sup> Diana Leong, 'The Mattering of Black Lives: Octavia Butler's Hyperempathy and the Promise of the New Materialisms', *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience*, 2.2 (2016), p. n.p.

<<http://catalystjournal.org/ojs/index.php/catalyst/article/view/100>> [accessed 8 August 2017].

<sup>69</sup> Diana H. Coole and Samantha Frost, *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham, North Carolina ; London: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 10.

<sup>70</sup> Kyla Wazana Tompkins, 'On the Limits and Promise of New Materialist Philosophy', *Lateral*, 5.1 (2016), n.p.. <<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.25158/L5.1.8>>.



humans should be a secondary concern when thinking about loss and grief, but rather to refuse to take for granted the inclusivity of that term when, as Tompkins points out, the 'objecthood' that opposes humanness is 'a historical category with roots in larger political systems like racial capitalism, biopolitics, or colonialism' (Tompkins, npn).

Furthermore, new materialism offers a particularly timely analytical framework for the increasing amount of fiction that takes anthropogenic climate change as its theme, with *The Chemistry of Tears* a prime example of this trend. Contemporary scholarship grouped under the banner of new materialism is united in positioning itself as a necessary response to our particular moment of ecological crisis. These theorists believe our contemporary historical moment necessitates a 'new' way of imagining the material world and the various interactions that take place across it, not least because visible and felt changes like anthropogenic extinction, weather pattern changes, and rising sea levels are occurring across the globe. Tompkins suggests that this is one of the arenas in which new materialist thinking might prove particularly useful in the sense that it is able to offer 'a reckoning with planetary thought and the material world [...]' (npn). Coole and Frost similarly argue that it is crucial to turn to materialism at a time when 'we are finding our environment materially and conceptually reconstituted in ways that pose profound and unprecedented normative questions' (p.6). For Chad Shomura, the decentring of the human via the affirmation of its entanglement with the nonhuman ('animals, vegetables, and minerals') that characterises New Materialism means that it rejects 'fantasies of human mastery' and as such is 'particularly helpful in addressing the crises instigated or intensified by anthropogenic climate change' (npn). Diana Leong sees the new materialisms as belonging to a number of recent theoretical approaches that choose to focus on the nonhuman, and that appear 'grounded in the need to develop strategies of coexistence attuned to the Anthropocene's political and ecological crisis' (npn). For the most part these scholars see the ethical payoff of their projects as grounded in attempts to foreground

the enmeshment and interdependence of agential bodies. New materialists argue that humans must recognise the ways in which their lives and bodies are intertwined with, for example, nonhuman animals, objects, and aspects of the natural world, with this being a necessary step towards the awakening of an ecological conscience (or conscientiousness) that would contribute to the development of more sustainable ways of living in the Anthropocene:

Such a newfound attentiveness to matter and its powers will not solve the problem of human exploitation or oppression, but it can inspire a greater sense of the extent to which all bodies are kin in the sense of inextricably enmeshed in a dense network of relations (Bennett, p.13).

As will be apparent from Bennett's words here, a theoretical practice that seeks to move away from subject/object distinctions necessarily has something to contribute to work on loss that problematizes the ways that such distinctions prohibit certain expressions of grief. Indeed, some theorists whose work shares similarities with new materialism (notably Donna Haraway, Deborah Bird Rose, and Thom van Dooren) see an ethic of entanglement as inspiring humans to live more sustainable lives directly *because* of its relation to problems of loss in the Anthropocene. Haraway's version of Bennett's 'enmeshment' is called 'staying with the trouble', which for her entails the process of 'making oddkin'.<sup>71</sup> Companion species, Haraway argues, must become-with each other in a manner that invalidates human exceptionalism, and thinking about and feeling loss is one of the ways to best achieve this. 'Grief is a path to understanding entangled living and dying', she writes; 'human beings must grieve *with*, because we are in and of this fabric of undoing' (*Staying with the Trouble*, p.39). The new materialists are already engaging with the questions of attachment and loss that interest me here as they play out against a background of global change and precarity, and Carey's novel asks

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<sup>71</sup> Haraway, p. 18.

questions about the liveness and deathliness of matter on both a micro (Matthew's death) and macro (human species extinction) level whilst demonstrating the ways in which the global and the individual are always already intertwined.

These are the ways, then, in which I find new materialism useful as an analytical formation in this context. However, I would also like to engage here with some of the criticisms that have been made of the field, as it seems to me that bringing new materialism into dialogue with the power to 'unwork' that I have here afforded to melancholic critical agency might go some way toward drawing out as well as addressing some of these hypothesised problems. Many of these critical responses to new materialist work begin by asking questions about the work the word 'new' is doing in the title of this emerging field, and so I will begin here too.

In a thoughtful article called 'On the Limits and Promise of New Materialist Philosophy,' Kyla Wazana Tompkins calls attention to the fact that 'the putative "newness" of the field is in fact a resurrection of an old body of thinking that reaches back several centuries to Spinozan monism.'<sup>72</sup> As such, it is necessary to ask 'what is the heroic narrative that its putative "newness" seeks to instantiate?' (nfn) :

A non-human centered ontology and ethics; a sense of the biological world as vital and alive; an idea of the body as having a life and conversation of its own, with itself; and, most centrally and crucially, the idea that planetary life should, must be, and will be at the determinative center of political world-making: these are epistemologies and ontologies that can hardly be said to have been recently invented but rather are familiar to, among others, First nations and Indigenous peoples; to those humans who have never been quite human enough as explored, for instance, in postcolonial and revolutionary black thought; to some strands of feminist thinking, for instance, de Beauvoir's thinking about the objecthood of

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<sup>72</sup> Tompkins, p. n.p..

women; and to other non-Western medical and spiritual modalities (npn).

Tompkins is concerned here about the pervasive omission of (in particular) questions of race from new materialist thinking, arguing that minoritarian subjects and histories 'haunt the edges' of certain strands of its theoretical thought (npn). Diana Leong similarly argues that new materialist work proceeds through the 'disavowal or misreading of race as a stagnant analytical framework' (npn). In ignoring the work of critical race scholars, she argues, strands of new materialism secure the "newness" of their field by eliding the complex genealogies of this kind of materialist thinking:

Proscribed from the realm of the human, black intellectuals have had to think within and through the categories of the non-human and inhuman to pursue new ways of being in the world. Philosophical questions about the vitality and agency of the human, the animal, and the object are therefore longstanding in the fields of Black studies (Leong, npn.)

Other critical responses to new materialism have also suggested that the 'newness' it stands for should be treated with caution. In 2008 Sara Ahmed published an article called 'Some Preliminary Remarks on the Founding Gestures of the "New Materialism"' which has since proved extremely influential to debates about the ways in which the new materialisms have instantiated themselves as an emerging field of inquiry. In it she argues that this scholarship is founded on a gesture of rejection; specifically the denunciation of previous feminist scholarship as uninterested in matter, or 'anti-biological' (*Preliminary Remarks*, p.24). Ahmed finds in this trend an idea (that feminist work before new materialism ignores the body in order to focus on 'language, signification and culture'<sup>73</sup>) that has been

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<sup>73</sup> Sara Ahmed, 'Some Preliminary Remarks on the Founding Gestures of the "New Materialism"', *The European Journal of Women's Studies*, 15.1 (2008), 23 (p. 25).

'taken for granted as a common reference point' so that those claiming it often fail to cite specific examples of the ways it unfolds in practice or how it might be tracked across texts or bodies of work (pp. 25-7). Nikki Sullivan has similarly expressed a frustration with 'the claim, repeated of late with mantra-like monotony, that (usually nameless) feminist and/or social constructionists – even those whose work appears to focus on 'the body' – routinely ignore the matter of corporeal life.'<sup>74</sup>

As Peta Hinton and Xin Liu have suggested, then, the major critiques of New Materialism as an emerging field are organised by the suggestion that 'it contains a gesture of *abandonment*.'<sup>75</sup> That is to say, as is evident in the critical positions I have briefly outlined above, there is a consensus that 'new materialism's proclaimed critical nuances and transformative potentials are enabled in the very act of renouncing the sites of political and ethical engagements that have defined feminist and postcolonial praxis' (Hinton and Liu, p.128). In Ahmed's critique, this gesture of abandonment is framed specifically as one of *forgetting*. 'You can only argue for a return to biology by forgetting the feminist work on the biological [...],' she writes. 'In other words, you can only claim that feminism has forgotten the biological if you forget this feminist work' (*Preliminary Remarks*, p. 27).

It seems to me that this emphasis on notions of abandonment and forgetting returns us to the ways in which attachment is understood in the critical discourse on mourning and melancholia that has been the subject of this chapter. Specifically, critiques of new materialism argue for a sustained (melancholic) engagement with objects of attachment that have

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<<https://doi.org/http://journals.sagepub.com/sheffield.idm.oclc.org/doi/pdf/10.1177/1350506807084854>>.

<sup>74</sup> Nikki Sullivan, 'The Somatechnics of Perception and the Matter of the Non/Human: A Critical Response to the New Materialism', *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 19.3 (2012), 299–313 (p. 299). <<https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506812443477>>.

<sup>75</sup> Peta Hinton and Xin Liu, 'The Im/Possibility of Abandonment in New Materialist Ontologies', *Australian Feminist Studies*, 30.84 (2015), 128–45 (p. 128) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/08164649.2015.1046304>>.

either been declared dead (feminist engagement with the biological/material) or never allowed to become visible at all (critical race theory, particularly the work of black scholars). As such, I believe that the kind of melancholic critical agency I have argued for here – one focused on maintain a questioning relationship to losses that might be hidden or disavowed through its complication of the temporal, visible, and grievable – can be productively brought into dialogue with new materialism in order to draw attention to some of the objects it has abandoned, the things that, in Tompkins' words, 'haunt the edges' (nfn). Of course, as I have made clear, the work of new materialists has much to offer my analysis of *The Chemistry of Tears* by drawing attention to the ways that matter begins to 'matter' differently at a time when the global ecological environment is rapidly changing, with the place or cohesiveness of the category of the 'human' increasingly being called into question as part of these changes. As such, I would like my inquiry into the ways these two theoretical formations might productively intersect to emerge out of a reading of several striking moments in Carey's text in which grief is understood as affectively reorienting Catherine's responses to 'matter.' In short, I am interested in how Carey's novel provides an account of the political meanings, in the broadest sense, embedded in objects and beings, life and death, subjectivity and agency.

I began this section by giving some examples of the ways the who/what relation (understood primarily as the taxonomical organisation of living and dead bodies) starts to be troubled for Catherine after Matthew dies and she confronts what this means for him (and her) on the level of matter by imagining his physical degeneration. I turn now to the swan automaton and the large hull that contains its mechanism, the body that is doubled with Matthew's in the text and which is set to come back to life as his slowly deteriorates. It is through several striking encounters with the automaton and its hull that Catherine experiences once more an unravelling of the what/who relation just as she does with Matthew's body, an unravelling that calls her attention to the ways that death

organises and moves through this particular body, too. Here is the moment that Catherine enters her studio to find the mechanism and parts of what she still believes to be a duck automaton waiting for her:

In the left hand corner of the room, nearest to the door and therefore behind my left shoulder when I first entered, was an iridescent grey tarpaulin thrown across some objects, the largest one of which stood about four foot high.

I thought of a beached sting ray, some undead thing washed ashore in *La dolce vita*. When the rational brain woke up, I understood what *must* lie beneath the tarp – an upper and lower cylinder driven by a weight, thirty levers that could be connected with different parts of the duck’s skeletal system to make it drink, et cetera [...] (p.56).

Here, in the moment before her ‘rational brain’ wakes up and she decides that what she sees is an array of cylinders and levers (note the word ‘must’ here – what ‘must’ lie beneath the tarp rather than what ‘does’ lie beneath it) Catherine encounters several objects that escape her comprehension. As such, her initial response (that she is faced with an ‘undead’ stingray) is an affective one, characterised by sensory disruption. In new materialist terms, Catherine’s reaction to the ostensibly inanimate objects in front of her would point to some of the ways that matter, rather than remaining static, can instead be recognized as ‘indeterminate, constantly forming and reforming in unexpected ways’ (Coole and Frost, p.10). In similar terms we might also understand her ability to perceive the shifting lifeliness inhabiting and transforming matter as being related to the way that her encounter with the automaton parts is characterised by an affective, sensory openness (the moment, as Catherine describes it, before ‘rational’ awakening). Tompkins, for instance, finds Dana Luciano’s suggestion that “‘the most compelling contribution of the new materialisms is not conceptual or analytic [...] but sensory” to be ‘the most intellectually exciting reading of New Materialism’s critical potential’ (nbn). She is drawn in particular to this argument from Luciano: ‘The attempt to attend

to the force of liveliness of matter will entail not just a reawakening or redirection of critical attention, but a reorganizing of the senses.’<sup>76</sup> Similarly, for Bennett, the ethical task for what she calls the ‘vital materialist’ is to ‘cultivate the ability to discern nonhuman vitality, to become perceptually open to it’ (cited in Tompkins, npn). Certainly Bennett in particular understands this sensory opening as broadly affirmative in nature, part of the ethics of enmeshment she shares with many others in the field. In this regard, sensing the vitality (or, as I have called it here, lifeliness) in matter leads to recognition on behalf of the perceiving subject that ‘all bodies are kin’; that is, they share this material vitality and as such should be treated ‘more carefully, more strategically, more ecologically’ (p. 13.) This is of course a valuable insight, one that certainly has much to contribute to an ethics of care in our contemporary moment. How are we to account, however, for the less affirmative aspects of such sensory encounters: the ways in which this experience might be disgusting, frightening, tinged with horror?

The ‘beached stingray’ that Catherine thinks of when she looks over at the half-concealed objects is an abject thing, ‘undead’, calling to mind the monstrous dead fish that washes ashore at the end of Federico Fellini’s *La Dolce Vita* (1960). In this sense, it seems unlikely that she would be easily moved to a recognition of the fish’s (or automaton’s) body as kin to her own in the way that Bennett describes. Rather, this vision once more manifests the melancholic critical agency I have described. Although the ‘matter’ with which Catherine engages does have an emotional and sensory impact on her, an impact usefully theorised via a turn to new materialist work, the most important aspect of her affective response is the way in which it allows her to see the presence of death in that same material body. Specifically, in complicating life/death distinctions for her (revealing the “what” in the “who”) the loss of Matthew has caused Catherine to similarly ‘unwork’ other bodies/objects/things in her environment, so that she not only sees their vital lifeliness, but also their

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<sup>76</sup> Tompkins.



*deathliness*. Importantly, indeed, this visual 'unworking' is historical in nature in the sense that it forms causative links between the objects Catherine sees in the present moment and the ways in which these objects might be part of relations that extend across time.

After deciding that she is faced with cylinders and levers, rather than a dead animal, she takes away the tarpaulin covering the objects, although she now thinks of this covering as a 'shroud.'

If a moment later, I was replacing it, it was not because of the ingenious mechanism, but because of a wooden object placed beside it. Even that was nothing, of course, nothing at all. It was just a sort of wooden hull that had probably once contained the mechanism, but I was in a waking nightmare and the brain reported a failed cremation, a burned roast dinner, a black and formless fear. Professionally, I understood the pitch-black underside, but what I saw was the shell of a huge bivalve, crusty, flaking, disinterred from tar. I smelled napalm, creosote, burned pig, death (p.57).

Here, then, Catherine experiences a second distressing response to the objects in the room, one more severe than the first and focused in particular on the wooden hull which Amanda will later become so certain carries the parts of an internal combustion engine over to England from Sumper's workshop. The 'reorganizing of the senses' that takes place in this encounter is not only visual; this time Catherine is also confronted by various terrible smells. Indeed, there can be no doubt here that the vitality she finds present in the hull is terrible and disturbing. There is far more deathliness than liveness present here; filtered through the 'waking nightmare' of her loss, the hull appears to Catherine as full of horror and composed of various abjected elements, having apparently assimilated aspects of the living and dead things involved in its violent construction. Crucially, however, these things all share something in common. They all bear some relation to the practices of mechanised industry that are complicit in the contemporary ecological crisis that the Deepwater

Horizon oil spill is just one visible instance of, and their presence next to each other reinforces this. For example, the 'burned roast dinner' and 'burnt pig' might simply call to mind practices of meat-eating, but side by side with 'tar' and 'napalm' it becomes apparent that these images are associated with the intensive industrial agriculture, more commonly known as 'factory' farming. 'Tar', and the huge bivalve 'disinterred' from it, represents the petroleum industry that makes its presence felt throughout the novel, and 'napalm' the war machine. Intersection and enmeshment is apparent here then, but in order to suggest the ways in which all these industrial practices feed off and reinforce each other: the wars waged in the name of oil, the creosote that is used to preserve and smoke animal flesh, the death that is both prerequisite for and intended outcome of all these things. The images and smells Catherine is visited by all have in common a relation to burning and fire, and the bodies burning are both human and nonhuman. What these sensory nightmares enact, then, is an unravelling of the who/what relation that erases this distinction; leaving nothing but flesh, a shared vulnerability to death that spans across and beyond it.

In this sense, then, Catherine's vision of the hull might certainly cultivate something like the ecological sensibility Bennett is looking for by painting a picture of enmeshment as shared exposure to death, rather than life. Most importantly for my analysis here, however, her unworked image of the hull draws links between the object as it appears in the present moment, acting as a suture-point that holds together the novel's interest in the story of the duck and beyond that the development of mechanisation into industrial technologies. As such, finding the 'deathliness' in an object might here also be understood as locating and being confronted by its historicity. The moment of 'unworking' that takes place when Catherine encounters the hull in her studio combines both the temporal and visual forms of disruption that this chapter has suggested emerge from melancholic critical agency. This means that Catherine's melancholic gaze

here is a *remembering* one; a gaze that is confronted by historical relations and disavowed losses and that redistributes the grievable.

Nikki Sullivan points out that by positing ‘matter’ as an intellectually neglected object in this way, many theorists of new materialism ‘presuppose something called matter – albeit some “thing” whose substance, whose boundaries are relational, undecidable, and constantly in flux – and in doing so, constitute “it” (matter) as *a priori*’ (p.309). This would amount to the idea that new materialists assume ‘matter’ to be a ‘thing’ ready and available for theorising, without necessarily considering the sense in which different kinds of ‘matter’ have emerged and been designated as such in different ways. Mel Y. Chen’s work is invaluable here. Their book *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* builds on but departs from new materialist work by focusing on ‘animacy’ as a construct. Chen is particularly interested in the linguistic concept of an ‘animacy hierarchy’, a structure (or ‘grammar’) which ‘conceptually arranges human life, disabled life, animal life, plant life, and forms of nonliving materials in orders of value and priority.’<sup>77</sup> This enables them to discuss the ways that animacy is specifically ‘nonneutral’ as a concept in that it is shaped in particular by race, sexuality and ability:

Race because the formation of animal and animality has been enriched by colonial histories; sexuality because the discussions of kind, genre, production, and reproduction with regard to such an ontology inevitably call forth concerns of sexuality broadly conceived; ability because the human body and subject have resolutely been imagined as able-bodied, in a god’s image (p.234).

What Chen’s work insists on, then, is that attention be paid not only to the processes by which ‘animacy’ is distributed as well as withheld, but also and crucially to the historical trajectories of these processes. In this sense,

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<sup>77</sup> Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), p. 13.

Chen redirects attention to perception and affect as diagnostic tools that *act on* as well as *on behalf of* experiencing subjects. 'It seems that animacy and its affects are mediated not by whether you *are* a couch, a piece of metal, a human child, or an animal,' they argue, 'but by how holistically you are interpreted and how dynamic you are perceived to be' (p.210). Sullivan makes a similar argument once again in relation to the large body of new materialist discourse that situates the emerging discipline as a reaction to the way in which matter has been under-theorised. She suggests that this perspective is the 'vehicle and effect of a very particular, situated optics' (p.300). For Sullivan, this is an important point that new materialist thinkers in particular should reflect on, because, she argues, "matter" is inextricable from the I/eye that perceives it: perception makes 'matter' matter, it makes 'some-thing' (that is no-thing) (un)become *as such*, it makes 'it' intelligible (p.300). Whilst I am unconvinced that vision can be segregated off from other sensory experiences in this way (Chen's work offers a much fuller account of perception as an embodied encounter with the world), what interests me about Sullivan's argument is the sense in which she emphasises the perceiving subject's responsibility for and implication in the ways in which they 'see' matter. She refers to this as a 'somatics of perception', a term she coins to describe the ways in which soma (the body in the world) and techné (orientations to the world, like 'ways of seeing, knowing feeling, moving, being, acting and so on') are tangled together (p.302). Crucially, however, the orientations – or ways of negotiating the world – that make up the 'technics' of somatics are 'learned within a particular tradition or ontological context (are, in other words, situated), and function (often tacitly) to craft (un)becoming-with in very specific ways' (Sullivan, pg. 302). Necessarily then, perception, when understood as exemplifying this kind of situated somatics, presents 'an orientation to the world in which the I/eye is always-already co-implicated, co-indebted, co-responsible' (p.302). This means that what is really at stake in Sullivan's argument is an invitation to consider the gaze of the perceiving subject as inseparable from the conditions in which that same gaze has come to be. Because of this, she makes it clear, certain

subjects will have an ocular orientation to the world that may be, for example, anthropomorphising, colonising, or heteronormative. To put this back into Chen's terms: how 'holistically' you interpret the world, and how 'dynamic' you perceive it to be (the animacy you allow to different things), are effects of the somatechnics of perception in which you are personally implicated.

To return once more to Catherine and her nightmare vision of the hull, Chen and Sullivan's work enriches the reading I have so far offered of this textual moment by pointing to the sense in which Catherine's 'remembering' gaze is also turned back on herself. That is, there is something about the way loss has unworked Catherine's modes of perception that also applies to her own situatedness; it reveals her own complicity in the violent structures that she sees brought together in the abject hull. Catherine clearly understands the hull to be enmeshed with histories of industrialisation, just as Amanda does when she points to it as the hiding place for Sumper's combustion engine. As such, her terrible vision is inseparable from her obsession with the Deepwater Horizon oil spill and that disaster's own status as a powerful visual symbol of anthropogenic ecological damage.<sup>78</sup> It seems apparent from this that the deathliness Catherine finds present in the hull is related to anthropogenic climate change in the same way that Amanda's vision of its purpose is. It follows, then, that by drawing attention to the ways in which she is responsible for and implicated in her own perceptual schema, a critical melancholic 'remembering' gaze works to reveal how Catherine herself might be culpable in the history of that deathliness.

The agents of this history, as discussed above, are the large-scale mechanised industries (war, oil, meat) that subtend what Tompkins calls

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<sup>78</sup> Indeed, Chen sees the visual politics of the oil spill as exemplifying the sense in which (in new materialist terms) matter might be seen as agential in ways that threaten anthropogenic fantasies of mastery. The 'pure animation of the oil', they point out 'was dramatized and literalized by video coverage of the spewing drill pipe in the water' so that its animacy was 'spectacular to the degree that it dramatized the uncontrollable shifting or transformation of matter.'

'Christological racial capitalism.' This structure, she argues, is responsible for the current planetary crisis because it relies on a 'human-centred logic', one that 'produces categories of beings designated as animal or object, in the name of extracting value and labor-energy' (npn). Nicholas Mirzoeff attributes the same function (the shifting and categorising of beings between human/ nonhuman/ object/ property) to the logic of (neo)colonialism, which is centred, he argues, on 'questions of the definition of life, how to make distinctions and how to see difference.'<sup>79</sup> He also sees these practices, rooted in imperialism and the slave trade that enabled and was enabled by the emergence of capitalism, as predominantly liable for the mass species extinction and climate change that characterises the proposed new geological epoch of the Anthropocene. For this reason, his mantra has become 'it's not the Anthropocene, it's the white supremacy scene' expressive of his belief that 'it is not all people that are indicted by the onset of the Anthropocene but a specific set: colonial settlers, enslavers, and would-be imperialists' (npn).

To begin to conclude, then, whilst I do not wish to form an argument here for Catherine's personal imbrication in these categories and their oppressive history (although I think that would be possible), I would suggest that *The Chemistry of Tears* situates the museum space in which its narrative unfolds as deeply implicated in these histories. In Britain in particular, the legacy of museums is also that of empire, with many of these institutions established with the express purpose of displaying objects from the colonies in order to 'proclaim the merits of empire'.<sup>80</sup> In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries dedicated natural history museums provided homes for the considerable number of specimens brought back from expeditions 'in search of the strange and wonderful fauna of foreign lands', with these exhibits part of an imperial

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<sup>79</sup> Nicholas Mirzoeff, 'It's Not The Anthropocene, It's the White Supremacy Scene. Or, The Geological Color Line.', Forthcoming in *After Extinction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press).

<sup>80</sup> Robert Aldrich, 'Colonial Museums in a Postcolonial Europe', *African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal*, 2.2 (2009), 137-56 (p. 138)

taxonomic project to classify and order as many beings as possible.<sup>81</sup> John Miller points out that these systems of classification ‘further buttressed the ideology of empire by resolving beings into a ‘natural’ hierarchy of higher and lower animals, those destined to exercise dominion over others and those that were unavoidably their prey’, whilst ethnologists included humans in this schema so that ‘the European could contentedly look to science for a validation of racial superiority’ (Miller, pp.65-6). It is certain, then, that museum spaces played a major role in producing the ‘categories of beings designated as animal or object’ that Tompkins identifies as part of the human-centred logic of racial capitalism and the planetary crisis she sees it as originating (nbn).

The fictional Swinburne Museum at which Catherine works is not a dedicated museum of natural history, however. Reviews of the novel repeatedly point out the Swinburne’s similarity to London’s Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A), a resemblance that Carey has endorsed in interviews by revealing that part of his research for the book involved corresponding with a horologist presently working at the V&A. As one of these interview points out, whilst the Swinburne is not the V&A, ‘it has its warren of tunnels and back areas and its conservation protocols and office politics.’<sup>82</sup> The V&A museum’s connections to empire are equally as strong as those of its natural history siblings. Renamed the Victoria and Albert in 1899, its first incarnation was in 1857 as the South Kensington Museum and its purpose was to enshrine what Tim Barringer calls ‘a uniquely modern world-view, that of Victorian imperialism.’<sup>83</sup> The museum displayed objects from areas in which Britain had colonial interests, with Barringer suggesting that ‘the procession of objects from peripheries to

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<sup>81</sup> John Miller, *Empire and the Animal Body: Violence, Identity and Ecology in Victorian Adventure Fiction* (London ; New York: Anthem Press, 2012), pp. 62–63.

<sup>82</sup> ‘Peter Carey’s The Chemistry of Tears’, *CBC News*

<<http://www.cbc.ca/news/entertainment/peter-carey-s-the-chemistry-of-tears-1.1173468>> [accessed 11 September 2017].

<sup>83</sup> Tim Barringer, ‘The South Kensington Museum and the Colonial Project’, in *Colonialism and the Object: Empire, Material Culture, and the Museum*, ed. by T. J. Barringer and Tom Flynn (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 11–27 (p. 11).

centre symbolically enacted the idea of London as the heart of empire' (*Colonialism and the Object*, p.11). He explains that when the museum was re-opened as the V&A in 1909, despite a toning down of its 'didactic mission,' the building confirmed its role as 'the most spectacular repository of the material culture of empire' (p.27). It is likely, then, that Carey is interested in the legacies of empire that modelling the Swinburne on the V&A bring into dialogue with his narrative, given that the swan automaton has been brought into Eric Croft's hands in the first place because of its connection to the 'Sing-Song' clocks that were profitable colonial exports, as well as the fact that Henry Brandling is of course a Victorian gentleman whose family's money comes from investment in that most colonial of enterprises: the railways. So Carey certainly follows the connections between the history of empire and that of industrialisation, and it is in Catherine's vision of the hull that this relation is most richly expressed.

In essence, then, when Catherine sees the hull 'unworked', its relationship to both past and future is exposed as well as temporally disturbed. She is brought to an understanding of the ways it is both lively and deathly but also, more importantly, of the sense in which she perceives it in the way she does because of her situatedness in a particular environment. As such, the terrible affect of her vision might be usefully attributed to the fact that it invites her to take responsibility for the ways in which this particular material body manifests itself to her. She finds herself shamefully responsible for *and* vulnerable to the dreadful reality of environmental catastrophe that so terrifies her. This affective complexity goes far beyond the realisation of shared materiality that Bennett sees as the ethical payoff of her new materialist politics.

In this chapter I have argued that *The Chemistry of Tears* reveals that the attention new materialism pays to the importance of dislocating human agency in our present ecological moment must crucially be supplemented with what I see as the potential of a critical melancholic agency to trouble sites where losses have been made invisible or



disowned. I hope that such a theoretical move might offer an alternative model of enmeshment or imbrication that attends to the historical conditions that allow the emergence of certain kinds of material agency whilst suppressing and even killing others. Bringing melancholic vision into dialogue with new materialism might offer a way, I suggest, to address the micropolitical focus that Diana Leong argues currently characterises the discipline, and in doing so to prioritise the dislocation of oppressive structures that she rightly sees as vital to such a project (nbn).

## Chapter Two

# Narcissistic Attachments: A Melancholic Reading of De-Extinction Projects

### Introduction

On 30<sup>th</sup> July, 2003, a Pyrenean ibex kid was delivered by caesarean section. It was immediately obvious that the young female was struggling to breathe, and she died just a few minutes later; a necropsy revealed that the ibex had developed a large, non-functional lobe in her lung, the mass of which had fatally impaired her breathing. For the few minutes that she lived, however, this kid was the only member of her species present on the planet, the Pyrenean ibex having been declared officially extinct on 6<sup>th</sup> January 2000, when the last female (known as Celia) was found dead, crushed beneath a tree. As such, the birth of the kid heralded the first real 'de-extinction' event when a DNA test confirmed that she was 'genetically identical' to cells that had been taken from Celia four years previously.<sup>84</sup>

De-extinction refers, broadly, to the process of technologically reproducing an extinct organism. As might be expected, there have been many objections raised to such projects, particularly after the 2013 TEDxDeExtinction conference held in Washington DC caused de-extinction to hit the headlines like, in the words of Beth Shapiro, an evolutionary biologist who works with ancient DNA 'only new wars, missing airplanes, or resurrected mammoths can'.<sup>85</sup> Here, scientists in charge of current de-

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<sup>84</sup> J. Folch and others, 'First Birth of an Animal from an Extinct Subspecies (*Capra Pyrenaica* Pyrenaica) by Cloning', *Theriogenology*, 71.6 (2009), 1026–34.

<sup>85</sup> Beth Alison Shapiro, *How to Clone a Mammoth: The Science of de-Extinction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), p. 189.

extinction projects gave talks alongside dissenting voices keen to explore the ethical issues raised by biological resurrection. These are many: alongside concerns about the artificial nature of de-extinct animals,<sup>86</sup> it has been pointed out that many proposed de-extinction candidates would not return to the same ecological environment that once sustained them, and that the reappearance of such animals might impact negatively on human communities in various ways.<sup>87</sup> Furthermore, scientists involved with the various de-extinction projects have (perhaps predictably) been accused of hubris; after the TEDx event Shapiro began to receive menacing hate mail that claimed she was ‘playing God’ and ‘was going to bring about the end of the world’ (p. 192). Environmental philosophers Thom van Dooren and Deborah Bird Rose also recently intervened in this debate when they expressed concerns about the affective ethics of such projects. They suggest that in our current moment of anthropogenic mass extinction, rather than rushing to embrace techno-fixes like de-extinction, we should instead realise that ‘dwelling with extinction – taking it seriously, not rushing to overcome it – may actually be the more important political and ethical work.’ For van Dooren and Rose, this work involves a process of mourning that they argue might ‘open us into an awareness of our dependence on and relationships with those countless others being driven over the edge of extinction.’<sup>88</sup>

This chapter is in part a response to van Dooren and Rose’s claim that de-extinction projects are positioned as an alternative to the cultural and political work of mourning that they see as a vital response to

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<sup>86</sup> Shapiro explains that ‘genetically pure versions of any extinct species, are likely not possible’ but also argues that ‘a mammoth will not have to be pure in order to be received as a mammoth.’ (*How to Clone a Mammoth*) 130. Thus in the case of the passenger pigeon, for example, a successfully resurrected passenger pigeon would in fact be a genetically edited band-tailed pigeon, their closest living relative.

<sup>87</sup> Dolly Jørgensen, ‘Reintroduction and De-Extinction’, *BioScience*, 63.9 (2013), 719–20 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/bioscience/63.9.719>>.

<sup>88</sup> Thom van Dooren and Deborah Bird Rose, ‘Keeping Faith with the Dead: Mourning and De-Extinction’, *Australian Zoologist*, 2015, n.p.

anthropogenic extinction. Following their suggestion that de-extinction projects are reluctant to engage with mourning work, I argue here that these scientific endeavours can be understood as inherently melancholic. In reading these projects as such, I focus on the concepts of identification and ambivalence that are central to Freud's theorisation of melancholia, and I argue that looking at these key ideas in relation to de-extinction reveals the way that notions of human exceptionalism can be problematized by a psychoanalytic reading of these scientific projects. Indeed, I believe that a melancholic reading of these projects shows how they exhibit a radical potential to rethink cross-species relationships that exceeds and undercuts what would appear to be their more conservative, nostalgic agenda, and that this ultimately has ethical implications for rethinking the violence currently present in these relations.

In turning to psychoanalysis to read de-extinction projects and the relations that structure them, I follow Shoshana Felman in regarding Freud's work as an 'invitation to interpretation' rather than an authoritative set of knowledge that might reveal some kind of literary or social 'truth.'<sup>89</sup> Similarly, I value the way that psychoanalysis is able to, in Stephen Frosh's words, 'direct attention towards the unconscious' in order to track patterns of desire as they appear in literary and cultural texts, and it is for this reason that I find Freud's work useful in helping trace the forms of human-animal attachment at work in de-extinction projects (*Psychoanalysis Outside the Clinic*, p.220). I believe that reading de-extinction projects as melancholic in Freud's original sense makes visible certain intriguing aspects of human/non-human relationality that structure these endeavours and would otherwise have remained obscure; as such Freud's work serves to open up thinking in this area, whilst necessarily, as Frosh puts it, remaining 'partial' (p.221).

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<sup>89</sup> Shoshana Felman, 'Turning the Screw of Interpretation', in *Literature and Psychoanalysis: The Question of Reading, Otherwise* (New Haven: Yale French Studies, 1977), p. 116.

## I. Melancholic attachments

Whilst selective or back-breeding has been proposed as one means of achieving de-extinction, the technique that has generated extensive scientific, media and public interest is based on established cloning technology, and relies on the existence of high quality DNA fragments from extinct animals. As such, animals that became extinct relatively recently are the best candidates for this process, with examples including the passenger pigeon, gastric brooding frog, and thylacine, also known as the Tasmanian tiger. For example, in the case of the gastric brooding frog, which became extinct in 1983, preserved genetic material exists that can be transferred into the egg cell of a close relative of the extinct animal in order to, theoretically, create an embryo for implantation into a surrogate mother, in a process known as somatic cell nuclear transfer (SCNT).<sup>90</sup> For animals such as the thylacine or even the woolly mammoth, whose remaining fragments of DNA are damaged and difficult to read, scientists aim to sequence the genome of the extinct creature as best they can. In these cases they use the DNA of living members of a closely related species as a scaffold<sup>91</sup>; if sequencing is achieved, the next step is to manufacture the extinct DNA so that the same process of implantation into an egg cell can be carried out.<sup>92</sup>

In the case of the Pyrenean ibex kid born in 2003, somatic cell nuclear transfer was used. The live birth was the culmination of many years' work by a team operating in the Ordesa valley, a remote mountainous area of the Spanish Pyrenees home to the last few of these

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<sup>90</sup> Michael Archer, *How We'll Resurrect the Gastric Brooding Frog, the Tasmanian Tiger* <[https://www.ted.com/talks/michael\\_archer\\_how\\_we\\_ll\\_resurrect\\_the\\_gastric\\_brooding\\_frog\\_the\\_tasmanian\\_tiger?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/michael_archer_how_we_ll_resurrect_the_gastric_brooding_frog_the_tasmanian_tiger?language=en)> [accessed 28 October 2016].

<sup>91</sup> Jacob S. Sherkow and Henry T. Greely, 'What If Extinction Is Not Forever?', *Science*, 340.6128 (2013), 32–33.

<sup>92</sup> For more on this, see Beth Shapiro's book *How to Clone a Mammoth: The Science of De-Extinction* and also her April 2015 talk at TEDxDeExtinction "How to bring a mammoth back to life", available on the TEDx website

Pyrenean ibex, more commonly known as the *bucardo*. Bucardo were a subspecies of the Spanish ibex, well adapted to extreme habitats like high mountains and cold winters; once widespread, they were hunted intensively throughout the nineteenth century, when their decreasing numbers caused hunters to travel from all over Europe to try and kill what had now become a rare trophy. They were thought to have become extinct in the early twentieth century, so when the small community in the Ordesa valley was discovered, conservation efforts were expended to raise their numbers, which proved unsuccessful. From 1989 scientists began to study the reproduction of the bucardo in captivity, and attempts were made to transfer ibex embryos first into domestic goats, and then, more successfully, to goat/Spanish ibex hybrids. In 1999, skin biopsies were taken from Celia, by now the last of her species, and cells from these were taken to two different laboratories to be multiplied and then frozen. A team led by Dr Jose Folch then began work transferring the nuclei of these bucardo cells into goat cells that had been emptied of their own DNA, producing cloned bucardo embryos that in 2003 were implanted into 44 hybrid goats. Of these 44, only 7 became pregnant, and only one mother carried to term, giving birth to the bucardo kid whose short life confirmed that 'de-extinction' had now become a genuine possibility.<sup>93</sup> At some point in this story then, conservation work (a focus on keeping bucardos alive, either in the wild or captivity) was replaced by research geared toward resurrecting the bucardo through cloning, with the example above showing just how much work this entailed over a number of years. In this sense, the scientists working on the Pyrenean ibex project would appear to have taken the approach environmentalist Stewart Brand suggests is characteristic of de-extinction efforts and most appropriately addresses the challenges posed by mass extinction; 'Don't mourn. Organize.'<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> TEDx Talks, *The First De-Extinction: Alberto Fernandez-Arias at TEDxDeExtinction*

<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5eMqEQw9Fbs>> [accessed 28 October 2016].

<sup>94</sup> Stewart Brand, *The Dawn of de-Extinction. Are You Ready?*

<[https://www.ted.com/talks/stewart\\_brand\\_the\\_dawn\\_of\\_de\\_extinction\\_are\\_you\\_ready?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/stewart_brand_the_dawn_of_de_extinction_are_you_ready?language=en)> [accessed 28 October 2016].

Brand, establisher of the Long Now Foundation and founder of the project Revive & Restore, an initiative investigating the possibility of bringing back the passenger pigeon, made this claim as part of his presentation at TEDxDe-Extinction, dismissing affective responses such as sorrow, anger or grief as useless in the context of contemporary mass anthropogenic extinction.<sup>95</sup> Van Dooren and Rose's paper comes as a response to Brand's comments, which they find 'disturbing' and see as expressing 'a deep misunderstanding about the nature of mourning'; conversely, they see mourning as precisely 'not opposed to practical action' but instead 'the foundation of any sustainable and informed response' to species loss, a response they situate as dependent on the process of working-through that Freud identifies as characteristic of mourning (*Keeping Faith With the Dead*, n.p.). What would it mean, then, to read the rejection of mourning work that Brand suggests typifies de-extinction projects as symptomatic of a melancholic attachment to the lost species they seek to resurrect?

In *Mourning and Melancholia*, although Freud situates melancholia as a pathological response juxtaposed to the 'normal affect' of mourning, throughout his essay he struggles with the distinction between the two and, as Judith Butler notes, his portrait of melancholia 'continually blurs into his view of mourning' (*Psychic Life*, p. 172). Freud situates both conditions as responses to the loss of a loved object made visible in the grieving subject through symptoms of dejection, loss of interest in activities and the outside world and a loss of the capacity to love (*Mourning and Melancholia*, p. 244). In mourning, these external manifestations of grief are accompanied by intense internal work that sees libido withdrawn from the lost love object in a process carried out 'bit by bit, at great expense of time and cathectic energy', resulting eventually in

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<sup>95</sup> A major report published by the Living Planet Index in 2016 warns that the world is on track to lose two-thirds of wild animals by 2020. 'Living Planet Report 2016 | WWF' <[http://wwf.panda.org/about\\_our\\_earth/all\\_publications/lpr\\_2016/](http://wwf.panda.org/about_our_earth/all_publications/lpr_2016/)> [accessed 28 October 2016].

full detachment of the ego from the lost object, so that the ego 'becomes free and uninhibited again', able to seek out a new love object. In melancholia, Freud claims, this process of working-through does not occur; instead of libido being gradually detached from the lost love object and once more turned outward, it is instead withdrawn into the ego, with the result that an identification is established between the ego and the lost object (p.249). To put it in slightly different terms, a melancholic reaction to loss works to transfer the affect of loss from the vanished love object onto the ego; this means that, in Freud's terms, an object-loss is transformed into an ego-loss, and he explains that this process of identification is able to occur due to the narcissistic nature of the attachment to the love-object in melancholia, a point that I will return to later in more detail due to its relevance for my argument here. To sum up, then, for Freud the affect of mourning is opposed to that of melancholia in that after a process of working-through the mourner is able to choose a new love object, whereas the melancholic becomes engaged in a prolonged identification with the lost object that prevents such a reattachment being able to occur. In this way, de-extinction projects can be identified as melancholic in the sense that the scientists involved are either unable or unwilling to seek out new love objects, instead remaining engaged with the extinct animals that they refuse to declare dead. For example, scientists working on the Long Now Foundation's Revive & Restore project are committed to resurrecting the passenger pigeon, which became officially extinct in 1914 after being slaughtered by humans throughout the nineteenth century.<sup>96</sup> In Freud's terms, this would be a melancholic identification that refuses detachment from the lost object (the passenger pigeon), whereas a mourning response would involve a process of working-through allowing for the eventual choice of a new love object; for example, in the context of extinction this might involve instead taking up

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<sup>96</sup> See: Joel Greenberg, *A Feathered River across the Sky: The Passenger Pigeon's Flight to Extinction*, 1st U.S. ed. (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014). and 'About the Passenger Pigeon', *Revive & Restore*, 2015 <<http://reviverestore.org/about-the-passenger-pigeon/>> [accessed 29 October 2016].



conservation efforts on the behalf of any one of the large number of the living bird species whose populations are currently in huge decline.<sup>97</sup>

As I noted earlier in this chapter, many contemporary commentators have suggested that the melancholic reaction to loss is in fact ethical in its refusal to abandon the lost object.<sup>98</sup> In their 2003 volume *Loss*, David L. Eng and David Kazanjian seek to resituate melancholia as politically productive rather than nostalgic or reactionary, arguing that they ‘find in Freud’s conception of melancholia’s persistent struggle with its lost objects not simply a “grasping” and “holding” on to a fixed notion of the past but rather a continuous engagement with loss and its remains’ (4). This continuous engagement with the lost object makes itself known through the ‘critical agency’ that Freud claims becomes active within the ego as a result of the process of melancholic identification; this agency is manifested outwardly as a ‘disturbance of self-regard’ that sees the subject represent their ego as ‘worthless, incapable of any achievement and morally despicable’, a trait that Freud argues is absent in mourning and as such is the primary means of identifying the presence of a melancholic response to loss. Recall, he claims that this is able to happen because of the identification the ego makes with the object that has been lost (that is, the ego and the lost object have become one and the same) so these self-reproaches are in fact ‘reproaches against a loved object which have been shifted away from it on to the patient’s own ego’ (p. 248). This causes a kind of splitting within the ego, where one part sets itself ‘over against’ another and ‘judges it critically’ as it would do with an object, and Freud aligns this critical agency with what he believes to be one of the major institutions of the ego: conscience (p. 247). Crucially, however, Freud sees the actions of this critical agency (self-reproaches, accusations of

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<sup>97</sup> See Van Dooren.

<sup>98</sup> For some examples of and commentary on this see: Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*. ; Eng and Kazanjian. ; Jacques Derrida, Pascale-Anne Brault, and Michael Naas, *The Work of Mourning* (Chicago ; London: University of Chicago Press, 2001). ; Nouri Gana, *Signifying Loss : Toward a Poetics of Narrative Mourning* (Lewisburg [Pa.]: Bucknell University Press, 2011). ; Khanna, *Dark Continents*.

immorality) as the conscious representation of the subject's ambivalent relation to their lost love object, the nature of which is repressed (p. 257). That is to say, Freud argues that in melancholia the relation to the object is one characterised by some kind of ambivalence, a conflict of love and hate, and he claims that the presence of ambivalence in this relation prevents the subject from becoming conscious of the particulars of this struggle, as they would do in mourning. Instead, this conflict is represented in consciousness 'as a conflict between one part of the ego and the critical agency' – so, as self-beratement. As such, I argue that a melancholic reading of de-extinction projects should attend to and seek to make visible the ambivalence present in the object relation between proponents of de-extinction and the lost animals they wish to resurrect, a relation of ambivalence which I suggest is ethically productive. Therefore, I will now go on to locate how critical agency might be active in these projects, and to examine the ways in which Freud's concepts of identification and ambivalence are useful in tracing the unconscious workings of human-animal relations that such a reading allows to emerge.

## **II. Object Loss & Ego Loss**

As I explained above, the critical agency present in melancholia leads the experiencing subject to both understand and present themselves as 'morally despicable' not only in the present moment but in terms of their entire lived experience; indeed, Freud suggests that 'dissatisfaction with the ego on moral grounds is (melancholia's) most outstanding feature' (p.248). He explains that the melancholic 'is not of the opinion that a change has taken place' but instead extends their self-criticism back over the past; they declare that they were 'never any better' (p.246). For Freud, as Chapter One of this thesis showed, this self-reproaching critical agency is directed back toward and focused on the individual melancholic. However, I would like to move on now to consider the ways that de-extinction projects might be read as exhibiting these same patterns of self-reproach on a species, rather than an individual level. Declarations of

historical immorality (the ‘never better’ that Freud describes) are a key feature of public speeches made by many proponents of de-extinction, who stress humanity’s responsibility for extinction rates at the same time as suggesting that humans have a moral obligation to redress anthropogenic extinction. The most vocal commentators on this issue are the three men who have most publicly demonstrated their commitment to de-extinction projects: Stewart Brand, Michael Archer and Ben Novak. In his address at the TEDxDeExtinction conference, Brand declared, ‘the fact is, humans have made a huge hole in nature in the last 10,000 years. We have the ability now, and maybe the moral obligation, to repair some of the damage.’ In *National Geographic* he argues that with resurrection will come ‘redemption.’<sup>99</sup> Michael Archer, the man in charge of the team attempting to de-extinct the gastric brooding frog, which goes by the name ‘The Lazarus Project’, echoes these comments. He claims, ‘we have a moral imperative to try to undo the colossal disasters of this kind for which we are responsible.’<sup>100</sup> Finally Ben Novak, who works at Revive & Restore on the passenger pigeon project, frames the responsibility he also believes humans have to ‘restore’ extinct animals as an ethically necessary refusal to let go of loss (or, to mourn), reproaching humanity for having ‘forgotten’ the passenger pigeon.<sup>101</sup> In melancholic terms, Freud argues that this ‘disturbance of self-regard’ (which is, as here, always publicly expressed, suggesting a kind of ‘satisfaction in self-exposure’) points to the fact that the melancholic has suffered a loss of ego, rather than of object, as a result of the identification the ego has formed with the lost love object (p. 247). In this sense, then, the self-berating discourse of de-extinction points to the fact that not only has an identification been made between human ego and (lost) animal object, but further, that the loss of these animals has in fact materially impoverished the human ego; that is to say, something in

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<sup>99</sup> Stewart Brand, for National Geographic News PUBLISHED March 12, and 2013, ‘Opinion: The Case for Reviving Extinct Species’, *National Geographic News*, 2013. [accessed 30 September 2017].

<sup>100</sup> Brian Switek, ‘How to Resurrect Lost Species’, *National Geographic News*, 2013. [accessed 29 October 2016].

<sup>101</sup> “How to Bring Passenger Pigeons All the Way Back: Ben Novak at TEDxDeExtinction” Video at TEDxTalks’, *TEDxTalks*. [accessed 29 October 2016].

the human has been lost, too. Again, I say ‘the human’ here because it is clear that Brand, Archer and Novak do not identify this impoverished ego in individual, personal terms (as Freud would do) but rather conceptualise it as shared, or communal. As such, de-extinction projects appear to be invested in the concept of a kind of collective human species ego.

This notion is a problematic one, not least because it works to obscure the myriad differences between members of the human species by suggesting they might share the same investments in the future of that species; of course, this also works backwards too by implying the burden of guilt for nonhuman extinction is also equally distributed across humanity.<sup>102</sup> In this case, an emphasis on the use of the word ‘we’ in the words of all three men could be dismissed as a simple marketing ploy that emphasises shared responsibility and shared profit.

Within the parameters of a melancholic reading, however, and focusing on the process of identification that sees the ego merge with its lost love object, the positing of a collective human species ego materially and affectively impoverished by animal loss allows a more radical potential to emerge in this discourse: an avowal of the imbrication of the nonhuman within the human. The repeated invocation of this collective, and supposedly damaged, human ego in relation to nonhuman death implies an inextricable relationship between human and nonhuman life characterised not by the ‘practical’ value of biodiversity or ecosystem stability but by the imperative of maintaining a certain wellbeing or *psychical health* in the human species. As such, a melancholic reading

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<sup>102</sup> The problems that I identify here in relation to the concept of a human species ego parallel similar recent debates on the application of the neologism ‘Anthropocene’ to the current geological epoch, with the analogous flattening of humanity that this implies (i.e. equal human responsibility for the geological changes that have irrevocably altered the planet, as well as a lack of engagement with the unequal global distribution of human suffering that will result from these changes). This has led some theorists to prefer the term ‘Capitalocene’ for this same epoch. For a nuanced examination of this debate see *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, ed. by Jason W. Moore.

points to the way that certain patterns of attachment in de-extinction discourse undermine human exceptionalism. Such a challenge is vital, van Dooren suggests, because it is human exceptionalism that is at the root of 'our inability to really *get* – to comprehend at any meaningful level – the multiple connections and dependencies between ourselves and these disappearing others: a failure to appreciate the ways in which we are at stake in one another, all the ways in which we share a world' (*Flight Ways*, p.140).

I want to turn now to examine the narcissistic attachments that Freud argues characterise melancholia in order to break down the concept of ego/object identification a little more, and to show how this process of identification functions in the context of de-extinction projects to further reveal the complex ways that humans and animals might be 'at stake in one another.' In line with the argument I have made above for using the notion of a human species ego to track the patterns of identification and attachment at work in de-extinction projects, when I refer to the 'human' below I have this collective subject ego in mind, rather than any of the specific individuals involved in de-extinction initiatives.

### III. Narcissistic Attachments

In his editor's note to *Mourning and Melancholia* James Strachey suggests that the paper be regarded as 'an extension of the one on narcissism which Freud had written a year earlier.'<sup>103</sup> He refers here to 1914's *On Narcissism: An Introduction*, and suggests it was Freud's introduction of narcissism as a concept that allowed him to reopen the subject of melancholia he had put to the side years earlier. Indeed, in *Mourning and Melancholia* it is the idea of narcissistic attachment that

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<sup>103</sup> James Strachey, 'Editor's Note', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud. Volume XIV (1914-1916), On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works* (London: Vintage, 2001), p. 240.

really allows Freud to pull mourning and melancholia apart; he suggests that it is in fact the propensity to make narcissistic object-choices that predisposes a subject to melancholia, although regrets that this 'has not yet been confirmed by observation' (p. 250).

Narcissism in Freud's terms refers to a libidinal investment in the self: in 'On Narcissism' he argues for the existence of a 'primary and normal' form of this in all human beings, and associates this with the instinct of self-preservation that may 'justifiably be attributed to every living creature.'<sup>104</sup> He posits, however, the existence of a secondary type of narcissism; this also functions by drawing libidinal investment inward, into the ego, and occurs as a result of the subject making object-choices based on identification; that is to say, they are 'seeking *themselves* as a love-object' (*On Narcissism*, p. 88). It is this narcissistic kind of object-choice that Freud suggests produces a melancholic response if and when this chosen love object is lost: the narcissistic object-choice regresses into 'original narcissism' because love for the object is instead replaced by the ego identifying itself as that object in order that the love-relation 'need not be given up' (*Mourning and Melancholia*, p.249). Freud gives a summary of the 'paths' he says may lead to a person making a narcissistic object choice, explaining that this person (a 'him' in Freud's work) may choose to love objects that he associates with:

- a) what he himself is (i.e. himself),
- b) what he himself was,
- c) what he himself would like to be,
- d) someone who was once part of himself (*On Narcissism*, p.90).

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<sup>104</sup> Sigmund Freud, James Strachey, and Anna Freud, 'On Narcissism: An Introduction', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud. Volume XIV (1914-1916), On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works* (London: Vintage, 2001), p. 74.

To return once more to de-extinction projects, I want to suggest that examining their melancholic attachment to lost species in the context of narcissistic object-choice further illuminates the ways that relationships between different kinds of human and nonhuman life are being imagined in these initiatives, and I believe that this can be tracked in two particular ways.

Firstly, Freud's positing of narcissistic object-choice as one of the conditions of possibility for melancholia suggests that the chosen 'love-object' in de-extinction discourse – extinct animals – has been selected on a narcissistic basis. This means that it may be possible that the patterns of human desire (again, understood on a species rather than an individual level) at work in de-extinction projects are directed toward extinct animals because of a process of identification whereby, in Freud's terms, humans have sought *themselves* as a love object. This suggests that a reading of the attachments that structure de-extinction projects works to reveal not only human dependence on the nonhuman (in the sense of psychical health that I described earlier), but more specifically the impossibility of their straightforward separation; that is to say, in this context humans are *identifying with animals*. This also means that the impoverishment of human ego operative in this context, (which I described earlier as consciously expressed in the self-berating 'critical agency' of de-extinction discourse) does not only occur because a melancholic response causes the (human) ego to identify with the lost (animal) object after the fact, but conversely, suggests that the entanglement of human and animal is actually the structural possibility for melancholia. To put it another way, humans must have already made this identification with animals in order to have selected them as a love-object on a narcissistic basis, otherwise, as Freud explains, the melancholic response that allows narcissistic object-choice to regress to 'pure' narcissism, would not be likely to occur. This extends the argument I am making here for the imbrication of the nonhuman in the human beyond

the scope of de-extinction projects by suggesting that processes of human-animal identification are already at work outside of these contexts.

Secondly, I want to turn to the last of the four 'paths' listed above that Freud suggests may lead to a narcissistic choice of love-object, where he explains that a subject may form a love-relation with someone they understand as having once been 'part of' themselves. In the context of de-extinction projects, then, this would open up the possibility that humans might have narcissistically selected animals as love-objects as a means of repairing some kind of fissure or loss in the human ego. This idea makes more sense in the context of Freud's later work when he came to revisit his thoughts on melancholia, rejecting his earlier claim that it was a 'pathological' relation to loss and instead resituating the identification of ego with object as not only 'common and typical' but also as essential to the formation of the ego in the first place. Rather, he explains, the process is a 'frequent' one that 'makes it possible to suppose that the character of the ego is a precipitate of abandoned object-cathexes and that it contains the history of those object-choices' (*Ego and the Id*, p.18). In this way, Freud suggests that the ego may in fact be built upon the lost objects drawn inside it as the result of melancholic identification, so that, in Judith Butler's words, the 'character' of the ego 'appears to be the sedimentation of objects loved and lost, the archaeological reminder, as it were, of unresolved grief' (*Psychic Life*, p.133).

In the context of de-extinction then, the narcissistic choice of animals as love-objects, and the resulting melancholic identification of (human) ego with (animal) object, gestures toward the possibility that an ejection of the animal from the human ego (so that animals are missed when once they were 'part of' that ego) might be understood as one of the 'objects loved and lost' that serve to produce that same ego in the first place; that is, humans narcissistically attach to the animal object because it is understood as having been taken from them. The originary loss of the animal from within the human ego can be attributed to the (in this case



psychological) workings of human exceptionalism; a distinction is made between human and nonhuman animals (animals do not belong in the human ego), so that these nonhuman animals come to be understood as outside of and, in this context, lost from the human. In this sense then, paying close attention to the configurations of attachment operative within de-extinction projects allows human exceptionalism to be understood as a form of loss that works to both produce and impoverish the human ego. That is, the lost animal object can be comprehended as one of the 'abandoned object-cathexes' upon which Freud suggests the human ego is constructed. As such, this lost animal object can be theorised as a kind of residue or remainder within the ego that makes it possible for the human subject to remember the animal as 'someone who was once part of himself', leading to a narcissistic attachment that seeks to recover that lost 'part.'*(On Narcissism, p,90)*<sup>105</sup>

In terms of the argument I am making here, that a melancholic reading of de-extinction projects makes visible some of the complex ways that humans and animals are psychically and materially entwined, understanding human exceptionalism as entailing ego loss not only works to show how humans and animals are entangled, but also goes further in suggesting that a denial of this entanglement ignores the ways that the ego is impoverished, or wounded, without these relations. Judith Butler speaks to this impoverishment of ego when arguing that the substitution of ego for object that characterises melancholia 'does not quite work'. For Butler,

The turn from the object to the ego can never quite be accomplished; it involves figuring the ego on the model of the object [...]; it also involves the unconscious belief that the ego might compensate for

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<sup>105</sup> Whilst my argument here focuses on thinking through human exceptionalism specifically in psychoanalytical terms, there is of course already a large and established body of theoretical work that traces the workings of this concept historically and culturally. See in particular: Matthew Calarco: *Zoographies: The Question of the Animal from Heidegger to Derrida*; Cary Wolfe, *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and Posthumanist Theory*.

the loss that is suffered. To the extent that the ego fails to provide such compensation, it exposes the faultlines in its own tenuous foundations (*Psychic Life*, p.169).

In this argument, then, the melancholic ego identifies with the object that has been lost in order to make up for that loss, to be a 'substitute' for it. What Butler's work holds open here is the possibility that in failing to do this, a melancholic response to loss opens up the ego to a critical gaze. To put this another way, in exposing the 'faultlines' in the foundations of the ego, melancholia exposes its partiality; that is, the way that the ego cannot exist without the lost objects that structure and produce it. In the case of de-extinction projects, this would mean calling attention to the fact that humans cannot function as a substitute for the extinct animals that inhabit the place of the lost object in this melancholic relation, because human exceptionalism would be revealed as one of the 'tenuous foundations' of the ego, a faultline characterised by loss. As such, I would like to salvage this idea of the ego as impoverished, or wounded, by losses that it is unable to compensate for. This notion is ethically productive in that it is able to nurture the understanding that, as I have argued here, humans and animals are implicated in one another, but particularly in the sense that it suggests that different kinds of animal losses are not, as de-extinction might hope, replaceable.

Referring to the impoverishment of the ego in melancholia, however, once more recalls the 'critical agency' that Freud sees at work in this process, the public performance of self-beratement that identifies the melancholic as having suffered a loss (or impoverishment) of ego, rather than of object. Freud explains that this critical agency is the conscious representation of another of the preconditions for melancholia; the **ambivalence** that characterises the subject's relation to the love object. Butler suggests that the ambivalence present in melancholia (and the critical agency or self-beratement that makes this visible) is caused, as I

have discussed, by the failure of the ego to compensate for loss by successfully identifying with and replacing the lost object. As such, ambivalence in the melancholic relation proceeds from the impoverishment of ego that results when it fails to substitute for the lost object 'in a way that satisfies (that is, to overcome its status *as* a substitution)' (*Psychic Life*, p.169). Crucially, however, Freud explains that the nature of this ambivalent relation is repressed, so that 'everything to do with these struggles due to ambivalence remains withdrawn from consciousness' (*Mourning and Melancholia*, p.257). Therefore, the action of the critical agency (self-reproaches and self-beratement) is simply the conscious, or observable manifestation of the ambivalence of the object-relation, the particulars of which are in fact hidden from the subject. This means that the 'true' aspect of ambivalence, the failure of the ego to substitute for the lost object and the impoverishment, or wounding, of ego that this causes, is not available to consciousness. As such, the (human) subject is unable to understand the structural and affective importance of the ego's relation to lost (animal) love objects, and the potential that I have argued such an understanding holds for the refiguring of ethical relations cannot be put to work.

In light of this, I want to turn once more to de-extinction projects to examine how ambivalence works in the context of the melancholic attachment to lost species that this chapter has argued such projects demonstrate.

#### **IV. Ambivalence**

I began this chapter by noting, following Stephen Frosh, that a Freudian psychoanalytic reading of a cultural formation like de-extinction projects must necessarily always be partial. Up to this point, I have tried to track the patterns of desire and attachment in these projects and have argued that these inhabit a radical potential for acknowledging and rethinking human and animal entanglement against human

exceptionalism. However, such a psychoanalytic reading necessarily traces unconscious patterns of desire, and although I have argued that these are ethically productive, they are not visible in the material practices of de-extinction projects, which have been and will certainly be the cause of much animal suffering in addition to other effects, both known and unknown. In this sense then, the ethically valuable 'continuous engagement with loss' that Eng and Kazanjian see in melancholia, and the 'critique of the status quo' that Khanna attributes to its critical agency, are not observable in de-extinction's melancholic relation to lost species. It would seem, then, that it matters deeply how this continuous engagement plays out, and as such a melancholic reading should always be attentive to the specificity of the kinds of loss it seeks to uncover and trace. As such, I want to briefly examine some of the material effects that de-extinction projects might have for the animals involved.

As I have explained, the reality of the ambivalent relation, which in the case of de-extinction projects would be the failure of humans to substitute for lost animal species, is not available to consciousness, and instead is expressed through the self-berating activity of the critical agency. As this chapter has shown, this critical agency can be observed at work in de-extinction discourse in the way that its proponents situate humanity as morally responsible for the resurrection of lost species. The effect of this ambivalence then, as it is manifested consciously, is not a reflection on the generality of human-animal dependency, but instead a targeted selection of certain animals that are seen as more morally deserving of human attention in this context. The effect of this is that these animals (so-called 'candidates' for de-extinction) are prioritised over other animal bodies; Thom van Dooren refers to such practices as 'regimes of violent care', which he defines as occurring when 'intimate care for some [...] bodies, some species, sits alongside the domination, coercion and abandonment of others' (*Flight Ways*, p.92). Just one example of this as it occurs in de-extinction projects are the surrogate mothers that will be forcibly impregnated with cloned embryos; in the case of the Pyrenean

ibex these were the 44 hybrid goats that played host to Celia's cloned DNA. Recall, only seven of these became pregnant, and the one mother who carried to term lost her baby within minutes of its birth. As such it is important to note that the melancholic attachments at work in de-extinction projects function only with regard to specific kinds of nonhuman animals. Ian Lowe, the President of the Australian Conservation Foundation, has described them succinctly as 'special animals'. Lowe is referring here to their value in terms of biodiversity, but the selection of de-extinction candidates is evidently influenced by the established preference for 'specialness' that similarly skews both environmental and public interest toward the kinds of animals that have come to be referred to as 'charismatic megafauna'. In this sense, it is apparent that the 'critical agency' at work in de-extinction projects functions partially; that is to say, it is ignorant of the connection to and dependence on all animals that the unconscious workings of the ambivalent relation make visible in the human ego. Furthermore, whilst extinct animals are the focus of these projects and also my interest here, it is crucial to remember also that other kinds of animal deaths are legitimised by means of a continual reinforcement of their separation from the human to the point that not only the animals themselves, but also their deaths, become consumable in different ways. Therefore it is clear that the pattern and direction of narcissistic attachment in de-extinction projects (and human-animal relations more generally) is selective and limited to certain kinds of animals for reasons that are beyond this discussion.

Finally, another important material effect of de-extinction on the lives of the animals it involves would be the captive rearing that would become necessary if de-extinction succeeded and young animals were born. Raising animals in captivity brings with it a number of practical and ethical problems, as is demonstrated by this same practice as it currently exists in a zoo or conservation setting. Shapiro explains that some species 'suffer terribly' in captivity – 'they have shorter life expectancy, rarely reproduce, and even develop psychological disorders', and de-extinct

animals would face the added challenge of being reared amongst a social group that would necessarily be that of a different (if closely related) species (*Mammoth*, p.169). In this scenario, it would also be necessary to negotiate parent-child relationships, particularly in relation to imprinting; van Dooren explains that, for example, some birds raised in captivity by “parents” of another species ‘tend to preferentially associate with individuals of these kinds, individuals that look and sound like their “parents”’ (*Flight Ways*, p.95). Whatever else, it is certain that these animals would be subjected to what Matthew Chrulew calls an ‘intensive anatomo-politics of the animal body’, involving ‘regular testing, extraction of fluids, transportation, enforced tranquilisation, separation and recombination of social groups, imposed breeding and the removal of offspring.’<sup>106</sup> In this sense, Chrulew argues, these animals would not have ‘full’ or ‘flourishing’ lives, but instead would live a ‘wounded life, robbed of vital connectivities and expressions’ (*Life and Death at the Zoo*, p.139).<sup>107</sup>

Rather than a defence of the material practices of de-extinction as necessary or ethical, then, this chapter has been an attempt to show how a psychoanalytic reading of these projects might illuminate the radical potential they exhibit to rethink cross-species relationships, a latent possibility that exceeds and undercuts what would appear to be their more conservative, nostalgic agenda. Further, it has been an effort to make conscious the workings of ambivalence that structure melancholia and point to the ego’s partiality; that is, the fact that it exists because of the lost objects that structure and produce it, not in spite of these. I believe that in the context of human-animal relations making visible the ambivalence present in the object relation between proponents of de-extinction and the lost animals they wish to resurrect is an important and necessary ethical

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<sup>106</sup> ‘AHR 50 (May 2011): Matthew Chrulew: Managing Love and Death at the Zoo: The Biopolitics of Endangered Species Preservation’, p. 148 [accessed 30 October 2016].

<sup>107</sup> Chrulew makes this argument about contemporary breeding programs at the zoo, not specifically in relation to de-extinction, but the intervention into animal life would be the same in both contexts.

project, one this chapter has sought to enact. Further, bringing these processes into consciousness challenges human exceptionalism by demonstrating how de-extinction projects are always already psychologically invested in human and animal entanglement. Rather than suggesting that this justifies the activities of de-extinction projects, however, I would instead argue that the insight into human-animal dependency that has been sketched out here should invite reflection on the importance of all animal beings to human life, as well as prompting enquiry into the kinds of desires or investments animals might have in this relationship. That is to say, we might consider our connection not only to animals that have become extinct because of human activity, or those that are currently endangered for the same reason, but also to all those animals currently subject to varying degrees of violence at the hands of humans, so that we might consider, in Robert McKay's words, how to 'live well' with them.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Robert McKay, 'More-than-Human Life Well-Lived?', *Sheffield Animals Research Colloquium*, 2015.

## Chapter Three

### 'Futurity's Unquestioned Value': Precarious Subjects in *The Hunter* and *A Child's Book of True Crime*

#### Introduction

On April 16th, 2014, the *Daily Mirror* ran a front-page story highlighting the sharp increase in food bank use throughout the UK. The headline read, 'Britain, 2014. We're the sixth largest economy in the world. We have more millionaires than ever before... So why have we handed out ONE MILLION food parcels?' In smaller type the paper added 'new figures reveal 330, 000 went to hungry children.' A full-page photograph of a young white child illustrated the story; her eyes are full of tears and a trail of snot runs from her nose. She appears to be in great distress.<sup>109</sup>

This photograph became the subject of great controversy when it was revealed by a blogger to be a stock image purchased by the *Mirror* from the Getty Images photo agency.<sup>110</sup> It had in fact been taken in San Francisco in 2009, and uploaded to the photo sharing website Flickr by photographer Lauren Rosenbaum, the mother of the child in question. She explains on her Flickr page that her daughter's tears were actually caused by the loss of an earthworm, named Flower, whom she had befriended whilst playing in the park (Brown, *Guardian*). This revelation sparked a far-ranging debate about media ethics and authenticity. 'Imagine the stink

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<sup>109</sup> 'AHR 50 (May 2011): Matthew Chrlew: Managing Love and Death at the Zoo: The Biopolitics of Endangered Species Preservation', p. 148 [accessed 30 October 2016].

<sup>110</sup> Roy Greenslade, 'Daily Mirror's "Crying Girl" Picture Lands the Paper in an Ethical Row', *The Guardian*, 16 April 2014, section Media [accessed 25 September 2017].



if we'd used a pic of an actual child who had received food parcels' was the response from the *Daily Mirror's* editor, Lloyd Embley (Greenslade, *Guardian*). Jane Merrick, writing for the *Independent*, also defended the *Mirror*, claiming 'it was absolutely right to jar its readers into noticing this shocking statistic by using a highly emotive picture of a crying child.'<sup>111</sup> Merrick's point – that the capacity of the photograph to emotionally 'jar' readers was a valuable means of encouraging them to care about the rise in juvenile food bank use – was addressed in the *Guardian* by the columnist Andrew Brown, who pointed out that images like the one on the *Mirror's* front cover serve a particular purpose and have done for a long time. 'The great innovation of universalist religions, starting with Christianity,' he wrote, 'is the idea that it doesn't actually matter who the child is, or where it is crying. We have an immediate duty of compassion' (Brown, *Guardian*). Brown's words here focus attention on the ways that such affecting child-images can be (and indeed are) used as shorthand for particular moral narratives of care, vulnerability, neglect or violence. As such, they wield great symbolic power.

Lee Edelman makes the power of such child-oriented symbolism the focus of his 2004 polemic, *No Future*, in which he advocates a queerness that would refuse to engage with the futurity it is seen to threaten. He focuses on this idea through the figure of the capital-C 'Child', an emblematic conception that he makes clear is 'not to be confused with the lived experience of any historical children.'<sup>112</sup> His interest lies, specifically, in the ways this figure becomes enmeshed with political life so that it comes to be imagined as 'the fantasmic beneficiary of every political intervention' (Edelman, p. 2). As such, the Child serves as the symbol of society's collective and aspirational future, the emblem of what Edelman calls 'futurity's unquestioned value' (p.4). He argues:

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<sup>111</sup> Jane Merrick, 'How to Picture Child Poverty: The Mirror May Have Used a Stock Photo', *The Independent*, 2014 [accessed 25 September 2017].

<sup>112</sup> Lee Edelman, *No Future : Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), p. 11.

Historically constructed [...] to serve as the repository of variously sentimentalized cultural identifications, the Child has come to embody for us the telos of the social order and come to be seen as the one for whom that order is held in perpetual trust (p.11).

Edelman is at pains to make clear the absolute indispensability not only of the Child to visions of the political future, but also visions of the future to the political. As he sees it, the two are irrevocably linked, so that 'we are no more able to conceive of a politics without a fantasy of the future than we are able to conceive of a future without the figure of the Child' (p.11). But what if the inability to conceive of a vision of the future became a genuine possibility? What would that mean, not only for the political imaginary, but also for the symbolic power of the Child figure?

We are currently living through a mass extinction event, the largest since an asteroid impact wiped out the dinosaurs at the end of the Cretaceous period sixty-six million years ago. This crisis, sometimes referred to as the 'sixth extinction', has seen species going extinct in record numbers and is commonly understood as being caused by anthropogenic activity.<sup>113</sup> Clare Colebrook has suggested that one of the particular challenges for the human species in this new age of extinction is that "we" are finally sensing both our finitude as a world-forming and world-destroying species.<sup>114</sup> For Colebrook, the mass loss of nonhuman life that characterises the sixth extinction effects a kind of epistemological rupture in humanist narratives of progress by calling attention to the fact that the human species ultimately faces a similar fate. As such, she argues, 'one would not assume the future would only need to be altered in degree in

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<sup>113</sup> For a detailed and interdisciplinary account of the sixth extinction and what it means for particular species, see Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

<sup>114</sup> Claire Colebrook, *Death of the PostHuman: Essays on Extinction. Vol. 1: ...*, Critical Climate Change (London: Open Humanities Press, 2014), p. 32.

order for life to continue: one would ask whether the future would be one of life' (Colebrook, p. 57). It is easy to read Edelman's work with extinction in mind and note the problem it would pose to the political as he imagines it.

Whatever refuses the mandate by which our political institutions compel the collective reproduction of the child must appear as a threat not only to the organization of a given social order but also, and far more ominously, to social order as such, insofar as it threatens a logic of futurism on which meaning always depends (p. 11).

This chapter, then, will explore the relationship between extinction, futurity, and the Child that I have briefly sketched here. In order to think through these connections I bring work on queer negativity that positions the queer subject in an antagonistic relation to the future into conversation with two novels that engage with the current extinction crisis that I have suggested also poses a threat to the future imaginary. Specifically, I am interested in tracking the ways that the symbolic 'Child' figure Edelman diagnoses as animating political and cultural discussions about the future is also deployed in representations of extinction. I explore how these insights from queer theory make it possible to read these fictional texts as similarly reluctant to engage with futurity, with these anxieties played out through an engagement with precarious subjects like the child.

This enquiry will focus on Chloe Hooper's 2002 novel *A Child's Book of True Crime*, and Julia Leigh's *The Hunter*, published in 2000. Both fictional texts are set in Tasmania and have questions of extinction at their heart. Hooper's novel is narrated by Kate Byrne, a twenty-two year old school teacher who lives and works in the fictional town of Endport and becomes fascinated by the events surrounding a young woman from the town's murder some years previously. Kate decides to write down the

events of the murder in a format suitable for the children in her class, and her children's detective story weaves through the novel, narrated by a 'bush gang' made up of various extinct and endangered Australian animals. Leigh's novel *The Hunter* focuses on the actions of its protagonist, known only as 'M', who is employed by an unnamed biotech company to investigate a reported sighting of the last ever thylacine (also known as the 'Tasmanian tiger'), a dog-like marsupial officially declared extinct in Tasmania in 1986. M's task is to kill the animal and then harvest its organs and DNA, but his assignment is made more complicated when he becomes involved in the lives of the family paid to be his hosts.

In both texts anxieties about nonhuman extinction are played out within narratives that explore the vulnerability of human children. As such, both novels allow an insight into the ways that the 'Child' figure Edelman describes inhabits and shapes cultural (as well as political) responses to our current planetary extinction crisis. This connection is evident on a structural level in that both texts frustrate expectations of conventional narrative 'progress' because they are troubled by and reluctant to engage with futurity in just the way Edelman suggests queerness might be. In this sense, they maintain a melancholic relation against the future, with their investment in 'backwards feelings' also drawing attention to the ways that representations of both children and extinct/endangered animals are wrapped up in questions of national identity and the national past.<sup>115</sup>

## I. Queer negativity: feeling backwards

In 2005, the MLA Annual Convention in Washington DC hosted a panel called 'The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory.' Panel members Tim Dean, Lee Edelman, Judith Halberstam, and José Muñoz joined the

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<sup>115</sup> Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, 1st Harvard University Press pbk. ed. (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press, 2007).

organiser, Robert L. Caserio, in locating the origins of this ‘antisocial thesis’ in Leo Bersani’s 1995 work, *Homos*.<sup>116</sup> Here, Caserio explains, Bersani questions the ‘compatibility of homosexuality with civic service’, arguing that homosexual opposition to certain kinds of community is in fact politically valuable. Caserio claims that in asking the question “‘should a homosexual be a good citizen?’” Bersani ‘inspired a decade of questions of queer unbelonging’ (Caserio, p. 819). Following Bersani, queer theorists who endorse the antisocial thesis are interested in effecting a shift in the ways that the social is thought, so that the emphasis moves away from what Judith Halberstam calls ‘projects of redemption, reconstruction, restoration, and reclamation’ toward ways of being in the world that embrace negativity (Caserio, p.823). They see the workings of this ‘queer negativity’ as a reaction against and alternative to the emphasis in liberal gay politics on the extension of certain rights (marriage, parenthood) to gay citizens.<sup>117</sup>

For Heather Love, such efforts to make gay citizens more legally visible are particularly problematic in the sense that they ‘threaten to obscure the continuing denigration and dismissal of queer existence’ (*Feeling Backward*, p.10) In *Feeling Backward* she addresses what she understands to be a similar conflict at the heart of queer studies between the affirmation of gay and lesbian experience and an emphasis on remembering histories of queer suffering (Love, pp.1-3). Attempts to rehabilitate these histories of damage and violence in order that they might be used for ‘positive political purposes’ leave her concerned that ‘queer studies, in its haste to refunction such experiences, may not be adequately reckoning with their powerful legacies’ (p. 19). In this way, Love suggests contemporary queer subjects can be understood as facing a choice between engagement with the past and affirmation of the future that finds them “‘looking forward” while [...] “feeling backward”” (p. 27).

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<sup>116</sup> Robert L. Caserio and others, ‘The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory’, *PMLA*, 121.3 (2006), 819–28.

<sup>117</sup> See Caserio and others, p. 819; Edelman, p. 19.

'Rather than disavowing the history of marginalization and abjection' she writes, 'I suggest that we embrace it, exploring the ways it continues to structure queer experience in the present' (p. 29). For Love, this means engaging with and leaning into these 'backwards feelings' a move which simultaneously reckons with the ways that queerness has historically been perniciously associated with a kind of 'backwardness'.

Whether understood as throwbacks to an earlier stage of human development or as children who refuse to grow up, queers have been seen across the twentieth century as a backward race. Perverse, immature, sterile, and melancholic: even when they provoke fears about the future, they somehow also recall the past (Love, p. 6).

In this sense, then, Love's proposal that queer studies (as well as queer subjects) lean into and engage with 'backwardness' is also an invitation to inhabit a position that has been identified with queerness in negative terms. As such, her work shares similarities with Edelman's. He also sees the self-identification of queers with negativity as a way to redress the workings of a liberal politics that seeks to rehabilitate queerness from this association (*No Future*, p. 3). Both Edelman and Love point out that at bottom, a desire to refute or move beyond this identification simply means 'shifting the figural burden of queerness to someone else' (Edelman, p.27). For Love, this means that 'one may enter the mainstream on the condition that one breaks ties with all those who cannot make it' (p. 10). Those left behind by promises of liberal inclusion include 'the non-white and nonmonogamous, the poor and the genderdeviant, the fat, the disabled, the unemployed, the infected, and a host of unmentionable others'(p. 10). Edelman makes this point in slightly different terms by arguing that queerness inhabits a structural position of social negativity that is vital to a political project of imagining the future; that is, it takes the place of the death drive (non-reproductivity) that is always opposed to a Child figure that guarantees the future. As such, a negatively figured queerness, imagined as posing a threat to the Child, is in fact the very condition of

possibility for this figure's emergence. As Edelman makes clear, the supposed danger posed to this Child by queerness legitimates a political realm that restricts the freedoms of othered subjects in the name of safeguarding this Child's imaginary future:

We encounter this image on every side as the lives, the speech, and the freedoms of adults face constant threat of legal curtailment out of deference to imaginary Children whose futures, as if they were permitted to have them except as they consist in the prospect of passing them on to Children of their own, are construed as endangered by the social disease as which queer sexualities register (p. 19)

As such, Edelman argues, the fact that political visions of the future are organised around these imaginary Children and their imaginary futures means that the 'absolute privilege of heteronormativity' is preserved at all times. He names this political and cultural formation 'reproductive futurism' (p.2). Queer negativity, then, would name the 'unthinkable' space inhabited by those not "fighting for the children", those who refuse the logic of reproductive futurism by refusing to adhere to the logic that privileges the emblematic Child over real beings (pg.3). For Edelman this means an emphatic turn away from the future in an embrace of negativity that refuses to organise itself around principles of hope or redemption, seeing these things as simply too aligned with the political project of reproductive futurism to be rehabilitated for a more radical project. Or, as Edelman puts it, 'the future is mere repetition and just as lethal as the past.' 'What is queerest about us,' he writes, 'and queerest within us, and queerest despite us is this willingness to insist intransitively – to insist that the future stop here' (p. 31).

Edelman's project has been one of the most influential to engage with the 'antisocial thesis.' As Caserio acknowledged in the published conference debates that followed the 2005 MLA panel, there was a sense

in which the contributors overidentified the antisocial thesis with Edelman's work. Despite some panelists arguing against the project of queer negativity as proposed in *No Future*, Caserio noted that it was hard for them to 'fully escape Edelman's force' (Caserio, p. 820). The power of Edelman's polemic is such that contemporary work on queer negativity often follows him in situating the importance of such a project in relation to the concepts of reproductivity and childhood that he deploys so forcefully. Sara Ahmed, for example, has recently argued for the recognition of 'queer pessimism' as a significant affect, one that 'refuses to organize its hope for happiness around the figure of the child or other tropes for reproductivity' (*Promise of Happiness*, p.162). Similarly, Judith Halberstam's latest project *The Queer Art of Failure* thinks through some of the ways that queerness has been aligned with failure due to the fact that 'success in a heteronormative, capitalist society equates too easily to specific forms of reproductive maturity combined with wealth accumulation.'<sup>118</sup> Heather Love, however, differentiates her project of imagining a 'backward future' from Edelman's. Where he insists on the absolute suspension of the future and future imaginaries, Love sees the turn away from the future in her work as simply a side-effect of its prioritisation of backwardness (p. 147) As such, it is the gesture of feeling backwards that defines her contribution to theories of queer negativity, rather than that of refusing the future. In the sense that Love's work insists on the importance of maintaining an attachment to a past that others would seek to move beyond, then, it engages with melancholia, which she understands to be a particularly queer form of affect. This is not, as she makes clear, because she imagines homosexuality and melancholia to share some kind of naturalised relation, but is rather due to the fact that she sees this link as being undeniably present in queer culture and therefore deserving of critical attention (p. 20).

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<sup>118</sup> Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, N.C. ; London: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 2.



In tracking anxieties about nonhuman extinction, children, and the future as they appear in *The Hunter* and *A Child's Book of True Crime*, I keep in mind both these iterations of queer negativity. That is, I am interested in analysing the ways that both texts variously close off relationships to futurity as well as seek out melancholic connections to past histories of damage and suffering, histories that in this context are related to the legacy of colonialism as it haunts settler society. In this chapter, extinction is figured as presenting an alternative structural threat to 'the logic of futurism' than that of the queerness Edelman shows occupies that position, and following his theory and that of Love, I trace the ways that this affects the narrative representation of both human children and nonhuman animals.

## **II. Extinction, children, and precarious subjects.**

Sara Ahmed is inspired by Edelman's work when she chooses to conduct readings of dystopian imaginaries. These forms interest her because, she explains, 'they take as a starting point the possibility that the future might be something we have already lost.' As such they offer visions not only of unhappy futures but also engage with 'the possibility of no future at all, where no future is not conceived of as unhappiness (which would be predicated on the survival of a subject) but no hap, no chance, no possibility' (Ahmed, p.163). As I have already suggested, mass nonhuman extinction and the climate crises that contribute to it not only show that the future will be, as Ahmed puts it, 'a time of loss', but also gesture to the possibility (and indeed inevitability) of human species extinction. As such, extinction discourse is in a sense structured by the difficulty of imagining futurity, as well as in some sectors the problem of how to sell and market images of a future understood as stable and worthy of investment (for

example in the case of geoengineering projects that seek to mitigate the effects of climate change without addressing its structural causes).<sup>119</sup>

Responses to this aporia in ecological thinking can be generally understood as organised into those that are future-oriented and others that advocate for a 'backwards' approach that would take stock of the potential causes of the current extinction and climate crises. For example Ashley Dawson, in his book *Extinction: A Radical History*, takes up the second position. Although his project is to imagine how it would be possible to build a radical anti-capitalist conservation movement, and as such might seem focused on futurity, he makes it clear that such a movement could only emerge from a historically located understanding that 'the extinction crisis is at once an environmental issue *and* a social justice issue, one that is linked to long histories of capitalist domination over specific people, animals, and plants.'<sup>120</sup> Rob Nixon makes a similar point when developing his concept of the 'slow violence' that he suggests characterises much environmental catastrophe.<sup>121</sup> In preferring this term over that of 'structural' violence, Nixon argues that he is drawing attention to the temporal dimension of destruction that, in his words, 'occurs gradually and out of sight' (Nixon, p. 2). In this sense he can also be understood as advocating for a kind of dispersed, backwards thinking characterised by processes of memorialising when he claims that 'in the long arc between the emergence of slow violence and its delayed effects, both the causes and the memory of catastrophe readily fade from view as the casualties incurred typically pass untallied and unremembered' (pp. 8-9).

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<sup>119</sup> For an interesting and varied analysis of the ways such projects relate to the future in the theological imagination, see *Theological and Ethical Perspectives on Climate Engineering: Calming the Storm*, ed. by Forrest Clinger and Kevin J. O'Brien (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016).

<sup>120</sup> Ashley Dawson, *Extinction: A Radical History*. (New York: OR Books, 2016), p. 84

<sup>121</sup> Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011).

The future-oriented approach could perhaps be best summed up by the de-extinction projects that were the focus of the previous chapter in this thesis, which evolutionary biologist Beth Shapiro explains captivate her 'because de-extinction uses awesome, exciting, cutting-edge technology to take a giant step forward (*Mammoth*, p. 206).' Such endeavours look forward to the future by seeking to manage and mitigate planetary disaster in a similar manner to the geo-engineering projects I described above. Indeed, the debate over whether to 'mourn' extinct species or not that I engaged with in Chapter Two is exemplary of the tension in such discourse between 'forwards' and 'backwards' thinking. Stewart Brand, proclaiming 'don't mourn, organise!' belongs to the camp of those who are invested in addressing extinction through future 'fixes', whilst Thom van Dooren and Deborah Bird Rose's argument that mourning lost animals is an ethical project is premised on the assumption that thinking extinction necessitates a backward turn. Whilst, as I argued in the previous chapter, the fact that in these projects it is the birth (although crucially, not wellbeing) of nonhuman children that is seen as guaranteeing this future disrupts species relations, for the most part such initiatives still use the rhetoric of reproductive futurism that privileges the symbolic human Child. Take Stewart Brand's comments in his opinion piece on de-extinction for *National Geographic*, for example. He claims that conservationists are 'learning the benefits of building hope and building on hope' with de-extinct species being 'beacons of hope.' He then specifically situates the benefits of de-extinction as a means not only of enriching the lives of children, but also as engendering in them an environmental consciousness that will naturally be passed on when they become parents themselves:

The current generation of children will experience the return of some remarkable creatures in their lifetime. It may be part of what defines their generation and their attitude to the natural world. They will drag their parents to zoos to see the woolly mammoth and growing populations of captive-bred passenger pigeons, ivory-billed

woodpeckers, Carolina parakeets, Eskimo curlews, great auks, Labrador ducks, and maybe even dodos.<sup>122</sup>

Such rhetoric is omnipresent in discussions of ecological crisis, which in posing a threat to the future naturally poses a threat to the Child who stands for that future. Political and legal discourse on this issue more often than not concerns itself with protecting and legislating on behalf of future generations that are frequently conceptualised as inhabiting a permanent childhood. Whilst legal commentators such as Edward Page have suggested that climate change presents ‘a clear source of intergenerational inequality of opportunity’, and the World Future Council, formed in 2004 and calling itself ‘the voice of future generations’ sees one of its main achievements as the fact that ‘the United Nations general assembly now considers the rights of future generations in global deliberations’, policy documents like the 1987 Brundtland Report specifically characterise these ambiguous future generations as dispossessed children.<sup>123</sup> This environmental report, put together by the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development, is addressed to the ‘young’ in particular, and claims that a focus on global sustainability is necessary to avoid ‘undermining our children’s fundamental right to a healthy, life-enhancing environment.’ They claim that whilst environmental resource accounts ‘may show profit on the balance sheets of our generations, [...] our children will inherit the losses.’<sup>124</sup> This same discursive pattern is also evident, for example, in a recent collaborative campaign between UNICEF and Save the Children, which claims that ‘action on climate change is fundamentally about the action we must take

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<sup>122</sup> Brand, March 12, and 2013.

<sup>123</sup> Edward Page, *Climate Change, Justice and Future Generations* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2007), p. 58; World Future Council (WFC), ‘National Policies & International Instruments to Protect the Rights of Future Generations (Working Paper)’, p. 2 [accessed 4 May 2014].

<sup>124</sup> World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

to protect children's futures and the legacy we want to leave for them.'<sup>125</sup> These same anxieties are expressed in popular culture through the increasingly large number of post-apocalyptic novels and films that conclude with a single child, pregnancy, or adapted family unit signifying hope for the survival of the human species. Perhaps the example that springs most readily to mind (and one used by both Edelman and Ahmed as an instance of reproductive futurism in action) is P. D. James's novel *Children of Men* (1992), made into a film of the same name in 2006. Other examples might include Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), Justin Cronin's *Passage* trilogy (2010-2016), and a host of original and adapted films including *I Am Legend* (2007), *28 Days Later* (2002), *The Terminator* (1984), and *Oblivion* (2013).

The risk of such an investment in the Child, as Edelman points out, is that this figure's entitlement to 'claim full rights to its future share in the nation's good' always comes at the cost of 'limiting the rights "real" citizens are allowed' (p. 11). In the context of ecological thinking, then, and particularly as this manifests in legislation, the risk of prioritising this continuously deferred figure is the subordination of the rights of subjects that are already living. This is especially problematic because both the responsibility for and consequences of environmental crises are already unevenly distributed. As Peter Newell and Matthew Paterson put it:

Behind the cosy language used to describe climate change as a common threat to all humankind, it is clear that some people and countries contribute to it disproportionately, while others bear the brunt of its effects. What makes it a particularly tricky issue to address is that it is the people that will suffer most that currently

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<sup>125</sup> Jasmine Burgess, 'Climate Change: Children's Challenge' (Unicef UK, 2013), p. 7 [accessed 12 June 2014].

contribute least to the problem, i.e. the poor in the developing world.<sup>126</sup>

Yet the image of the endangered Child endures in conversations about extinction and climate change. Whilst Edelman's argument frames the Child figure as threatened by (and in need of protection from) queer sexualities, Paul Kelleher broadens the field of culpability by suggesting that this is the default mode of representation for any portrayal of children. 'In order to reflect on our relationships with children,' he argues, 'in order to conceive of childhood as such, we must put the child in danger.'<sup>127</sup>

Why, as a way to think about children, have we become accustomed to beginning with an image of the "child" in danger and only then (assuming *then* ever comes, working our way back to the boy or girl in the room? The "child" I speak of here refers not to a group or class of children, or any one identifiable child, but rather the figure of *no child in particular*, a figure whose lack of particularity enables a great deal of thinking and speaking – not to mention legislating and policy making – about matters of so-called general, national, or universal concern (Kelleher, p. 151).

Kelleher's argument here clearly crosses over with Edelman's (both were published in the same year), but his work is particularly useful not only because the argument above speaks directly to the rhetorical patterns of the environmental policy makers cited here, but because he pays extensive attention to the way children are framed as endangered in a more general sense. Kelleher's words here gesture to the way that his 'no child in

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<sup>126</sup> Peter (Peter John) Newell and Matthew Paterson, *Climate Capitalism : Global Warming and the Transformation of the Global Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 7.

<sup>127</sup> Paul Kelleher, 'How to Do Things with Perversion: Psychoanalysis and the "Child in Danger"', in *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children*, ed. by Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), pp. 151–71 (p. 151).

particular' (Edelman's 'Child') becomes emptied of meaning precisely because of the sense in which it emerges as a precarious subject (the child in danger). This is especially useful as a means of drawing attention to the ways that talking about (or writing about, for my purposes here) children presents a problem of representation in that the emptiness of this figure also opens it up to a struggle for meaning. It is in this sense that I would like to draw an analogy here between the Child figure, and extinct and endangered animals.

Ursula Heise argues that stories about nature and biodiversity are generally made to fit a narrative template that suggests both these things 'have done nothing but deteriorate under the impact of modern societies' (a claim she is sceptical about), with this template made to work 'through a pervasive logic of what biologists usually call proxy and literary scholars call synecdoche – the part standing in for the whole.'<sup>128</sup> One of the ways that this happens, she explains, is through a focus on 'a fairly narrow set' of animals (whether endangered or extinct); so-called charismatic megafauna like whales, gorillas, bears and visually striking birds (Heise, p.23). The result of this, Heise explains, is that the focus on a single aesthetically appealing species 'blocks from view other species, lacking those qualities, that may be more endangered or more crucial for ecosystemic functioning' (p. 24). Already then, we can begin to see that the representation of extinct or endangered animals replicates that of the Child figure as certain symbolically powerful animals come to dominate the field of conservation science and ecological activism to the detriment of others (not to mention, as Heise points out, plants).<sup>129</sup> This relation is perhaps most fully evident in conservation work in which 'introduced' species are the subject of eradication programs that prioritise the lives of other, more 'authentic' animals, with the racially coded reference to these

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<sup>128</sup> Ursula K. Heise, *Imagining Extinction: The Cultural Meanings of Endangered Species* (Chicago ; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), p. 22.

<sup>129</sup> Heise argues that 'conservation science [...] shows preferences in its objects of study that broadly parallel public biases.' (pp. 24-5.)

species as 'invasive' calling to mind the way that the Child is imagined as in need of protection from threatening (non-white, queer) others (Heise, p. 29).

Representations of endangered and extinct animals also follow the same logic as those that figure the Child in the sense that Kelleher describes when the emergence of their subjectivity is premised on and arises out of the ways that they are imagined as being in danger. Kathryn Yusoff refers to this as 'subjectivity declared through precarity', arguing that this 'prepares an ontological field for the subject in which dependence is already inscribed in the material conditions of emergence.' The example she gives is that of an orang-utan pictured in an area of deforestation. By being declared in this way, she explains, the animal is 'already an abandoned being.'<sup>130</sup> It is in this same sense that the individual 'last' animal (an elegiac subject declared through precarity) stands in, as Heise would put it, *synecdochically* for the rest of its species, so that its own particular 'material conditions of emergence' are obscured in the same way that those of the symbolic 'Child' figure are.

I don't wish to suggest here that the emblematic figures of the 'Child' and the extinct/endangered animal are simply equivalent; indeed, there are numerous differences in the way that these figures are deployed that, although of interest to me, are beyond the scope of this chapter. Rather, I want to argue that they are both symbolic forms that trouble the future imaginary, and because they raise similar questions about representational logic, when they converge in narratives about extinction their precarious subjectivity sets up certain formal expectations (about their right to be protected or rescued) that are frustrated by the two novels on which this chapter focuses. Theories of queer negativity provide a useful analytic framework in which to explore the ways that both texts

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<sup>130</sup> Kathryn Yusoff, 'Aesthetics of Loss: Biodiversity, Banal Violence and Biotic Subjects', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 37.4 (2012), 578–92 (p. 586). [accessed 28 November 2013]



organise these representations of children and endangered/extinct animals by engaging with the conflict between future-oriented and 'backwards' thinking that I have suggested frequents narratives of environmental crisis.

### III. Troubled futures

Both *The Hunter* and *A Child's Book of True Crime* figure children as precarious subjects. In *The Hunter*, M lodges in a remote house at the foot of the mountain that he periodically ascends in pursuit of the thylacine. A grieving family inhabits this house; a young girl (Sass) and her even younger brother (Bike) are in charge whilst their mother Lucy sleeps all day under the influence of copious amounts of prescription medication. Their father, Jarrah Armstrong, is believed dead after climbing the mountain months previously in search of the same thylacine that M now pursues. Sass and Bike are undoubtedly in need of adult care – on M's arrival the house is filthy and 'a black mould clouds the ceiling and walls.'<sup>131</sup>

In *A Child's Book of True Crime*, this precarious subjectivity is explicitly gendered; with children in danger for the most part exhibiting the 'feminized infantile vulnerability' that Lauren Berlant has called 'the scene of national anxiety.'<sup>132</sup> Whilst children appear often in the novel, because the narrator Kate is a primary school teacher and the text often focuses on her conversation with her classes, it is Kate herself who presents the exemplary endangered 'Child' in the novel. Despite being twenty-two, she exhibits a constant and unwavering nostalgia for childhood ('I wished I really were a little girl'), and has found becoming a teacher 'like crossing to the other side', unable to stop herself 'feeling like

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<sup>131</sup> Julia Leigh, *The Hunter* (London: Faber, 2000), p. 9.

a spy.<sup>133</sup> Kate is engaged in a love affair with Thomas Marne, the father of her favourite pupil, and Thomas's wife Veronica has recently published a true crime story retelling the events of the 1983 murder of local woman Ellie Siddell called *Murder at Black Swan Point*. At the time of her murder Ellie was also in an adulterous relationship with the local veterinarian Graeme Harvey, whose wife Margaret – the main suspect in the killing – vanished without a trace on the same day that Ellie was brutally stabbed. Kate is obsessed with both Ellie's story and Veronica's retelling of it, and believes it is being replayed in real time with the role of murdered young woman being hers this time around. 'I understood Ellie' she explains, 'because I gave her my own story' (p. 71). Kate imagines Ellie, like herself, as being so vulnerable that she has had to be 'protected from bad things so strenuously that the slightest irregularity – like the tattooed woman once seen bathing – could overwhelm' (p. 66). Furthermore, she sees young female victims like Ellie as characterised by the lack of particularity that Kelleher attributes to the child in danger motif. As part of Kate's newfound interest in true crime narratives, she has come to believe that the same photographs are used inside all the true crime books – 'they'd found the ultimate photograph of a murder victim in her school uniform which they reused over and over, alternating others from their *doomed girls series*' (p. 132).

In both texts the precarious subjectivity of children is also mirrored by and intertwined with that of endangered and extinct animals, most specifically the thylacine. In *The Hunter*, M's mercenary quest to kill the thylacine and harvest its organs is juxtaposed against the decision of the missing Jarrah Armstrong (who it transpires has also seen the tassie tiger) to keep this discovery secret from everyone except his family. As such Leigh's narrative holds out the hope, as Tony D'Aeth has argued, that through time spent with Jarrah's children, M will decide to abandon his

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<sup>133</sup> Chloe Hooper, *A Child's Book of True Crime: A Novel* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2002), pp. 19, 47.

hunt and let the tiger live out its days in peace.<sup>134</sup> In *A Child's Book* the thylacine is also foregrounded in the alternative version of *Murder at Black Swan Point* that Kate decides to write to explain the story of Ellie Siddell's murder to children. This story takes up alternative chapters of the novel, and is told by a group of animal detectives who are investigating the crime. This group is made up of native Australian animals with alliterative names (Kitty Koala, Wally Wombat) led by Terence Tiger, a thylacine who keeps his coat 'superbly clean, despite his poverty' and has an interest in psychologically profiling murderers (p. 209). All the animals in this 'bushgang' are suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder – 'so many of their furry brethren, their feathered cousins and most reptilian relatives had had foul and bloody deeds committed against them' – and are not doing so well themselves. Kitty the Koala has a strain of chlamydia that has left her blind and infertile; Wally the Wombat's family have been killed by feral cats; and Terence, of course, is extinct (p. 183). Kate presents these vulnerable animals as companions and protectors to the children who will read her book, and throughout the novel the violence done to animals and young 'doomed girls' is collated.

In both texts, then, the threat of nonhuman extinction is tied to the fate of the novel's human children. In *A Child's Book* their safety depends on the wellbeing of the 'bushgang' who safeguard them from violence, and in *The Hunter* M's decision of whether to continue searching for the thylacine is seen as directly related to the burden of care that he may or may not take up in relation to Sass and Bike. As such, the futures both texts imagine for human children are shaped by the ways in which they engage with the problems nonhuman extinction poses to these futures, with children and nonhuman animals figured as companions in precarious subjectivity. The fact that 'dependence is already inscribed in the material conditions of emergence' for these children and animals means that a certain set of assumptions are set out in both texts relating to the ways in

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<sup>134</sup> Tony Hughes-d'Aeth, 'Australian Writing, Deep Ecology and Julia Leigh's *The Hunter*', *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature*, 1.0 (2006), 19–31 (p. 23).

which these vulnerable beings might fairly expect protection. In both novels, however, such expectations are disrupted when the trajectories of both narratives fail to move toward a future that would guarantee the safety of these precarious subjects.

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Both novels have at their heart what might be considered exemplary humanist narratives of progress. In *The Hunter* this plot is one of scientific discovery and advancement, and in *A Child's Book of True Crime* one of pedagogy, focusing on the processes by which children are socialised into adulthood. In both texts, however, these narratives of progress fail to work in the way they should; they falter, go wrong, or turn backwards. By considering this disruption in terms of Edelman's 'cult of the Child', however, it becomes clear that Leigh and Hooper's treatment of progress narratives varies according to the extent to which reproductive futurism is present as an idea in each text. In terms of *The Hunter's* exploration of extinction, Leigh performs what in Edelman's terms would be the fairly conventional gesture of suggesting the failure to care for children means the failure to be of the future. In contrast, in *A Child's Book of True Crime* Hooper reflects critically on the ways in which reproductive futurism structures the stories that are told about extinction and precarious subjects, with the text ultimately suggesting a turn toward the past is one means of moving away from these kinds of plots.

Tony D'Aeth posits the existence of a particularly Australian poetics of place in which 'redemption is the implicit theme.' This idea unfolds, he argues, as 'a central element of the metaphysics of land – the hostile land, the conquered land, the merciless land, the merciful land – that has run through Australian place-writing since the journals of exploration' (D'Aeth, p. 23) As such, D'Aeth claims, *The Hunter* commits something of a heresy when it leaves M 'unredeemed' (p. 22). He refers here to the fact that M does in the end carry out his task of finding and murdering the thylacine,

after returning from a short time away from Tasmania to find the house abandoned. Sass, he finds out, has been badly burned after a stray spark from the fire next to which she has been sleeping sets her clothes alight. The accident has torn the family apart: Sass is critically ill in hospital, Bike is in foster care, and their mother has been institutionalised. For D'Aeth however, the fact that M does not, in the end, get to participate in a redemption narrative is not a failing in the novel, but is in fact 'the point of the novel' (p. 22). He links expectations of redemption in the novel to M's interactions with the bereaved Armstrong family, suggesting that the orthodox outcome of such an encounter as it plays out in the novel form is usually the forming of a new family unit.<sup>135</sup>

Still (we long to believe) children have strange effects on people, they can soften even the hardest hearts, and then there is the woman who must awake and she too, especially given her own demons, will surely find a way to redeem M (p. 23).

By withholding this outcome from the reader, D'Aeth argues that Leigh 'uses the humanist machinery of the novel form to expose the limits of human-centred values' (p. 28). Whilst I find his argument entirely convincing, I would like to push it a little further here by suggesting that these 'human-centred values' only ever function within a framework of future oriented thinking that is focused on the infinite reproduction of (valued members of) the human species. Leigh's subversion of humanist narrative form is in fact only able to occur because these narrative conventions are reliant on and mobilised by the particular set of expectations that crystallise around the Child figure. Sass and Bike are precarious subjects whose inclusion in the text enacts the expectation that narrative progression will only occur once M acknowledges his debt of care and fulfils his position in the heteronormative family unit. The possibility of such an outcome is gestured toward in the text, making it all

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<sup>135</sup> The 2011 film adaptation of the novel which stars Willem Defoe concludes with M arriving at a school to meet a sad looking Bike, who immediately runs into his arms.

the more powerful when this happy resolution never materialises. For the most part, it is M's relationship with Bike that implies he may be developing feelings for the Armstrong family. This is particularly evident in an incident about halfway through the novel, where Bike secretly follows M hoping that they can ascend the mountain together. M's anger when he discovers Bike's presence causes the boy to break down in tears, and the normally cold M takes Bike in his arms and, moved to feel 'how tiny he is, and how warm', begins whispering words of comfort that he remembers hearing from his own mother (*Leigh*, p. 110). The developing relationship between M and Bike is also linked to the expectation that M may call off his hunt for the thylacine, after Bike shows him a drawing he has done of the animal based on his father's sighting, a piece of information that is 'top secret' (p. 79). Bike's obvious investment in protecting the thylacine offers up the hope that in learning to care for Bike, M will also learn to keep his secret.

Cate Kennedy's 2009 novel *The World Beneath* depicts what might be understood as the orthodox version of this narrative.<sup>136</sup> Rich, estranged from his teenage daughter Sophie for most of her life, invites her on a trip to hike across the Tasmanian Overland Track. An arrogant yet inexperienced hiker, Rich orchestrates their separation from the rest of the group, and they soon become lost in the wild landscape. On their arrival in Hobart, Sophie is saddened and angered by the forlorn thylacine exhibit in the town's museum, and they are both shocked when what appears to be a Tasmanian tiger breaks through the undergrowth close to their campsite. Rich, a photographer by profession, manages to take a few shots of it on his camera; shots that could make him famous. Distressed by the idea that he might make the photographs public, Sophie attempts to convince her father that they have simply seen a wild dog. The climax of the novel sees them estranged as helicopters arrive to rescue them from their isolated spot; as Sophie is about to leave Rich ceremoniously pulls

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<sup>136</sup> Cate Kennedy, *The World beneath* (London: Atlantic, 2010).

the film out of his camera, winning back her trust. As the novel closes we learn that Rich has earned his place as a part of Sophie's life. Crucially, being a father has given his life meaning.

The plot of *The World Beneath* clearly replicates the logic of reproductive futurism by insisting that the only way to look forward is to participate in what Caserio calls 'the cult of family [...] that never questions the value of biological reproduction and of children's sensibilities' (Caserio, p. 820). That is, the novel's imagining of an ecologically viable future, which Sophie suggests can only be achieved by keeping people out of 'wild places' ('we should just lock them up and throw away the key [...] we wreck everything we touch') is achievable only by Rich prioritising his relationship with his daughter by acquiescing to her desires. In this way, the novel suggests, to register affect for the Child is also to look toward a hopeful future, with this affective relation (Rich's care for his daughter) made visible through his treatment of the precarious subject with which she is twinned: the thylacine. Although it might seem that in taking such a different narrative direction (refusing to allow a hopeful future to crystallise) *The Hunter* contradicts the logic of reproductive futurism, in fact the novel does the opposite. All that happens, in fact, is a kind of reversal of the events of *The World Beneath* that ultimately ends up confirming the same thing; that to register no affect for a Child, especially a Child-in-danger, is to be turned against the future which the thylacine once more stands to symbolise.

M's characterisation in *The Hunter* works to confirm a claim that is implicit in Edelman's depiction of the negatively figured queer as 'the place of the social order's death drive.' This is that in belonging to the side of those "not fighting for the children" – i.e. by not prioritising the precarious subjectivity of the Child – the queer is imagined as inhabiting a subjectivity that is somehow less-than-human. This is apparent in what D'Aeth calls M's 'android relationship to the world', arguing that his mode 'is not reflection but process [...] he administrates himself, constantly

attending to data, and managing his needs in terms of the task at hand' (D'Aeth p.p. 25-6). One of the effects of his positioning by Leigh as a kind of 'android hero', D'Aeth suggests, is that he stands 'outside of moral frameworks' (p. 26). More specifically, I would argue, M stands outside of the relational, family-based frameworks that are assumed to govern morality, 'anchored by neither wife nor home, nor by a lover or even a single friend' and having borrowed money so that his 'only girlfriend' could pay for an abortion after falling pregnant with his child. This memory inspires little emotion in him, other than surprise that 'after all these years [...] he still remembers' (p. 69).

Whilst it is clear, then, that M's character is opposed to reproductive futurism and its tenets (the Child and its family), his figuration as an agent of queer negativity is also tied to his murder of the thylacine. After killing the animal, he has a thought that 'grows light in him, incandescent,' the thought that 'he is the only one: the only one, I am the only one' (p. 167). The thylacine's death, it seems, has enabled him to take her place – the place of the 'last.' As such, he takes on what Katherine Yusoff refers to as 'the burden of representation' carried by any such 'last' animal. Such a burden is related to the same kind of closing down that M's murderous act enacts, Yusoff explains, because 'while there are many, there is possibility,' whereas 'when there is only one there is only the burden of representation, of representing *a failure to become (to be of the future)*' (Yusoff, p. 589, my italics). As such, Leigh's novel ties M's refutation of reproductive futurism to his killing of the thylacine, suggesting that these different ways in which he refuses to 'be of the future' are in fact entangled. In performing this gesture, the text makes the unfortunate move of tying M's inability to react compassionately to scenes of extinction to his non-participation in 'the cult of the family.' In this way, Leigh's novel simply reproduces the discourse of reproductive futurism that would see those who opt out as positioned against the future; or, in Edelman's terms, queered. Ultimately, the regrettable consequence of such a formulation is that the text leaves no space open for the development of



a *queer response* to problems of extinction, a response that might look to react to our current ecological crises in ways that move beyond the privileging of heteronormative (white, wealthy) family units.

#### IV. Feeling backwards

Ursula Heise argues that ‘the elegiac mode dominates verbal and visual representations of endangered species’, with stories about extinct or threatened animals frequently engaging with what she refers to as the ‘politically mobilizing’ potential of mourning and melancholia (Heise, pp. 54, 35). For Heise, *The Hunter* presents just such an example of an elegiac narrative where ‘the elegy for a species becomes a fulcrum for rethinking development and modernization’ (p. 46). Such narratives, she suggests, predominantly work to critique histories of colonization and modernisation and position them as responsible for extinction crises (p. 48). In doing so, she argues, they also raise questions of national identity, with this usually seen as diminished or altered by species loss:

In literary, visual, and musical representations of extinction, biological crisis typically becomes a proxy for cultural concerns: worries about the future of nature, on one hand, and on the other hand, hopes that a part of one’s national identity and culture might be preserved, revived, or changed for the better if an endangered species could be allowed to survive or an extinct one could be rediscovered (p. 49).

Ostensibly, Chloe Hooper’s *Child’s Book of True Crime* might be seen to fit this profile. Kate, is obsessed by the colonial past of Tasmania and the ways in which these histories are obscured in the contemporary moment. As a settler society, modern Tasmanian national identity is inescapably tied to the genocidal extermination of the island’s indigenous peoples on

which its community is built.<sup>137</sup> Kate sees the numerous instances of brutal animal death on the island as symptomatic of the way that such a violent history necessarily returns to haunt its inhabitants. In this sense, then, *A Child's Book* might be understood as unfolding in the 'elegiac mode' that Heise describes. However, Hooper's novel remains, ultimately, uninterested in the kind of redemption narrative that would see this national identity 'preserved, revived, or changed for the better.' Rather, the text focuses on asking (but not necessarily answering) questions about how this past might be *represented*, and how such forms of representation might create precarious (or victimised) subjects in ways that obscure the reality of societal power relations. Sceptical of a future that promises only to hold more violence, and interested in the genealogies of this violence, *A Child's Book* offers an example of the 'feeling backwards' Heather Love associates with attempts to lean into histories of suffering. In the manner of the backwards turn Love theorises, however, the text does not suggest that such an engagement is a means of guaranteeing a hopeful future. As such, its melancholia is not 'politically mobilizing' in the sense that Heise suggests, but rather a necessary refusal of what Emily Potter calls Australia's 'rhetoric of Official Reconciliation [...] predicated [...] on the transcendence of unclean or uncomfortable pasts.'<sup>138</sup>

In Kate's narrative the town of Endport and its environs are presented as exhibiting a kind of forced amnesia toward these 'uncomfortable' pasts. This is evident in attempts to cover over or repurpose sites that gesture toward this history; an endeavour that inevitably fails to suppress the glimpses of violence that emerge, palimpsest-like, into view. For the benefit of visiting tourists, Kate

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<sup>137</sup> For a detailed account of these events see Lyndall Ryan, *The Aboriginal Tasmanians*, 2nd ed. (St. Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1996). Also Henry Reynolds, *A History of Tasmania* (Cambridge; Port Melbourne, Vic.: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 47–87.

<sup>138</sup> Emily Potter, 'Disorienting Horizons: Encountering the Past in Chloe Hooper's *A Child's Book of True Crime*', *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature*, 3.0 (2006), 95–102 (p. 95); Ann Curthoys, 'Expulsion, Exodus and Exile in White Australian Historical Mythology', *Journal of Australian Studies*, 23.61 (1999), 1–19.

explains, ‘we sweetened history by making fudge on the site of the brutal Female Factory; we painted a gravestone white to hide its convict stain’ (Hooper, p. 150). Efforts to make the site of the former penal colony more palatable to tourists and inhabitants still acknowledge and engage with Tasmania’s convict history, however. (Kate explains that some of her university friends were ‘paid to welcome international visitors to the airport wearing convict costumes. We thought the joke was on the tourists’) (p.185). In contrast to this, as David Farrier points out, the island’s history of indigenous genocide is ‘almost entirely erased.’<sup>139</sup> The dark traces of this past emerge in Kate’s environment through what Farrier describes as the island’s ‘haunted, even pathological landscape’, with rocks ‘bruised purple, bruised red – swollen with history,’ as well as through her own descriptions of these past events (Farrier, p. 7.; Hooper, p. 31).

Runaway convicts [...] learned bushcraft from the Aborigines and disappeared into the bush. Meanwhile the Aborigines, terrified of the colonists’ guns *vomiting forth thunder*, had their land cleared. Dispossessed, they formed raiding parties, lighting decoy fires to steal settler’ guns and food. Settlers were speared, but during the seven-year Black War the whites that died did not surpass the number that arrived monthly on each new convict ship. And by 1839 most of the indigenous population had died or been driven away. Our local history is the *Ur-true-crime* story, and in volume after volume the bodies pile up (Hooper, p. 98).

Here, Kate situates the murder of the indigenous population as an originary act of violence that implicates all of Endport’s inhabitants. As such, the suggestion in the text is that Kate sees the brutal extermination of local wildlife (roadkill is such a problem that ‘most of our fauna is displayed by the side of the road’ (p. 37)), as well as Ellie Siddell’s death

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<sup>139</sup> David Farrier, ‘Animal Detectives and “Anthropocene Noir” in Chloe Hooper’s *A Child’s Book of True Crime*’, *Textual Practice*, 2017, 1–19 (p. 7).

and what she believes are Thomas and Veronica's plans to murder her as simply inevitable consequences of the Endport community's inherited propensity to commit acts of criminal violence. In order, it seems, to grant herself a kind of immunity from this criminality and its effects, Kate insists on characterising herself as a subject in need of protection: that is, a child. These efforts to remain childlike are magnified in situations that are generally recognised as the purview of adults, most notably with regard to her sexual relationship with Thomas. She speaks to him 'in a nuanced baby talk' and he buys her sweet treats like 'chocolate mice and gingerbread men' (pp. 165, 18). When he drives away after one of their clandestine meetings, she thinks, 'wait for me, I don't want to go to school! Can't I stay at home and watch television?' (p. 43). Her narrative voice is also defined by a mode of dense self-analysis that structurally performs this refusal to move forward, circling around her anxieties about adulthood, often in relation to the ways this is signalled on her body. She is still coming to terms, she explains, with 'the shock of developing breasts' (p. 114). Her insistence on imagining herself to be in danger from Veronica and Thomas also contributes to this performance of precarity. The evidence for this is haphazard but convincing: her car's fan belt has been tampered with; someone has carved the words 'I know' into her classroom door; she has received a number of unidentified phone calls. The novel's structure invites us to assume that as it draws nearer to revealing the real murderer of Ellie Siddell (the promise of Veronica's true crime book), so this threat to Kate's life will also reach some kind violent climax.

As it turns out, the text withholds both of these things. Veronica's book sheds no new light on Ellie's murder, which remains unsolved, and Kate's showdown with the Marnes is something of a letdown, more comical than frightening. This anticlimactic outcome achieves two things that contribute to my positioning of the novel here as invested in a 'backwards' turn. Firstly, the text remains uninterested in providing the pleasure of resolution that would situate it as a future-oriented narrative; one of the 'projects of redemption, reconstruction, restoration, and

reclamation' that Halberstam argues queer negativity is positioned against in its desire to challenge the norm of social thought (Caserio p. 823). Secondly, Kate's confrontation with the Marne family punctures the inflated discourse of reproductive futurism that sees the Child as always already in-danger by showing this to be a fantasy on her part. Her encounter with Thomas and Veronica takes place toward the end of the novel. She arrives at their house, drunk and with a knife in her purse, to confront them about their son Lucien, who she believes has been traumatised by his mother's reimagining of the Ellie Siddell murder. After she has forced her way into Lucien's bedroom and demanded that he draw a picture for her – she claims that his drawing will reveal 'the real story' – Thomas drags her out of the house. The expectation that Kate must necessarily come to harm at the hands of Thomas and Veronica – manufactured by the twinning of her story with Ellie Siddell's – is deflated when Thomas's response to Kate's pleas for her life is to return to his house, yelling "Kate, not all things have to be so momentous!" This deliberately anticlimactic end to their relationship exposes her attachment to precarity as, ultimately, manufactured, as is her assumption that Lucien is also in danger.

Kate's identification with the figure of the endangered child leads her to construct a narrative for herself in which she is the only victim. In doing so, she seeks to exempt herself from the pervasive criminality that she attributes to the other members of her community, a criminality that she ultimately sees as inherited generationally from the country's genocidal white settlers. In this sense, her fixation on claiming victim status can be seen as a refusal to really engage with this brutal colonial past as it relates to her own status as a privileged white subject. Ann Curthoys has argued that 'there is a special charge associated with the status of victim in Australian historical consciousness' with the country's popular historical mythology stressing 'struggle, courage, and survival,

amidst pain, tragedy, and loss.’<sup>140</sup> Originally a means for asserting ownership over land (the rights to it earned through ‘struggle, courage, and survival’), she suggests that these victim narratives are now pervasive enough to appear in both radical and conservative versions of Australian history (p. 3). As I suggested is the case with *Kate*, Curthoys notes that ‘the emphasis in white Australian popular historical mythology on the settler as victim works against substantial acknowledgement and understanding of a colonial past, and informs and inflames white racial discourse’ (p. 4). The text’s suggestion that Kate similarly wishes to abdicate responsibility for this past is not, I believe, accidental, but rather represents the culmination of the novel’s investigation into the ways that precarity might be constructed and manipulated. Indeed, the scenario plays out in miniature in Kate’s classroom, where, she admits, she had ‘skirted around the issue of genocide [...] only asking the kids to write their own versions of Aboriginal Dreamtime stories’ (p. 33). However, when Thomas suggests that the children practise letter-writing by contacting the Tasmanian parliament to advocate for the Aboriginal Land Acts to be passed,<sup>141</sup> the children arrive at school crying because their parents have ‘re-educated them’: ‘They were going to lose their backyard, and therefore the new swing set or trampoline’ (p. 35). Here, the wealthy white school children in Kate’s class assert their (unquestioned and unquestionable) rights to the land by affirming a victim status. They stake their claim to the nation’s future at the expense of the indigenous population, figured here in the negative as those not ‘fighting for the children.’

*A Child’s Book’s* attitude to problems of extinction and the future imaginary differs from that of *The Hunter* in that this novel opts out of the logic of reproductive futurism. Where *The Hunter* reinforces the culturally prevalent notion that thinking about nonhuman extinction also means

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<sup>140</sup> Curthoys, p. 3.

<sup>141</sup> The text is set at a very particular time in Australian history and politics, against the background of the 1992 Mabo decision that led to the introduction of ‘Native Title’. This new law recognised Australia’s First Peoples as having traditional rights to their lands.

thinking about human children, *A Child's Book* points instead to the ways in which subjects that have been designated precarious (like the Child, or the extinct/endangered animal) do not pre-exist the social processes that invent them as such. To echo Edelman, this is not to argue that no children or animals really face danger, but instead to suggest that it is important to think critically about the subjects that are, in Love's words, 'left behind' by such designations. That is, the designation of certain subjects as precarious (and thus future-forming in the demands they make on others for protection) happens at the expense of other subjects that are denied access to such vulnerability. In *A Child's Book*, the ways in which precarity might be conceived of as both irregularly distributed and also malleable are exemplified by Kate's characterisation of Terence Tiger, who comes to demonstrate the sense in which the coherence of narratives of precarity relies primarily on the deployment of representative strategies that shift over time.

As Hooper surely knows, the body of the thylacine has long been a site of conflict when it comes to debates over its representation. The combination of its striking stripe pattern, elongated tail and ability to open its jaws unusually wide (almost 80 degrees) give it a unique appearance that initially made it hard for early white settlers to categorise in species terms. David Owen argues that this uniqueness ultimately proved to be 'its undoing.'

The earliest Van Diemen's Land European settlers, [...] had to 'invent' it – and they did so in a welter of confusion, wrongly ascribing to it the characteristics of known predatory mammals. In this way it became a big cat/wolf/wild dog/hyaena hybrid, an elusive New World creature as disturbing as the venom-spurred platypus was bizarre.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> David Owen, *Thylacine: The Tragic Tale of the Tasmanian Tiger* (Crows Nest, N.S.W.: Allen & Unwin, 2003), p. 4.

Carol Freeman has tracked the ways that colonial representations of the thylacine tended to depict it as predatory and wolf-like in this way, a strategy that (falsely) fuelled claims that it was a threat to livestock and encouraged hunters to kill the animal in large numbers in exchange for bounty payments. Only when such activities had pushed the thylacine to the brink of extinction, Freeman notes, did it begin to appear in natural history works as a 'relatively innocuous, dog-like animal.'<sup>143</sup> The last 'Tassie Tiger', known as Benjamin, died in the Hobart zoo in 1936 and although the animal was listed as endangered for many years, the Tasmanian Government finally declared it extinct in 1986. Despite, this, there have been numerous reported sightings of the thylacine in the years since Benjamin's death, none of which have resulted in a living animal being found.<sup>144</sup> The thylacine has become, Stephanie Turner argues, 'Tasmania's brand logo', often described in 'a language of loss' that suggests the animal might still exist, with the possibility of seeing a thylacine a 'heady attraction for Tasmanian visitors.'<sup>145</sup> Even from the brief outline I have given here it is easy to see how both scientific and cultural attitudes towards the thylacine have shifted from representing it as dangerous (and therefore disposable) to figuring it as a precarious subject in need of protection. Whilst there is certainly a sense in which such a figuration of the animal is borne of nostalgia, its spectral presence also contributes to extinction's future imaginary. That is, the idea that the thylacine might still exist organises and mobilises Tasmanian national identity by implying that ecological stability (and redemption) might accompany its rediscovery.

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<sup>143</sup> Carol Freeman, *Paper Tiger: A Visual History of the Thylacine* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), pp. 27–28.

<sup>144</sup> For more on the thylacine and its influence on contemporary Tasmanian conservation projects, see, for example, David Owen, *Thylacine: The Tragic Tale of the Tasmanian Tiger* and Robert Paddle, *The Last Tasmanian Tiger: The History and Extinction of the Thylacine*, 1st paperback ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

<sup>145</sup> Stephanie S. Turner, 'Negotiating Nostalgia: The Rhetoricity of Thylacine Representation in Tasmanian Tourism', *Society & Animals*, 17.2 (2009), 97–114 (p. 97).



In *A Child's Book of True Crime* Hooper short-circuits such a future-oriented narrative. As David Farrier points out, 'by making the thylacine the *detective* in her narrative, pursuer not pursued, Hooper is able to explore the contingent nature of the competing narratives of the tassie tiger" (p. 12). As Farrier's argument suggests, then, the text is interested in the ways the thylacine becomes available for representation as a precarious subject. Crucially, the novel suggests, this is only able to happen by the animal's body coming to be understood as a site of emptiness, waiting to be filled, just as its hoped-for return is figured in the national imagination. Terence Tiger is particularly good at finding evidence, he explains, because 'when you're extinct, people look you straight in the eye and assume they haven't seen you' (Hooper, p. 183).

Necessarily, then, the 'backwards feelings' that pervade Hooper's novel refuse the 'politically mobilizing' power Heise attributes to elegiac narrative. Instead, the text exposes the ways in which feelings of loss as well as calls to protect certain animals and humans are often mobilised by the manipulation of precarious subjectivity and its accompanying discourses of reproduction, redemption, and reconciliation. In thinking about children and animals alongside each other, Hooper's novel shows the ways that precarious subjects come to be invented, and asks us to think critically about the stories we tell about extinction, compassion, and imagined futures.

## Chapter Four

### Subjectivity and Interpretation in Trauma Theory: Welcoming the Nonhuman

#### Introduction

The first section of this thesis explored theories of mourning and melancholia in relation to a group of contemporary texts about loss in order to analyse how these texts made space for nonhuman bodies. I examined the processes of attachment and identification that shaped the figuration of these nonhuman bodies as lost objects, as well as the ways that the workings of such processes troubled the subjective category of the 'human.' In this second thesis section I want to build on these arguments by moving on to explore how hospitable contemporary texts are to these attachments. In other words, how are these nonhuman spaces in narratives of loss *kept open*, and in what sense does this gesture of keeping open relate to the processes of meaning-production by which nonhuman bodies come to be interpreted in literary texts?

In order to conduct this examination of nonhuman bodies and interpretation I turn to another cultural formation influenced by psychoanalysis, what Roger Luckhurst calls, following Bruno Latour, the 'exemplary conceptual knot' of trauma theory.<sup>146</sup> This is not because I want to suggest that mourning and melancholia are superior analytical tools for examining narratives about extinction and climate change, whilst the theoretical approaches of trauma theory are more appropriate for the thematic schema addressed in this section (novels about animal

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<sup>146</sup> Roger Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question* (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 14.

'ghostings').<sup>147</sup> Rather I believe that the debates about interpretation that I argue here plague the field of trauma theory make it a particularly suitable analytical framework through which to address questions of meaning and subjectivity.

When using the term 'trauma theory' I refer specifically to what Michael Rothberg defines as 'classical trauma theory' and Roger Eaglestone calls the 'post-deconstructive strand' of trauma work. This predominantly means the work of the American literary critic Cathy Caruth, as well as her colleagues Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman, and the intellectual traditions from which this school of thought emerges. I choose to focus on Cathy Caruth's work here not because I think it offers the best model for thinking about trauma (rather the opposite, as it happens) but due to the fact that I see the psychoanalytical approaches that subtend it as replicating the problematic of 'holding on' and 'letting go' that has structured my inquiries in this thesis. In the context of trauma theory I see this conflict as playing out through debates about interpretation that set up an opposition between either working through (narrating) experiences of trauma or remaining in an aporetic (unnarratable) relation to them.

In the chapter that follows I examine these interpretative debates and draw attention to the ways in which they imagine the traumatised subject. Following Ruth Leys and Susannah Radstone, I argue that the Freudian psychoanalytical model of trauma, which also informs the basic tenets of classical trauma theory, relies on a model of sovereign subjectivity that establishes the breaching of an inside/outside boundary as endemic to the traumatic experience. I suggest that this sovereign subject is only able to come into being by shielding, or exempting itself

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<sup>147</sup> Indeed, Michael Rothberg sees climate change as one of the 'important areas of concern' for contemporary trauma studies. See Rothberg, 'Preface Beyond Tancred and Clorinda - Trauma Studies for Implicated Subjects,' in *The Future of Trauma Theory: Contemporary Literature and Cultural Criticism*, ed. by Gert Buelens, Sam Durrant, and Robert Eaglestone (London: Routledge, 2014), pp. xi-xvii (p. xiv).

from, other kinds of subjectivity that are imagined as both invasive and characterised by lack. This kind of othered subjectivity, I argue, is exemplified by the figure of the animal whose imagined privation allows the category of the 'human' to emerge and as such must necessarily be held in an 'outside' relation to this same human through the policing of species boundaries. As such, I am interested in the ways that this animal figure inhabits narratives about trauma, and particularly in the ways that space might be held open for animals in this context. The texts I focus on here figure animals in terms of a traumatic 'outside' (which they always already are in the sense that they constantly threaten to transgress the species boundary), and as such I analyse the kinds of meanings that are available to them in these narratives. I argue in this chapter that animals are at the heart of debates about interpretation in the same way that theories of trauma are. As such, I suggest, it is important to examine the opportunities they have to 'mean' differently in these texts in relation to the way that, as sites of trauma, attempts to interpret their bodies are affected by imperatives to either successfully work-through their presence in the text or to understand it as aporetic. Instead of this, I argue, it might be more productive to think about how the figure of the animal might be read critically whilst also keeping space open for the multiplicity of meanings this figure might contain.

In readings of the first two texts I examine in this thesis section, Evie Wyld's novel *All the Birds, Singing*, and *The Dogs of Littlefield* by Suzanne Berne, I argue that such an objective fails to be achieved due to the different ways in which both texts remain attached to the interpretative strategies of classical trauma theory. The final chapter of this section focuses on Fiona McFarlane's novel *The Night Guest*, which I argue engages critically with processes of meaning-production as they occur in the context of trauma. Ultimately, I suggest, the novel allows for a reading of animal bodies that refuses either working-through or aporia as modes of interpretation, and is instead hospitable to holding several kinds of meaning in productive tension. This chapter will set out the theoretical

entanglements that provide the context for this argument, ending with a brief reading of *All the Birds, Singing*, in which I show how the novel's privileging of Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSD) as a traumatic model acts to close down the meaning of the mysterious animal that haunts its pages.

## I. Trauma theory and interpretative work

The history of trauma can be traced haphazardly across science, medicine, and culture. In his genealogy of the concept, tracing its development from the nineteenth century and then through the invention of PTSD as a diagnostic category post-Vietnam, Roger Luckhurst suggests trauma owes its emergence to the rise of 'the technological and statistical society that can generate, multiply, and quantify the 'shocks' of modern life' (*Trauma Question*, p. 20). As such, he explains, it is possible to note that throughout its history trauma is always 'in major part a medico-legal concept bound up with economic questions of compensation' (p. 211). In this sense trauma as a concept exceeds the context of the individual sufferer and becomes imbricated in the structures of modernity; specifically, Luckhurst argues, in relation to law, psychiatry and industrialized warfare (p. 20). As such, it presents 'an intrinsically interdisciplinary conjuncture', both in terms of the conditions that allow it to emerge as a diagnostic category as well as the responses that it provokes. An attempt to engage closely with this wandering and complex legacy is necessarily beyond the scope of this chapter, and as such I will limit myself to a brief review of the elements of this history as they relate to the psychoanalytical formulations that are of interest here.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> See instead Luckhurst's study, cited above, which is a brilliantly comprehensive engagement with the history of trauma that ranges widely across disciplines. Luckhurst describes the book as 'a historical genealogy of trauma that tries to make sense of the divergent resources that have been knotted into the concept of trauma across its peculiarly disrupted, discontinuous history.' (p. 15).

Luckhurst argues that general scholarly consensus links the appearance of trauma as an idea to the development and expansion of the railways that was taking place in the 1860's (p. 21). He suggests this as one of the key moments at which the general middle and upper class public were exposed to some of the corollaries of industrialisation, namely 'the kinds of technological violence previously restricted to factories', via the possibility or reality of the railway accident and the consequences of this for the person involved in it (p.21). Such consequences were predominantly psychological affects disruptive of both sleep and waking life, and these diverse symptoms were eventually gathered together and put to work under the ambivalent diagnosis of 'railway spine.' This label referred to the clinical consensus that the psychological disturbances caused by railway accidents were not themselves psychological in origin, but in fact had a physical aetiology in 'micro lesions of the spinal cord' caused by the collision.<sup>149</sup> Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman point out that whilst it was the German psychiatrist Hermann Oppenheim who first used the more familiar term 'trauma neurosis' in relation to the condition, it was Freud and his later rival Pierre Janet who introduced the notion of psychic causation into theories of trauma (p.31). Freud notes the connection between railway spine and trauma toward the beginning of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, where he writes 'a condition has long been known and described which occurs after severe mechanical concussions, railway disasters, and other accidents involving a risk to life. It has been given the name, traumatic neurosis.'<sup>150</sup> Freud attributes the proliferation of 'war neuroses' after the First World War as drawing attention to this condition and putting 'an end to the temptation to attribute the cause of the disorder to organic lesions of the nervous system brought about by mechanical force' (p. 12).

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<sup>149</sup> Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman, *The Empire of Trauma : An Inquiry into the Condition of Victimhood* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 30.

<sup>150</sup> Sigmund Freud, James Strachey, and others, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud. Vol. 18 (1920-1922) : Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Group Psychology and Other Works* (London: Vintage, 2001), p. 12.

Despite the fact that Freud is an important and controversial figure within trauma studies, his engagement with the traumatic neuroses is, as Luckhurst points out, 'actually rather intermittent' (p. 8). His work often speaks, indirectly or otherwise, to ideas pertinent to the development of the trauma paradigm; however his contributions are inconsistent and complex, and the extraction from them of a fixed theory or conclusion proves almost impossible.<sup>151</sup> His influence on theories of trauma can initially be traced back to 1937's *Studies in Hysteria*, written in collaboration with his colleague Joseph Breuer. Here, Freud and Breuer argue for the usefulness of compounding the pathological reactions of 'common' hysteria and traumatic neurosis in order to consider how a 'traumatic hysteria' might present itself.<sup>152</sup> They suggest that traumatic hysteria might be diagnosed when hysterical symptoms can be linked backwards in time to an experience of what they call 'psychical trauma' (Freud & Breuer, p. 9). Famously, Freud and Breuer hypothesise this psychical trauma as retroactive; they suggest it 'operates like a foreign body which must still be regarded as a present and effective agent long after it has penetrated' (p.10). As a result, they conclude that:

The precipitating event in some way still continues to exercise an effect years later, not indirectly through a chain of intermediary causal links, but as a directly relating cause, in something like the way that a psychical pain remembered in waking consciousness will still produce the secretion of tears later on: *hysterics suffer for the most part from reminiscences.* (p. 11, italics in original).

The idea that trauma might be characterised by a kind of belatedness of experience has proved tenacious. It is one of the elements at work in trauma theory that associates it so closely with, and makes it so useful for,

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<sup>151</sup> See Ruth Leys on this. *Trauma: A Genealogy* (p. 274)

<sup>152</sup> Sigmund Freud and Joseph Breuer, *Studies in Hysteria* (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 9.

a theorisation of hauntings. Further to this, however, it also invites and even necessitates the instigation of a process of interpretation that would seek to trace affective experiences in the present back to a notional and locatable origin. Freud and Breuer make this explicit in their discussion of the kind of therapeutic treatment they find effective for such a condition.

*We found, at first to our great surprise, that the individual hysterical symptoms disappeared immediately and did not recur if we succeeded in wakening the memory of the precipitating event with complete clarity, arousing with it the accompanying affect, and if the patient then depicted the event in the greatest possible detail and put words to the affect* (p. 10, italics in original).

Here we see an iteration of the kind of therapeutic ‘working-through’ closely resembling the talking cure that would later come to characterise the psychoanalytic project. Processes of meaning-production are at the heart of this medical encounter: the patient must choose how to frame and then transmit their experience to a therapeutic listener, who in turn accepts it as an accurate (or useful) retelling of the traumatic event. For Freud, crucially, the therapeutic worth of a patient’s story of trauma (i.e. the extent to which it assists in an alleviation of their disruptive symptoms) for the most part takes precedence over establishing if that same story successfully portrays a ‘real’ event. His reluctance to distinguish firmly between true and false memories of traumatic experience led to his abandonment of the seduction theory (the idea that repressed memories of real childhood sexual abuse were fundamental to the development of hysterical symptoms in some patients). This has led in more recent years to ‘the scapegoating of Freud as the patriarch who denied the traumatic realities of his women patients’ (Luckhurst, p.49). Luckhurst defends Freud against this claim, arguing:

Freud never simply replaced the ‘real’ event with a fantasy, truth with falsity. Rather, he considered traumatic memories as



particularly hemmed in by resistances to being brought into conscious recall, and were thus subject to multiple tricks of transformation or displacement, intertwining the real and fantasmatic (p. 47).<sup>153</sup>

We come here to an example of the way in which issues of traumatic interpretation intersect with and are necessarily shaped by the often-diverse research aims of those contributing to the field of trauma studies. For example, despite the key position Freud holds at the heart of the aporetic project of Caruthian trauma theory, as a clinician he conceives of his work as a scientific method concerned primarily with exploring and refining the efficacy of therapeutic treatments. As such, it is useful to understand that Freud's allegiances are to the processes of working-through and resolution that align with the interests and concerns of contemporary therapeutic practitioners, rather than the aporias of cognitive expression that Caruth and her colleagues see as an inevitable blockage to the relation of traumatic experience. In this sense then, Freud's work on trauma can be seen as aligned with the imperative to 'let go' that also characterises his initial response to the problem of mourning.

As Luckhurst points out, the aims of cultural work on trauma and those of therapeutic practices should not be collapsed in ways that fail to recognise the different contexts in which they both operate. As he notes, 'aesthetic meditations that sustain irresolution and explore narrative disjuncture are not written under the rubrics and aims of therapeutic work with traumatized people' and therefore 'one should not be judged by

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<sup>153</sup> Ruth Leys echoes Luckhurst on this point when she claims that 'for Freud, at the origin there may well be a fundamental or originary dissimulation' (*Trauma: A Genealogy*, p. 283). She also argues that despite fundamental differences of opinion between Freud and his one-time influence Pierre Janet on the sexual content of psychoanalysis, these are in fact less significant than 'their agreement that, if narration cures, it does so not because it infallibly gives the patient access to a primordially personal truth but because it makes possible a form of self-understanding even in the absence of empirical verification.' (p. 117)

the other' (p. 82). However, he later qualifies this statement when he claims that 'cultural theory too often demands that the impossible, aporetic or melancholic response is the only appropriately ethical condition for individuals and communities defined by their post-traumatic afterwardsness,' whereas 'psychiatric discourse assumes a *plurality* of possible responses to traumatic impacts' (p. 212). Luckhurst is at pains here to suggest the existence of a kind of flatness in cultural trauma theory that acts to close down the possibility of multiple meaning-making approaches to traumatic experience. Luckhurst posits the kind of classical trauma theory aligned with Caruth and her colleagues as an interpretative mode that, in contrast to the way Freud's later version of working-through engages with traumatic narrative as it becomes therapeutic to the patient, instead acts on or reduces narrative meaning in pursuit of an (ethical) truth.

I turn now to look at classical trauma theory in the context of these questions. This work originated in the scholarship of several members of the so-called 'Yale School'; in addition to Caruth, members of this group included Geoffrey Hartman, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub.<sup>154</sup> Despite their contributions to this area of research, I will focus here on Caruth's work and its reception, which I see as particularly pertinent to the aims of this chapter. The influence of her theory is based predominantly on two publications, the 1995 collection *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* which she edited and introduced, and her 1996 monograph *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*.<sup>155</sup> In *Unclaimed Experience* Caruth offers a 'general definition' of trauma, which she describes as 'the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena' (p. 91). This definition

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<sup>154</sup> For a full account of the evolution of Yale School trauma theory, see Luckhurst pp. 4-10

<sup>155</sup> Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Twentieth Anniversary edition (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016).

neatly encapsulates the two key characteristics Caruth attributes to the traumatic experience; firstly, the unassimilable nature of the experiential event, and secondly the repetition compulsion that is triggered by that same event. Caruth is influenced by Freud's notion of hysterical 'reminiscences' when she argues that 'the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it' (*Trauma*, pp. 4-5). Crucially, Caruth attributes ethical value to the aporia presented by this traumatic moment, specifically to what she conceives of as the difficulty of representing or communicating an experience conceived of as unavailable to rational consciousness.

The transformation of trauma into a narrative memory that allows the story to be verbalized and communicated, to be integrated into one's own, and others' knowledge of the past, may lose both the precision and the force that characterized traumatic recall (*Trauma*, p. 153).

Whilst she sees this loss of precision and force as both regrettable and important, Caruth firmly locates the ethical risk of communicating or verbalizing trauma in what she calls the more 'profound' loss of 'the event's essential incomprehensibility, the force of its *affront to understanding*' (*Trauma*, p. 154, italics in original). She sees this 'refusal of understanding' as 'a fundamentally creative act' (p. 155). Therefore, in opposition to therapeutic processes of working-through, Caruth situates an aporetic response as the only ethical means of approaching the traumatic event.<sup>156</sup> In contrast to Freud, then, her work has an ethical

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<sup>156</sup> For Caruth (and her colleagues) the Holocaust is understood to be the archetypal traumatic event, and as such her work is situated in a complex tradition of thought (influenced by Theodor Adorno) that sees narratives of trauma after the Holocaust as implicated in crises of representation.

investment in 'hanging onto' the traumatic experience, rather than letting it go.<sup>157</sup>

The opposition between working-through and aporia that characterises the psychoanalytic narrative of trauma theory is theorised slightly differently in the work of the historian Ruth Leys, whose own genealogy of trauma seeks to establish the existence of a polarisation in the field of trauma studies between work that takes, variously, a mimetic or an anti-mimetic approach to theorising the traumatic experience. The mimetic position, for Leys, is associated with an understanding of traumatic symptoms that perceives the trauma victim as having identified with (and be involved in the acting out/repetition of) a traumatic experience not available to that traumatised subject for reflection or representation. Conversely, anti-mimetic thinking would seek to draw a dichotomy between the traumatic event and an 'autonomous subject' understood as being 'fully constituted.'<sup>158</sup> This subject would, albeit with some difficulty, be able to remember, recover, and represent their trauma in ways that might alter or cast doubt on the notion that the experience held a fundamental or elusive truth. I would suggest then that the mimetic position could be identified with a paralysing, aporetic relation to trauma, whilst the anti-mimetic approach would imagine a subject able to work-through their traumatic experience. Leys' identification of a constant 'oscillation' between these two positions, then, would also point to the ways that trauma theory has been (and remains) troubled by questions of interpretation that fail to resolve this conflict between narrative and

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<sup>157</sup> Despite this, Caruth does situate her work in relation to and as drawing from scientific studies of trauma victims. The clinician Bessel van der Kolk, whose findings feature prominently in her writing as justifications for her own theories, particularly influences her. Joshua Pederson suggests this as a partial explanation for her 'system's enduring use value', noting that 'because she constructed her critical edifice on a scientific foundation, her theory has long been resistant to critique.' See Joshua Pederson, 'Speak, Trauma: Toward a Revised Understanding of Literary Trauma Theory', *Narrative*, 22.3 (2014), 333–53 (p. 334)

<sup>158</sup> Ruth Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy* (Chicago ; London: University of Chicago Press, 2000), pp. 9, 299.

aporetic approaches; questions that, I want to suggest here, are linked to the ways that it imagines subjectivity.

## II. The 'subject' of trauma theory

Caruth can be understood as exemplifying the anti-mimetic position, Leys argues, because she characterises the 'unclaimed experience' of trauma 'as a literal, nonsymbolic, and nonrepresentational *memory* of the traumatic event' (p. 272). This is typified in Caruth's work by her description of the traumatic dream as 'the literal return of the event against the will of the one it inhabits' (*Unclaimed*, p. 59). However, as Susannah Radstone points out in her reading of Leys, it is important to recognise that 'mimetic and anti-mimetic tendencies cannot be strictly divided from each other', and rather than trying to resolve this problematic Leys focuses instead on identifying 'the contradiction between these tendencies' in the history of psychoanalytically influenced approaches to trauma. In this sense, then, as Radstone makes clear, anti-mimetic thinking will necessarily always contaminate Caruth's work, even as she strives toward the purity of the mimetic position.<sup>159</sup>

For Radstone, whilst Caruth's trauma theory might seem to fit more easily with the mimetic paradigm in that it 'emphasizes lack of recall and the unexperienced nature of trauma', its emphasis on trauma as event-based also aligns it with the anti-mimetic position (p. 15). In *Unclaimed Experience* Caruth frequently refers to traumatic experience as an 'event',<sup>160</sup> and Stef Craps sees this adherence to a 'traditional event-based model of trauma, according to which the trauma results from a single, extraordinary, catastrophic event' as one of the hallmarks of classical

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<sup>159</sup> Susannah Radstone, 'Trauma Theory: Contexts, Politics, Ethics', *Paragraph*, 30.1 (2007), 9–29.

<sup>160</sup> See for example, p. 11: 'In its most general definition, trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena.'

trauma theory.<sup>161</sup> Caruth's emphasis on the traumatic event arrives in her theory through her privileging of Freud's writings on trauma, which Radstone points out 'return, always, to trauma's relation to an event' (p. 15). In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, such a formulation gives rise in Freud's work to the comparison of the mind to a 'living organism [...] an undifferentiated vesicle of a substance that is susceptible to stimulation' (p. 26). Freud imagines this vesicle (a kind of single cell) as being in possession of a 'protective shield against stimuli', and goes on to explain 'we describe as 'traumatic' any excitations from outside which are powerful enough to break through the protective shield' (pp. 27, 29). Trauma is envisaged here as a sudden event powerful enough to pierce this protective layer, an image that returns to the original Greek meaning of trauma as 'wound', which Catherine Malabou explains derives from '*titrosko*' meaning 'to pierce'. Trauma thus 'names a shock that forces open or pierces a protective barrier.'<sup>162</sup> Caruth takes up this image of trauma as a mental wound in *Unclaimed Experience*, where she argues that this 'wound of the mind [...] is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event' (p. 4).

Such a figuration of the traumatised subject is characteristic of the anti-mimetic paradigm, Radstone follows Leys in arguing, because it allows this subject to be 'theorized as *sovereign*, if passive' (p. 15). That is, it secures the notion of a bounded subject that the mimetic position threatens to destabilise when it suggests traumatised subjects are necessarily 'absent from themselves and involuntarily mimicking a past traumatic experience' (p. 14). However, for Radstone, Freud's work ultimately fails (and refuses) to install sovereignty at the heart of the subject due to the emphasis placed on 'the mediating role of *unconscious processes* in the production of the mind's scenes and meanings, including

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<sup>161</sup> Stef Craps, *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma out of Bounds* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 31.

<sup>162</sup> Catherine Malabou and Steven Miller, *The New Wounded: From Neurosis to Brain Damage*, 1st ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), p. 6.

those of memory'<sup>163</sup> (p. 16). In contrast, she suggests, classical trauma theory 'dispenses with the layering of conscious/subconscious and unconscious, substituting for them a conscious mind in which past experiences are accessible, and a disassociated area of the mind from which past experiences cannot be accessed.' By flattening the topography of subjectivity in this way, Radstone suggests, Caruth's work loses 'the challenge to the subject's *sovereignty* posed by the unconscious and its wayward processes' (p. 16).

The irony of this, Radstone makes clear, is that Caruth's work departs from the critical relationship to subjective autonomy and sovereignty that the scholarly fields subtending her work (psychoanalysis, poststructuralism and deconstruction) insist on. In doing so, her work theorises an autonomous, bounded subject for whom trauma advances from an invasive 'outside' in an act of traumatic wounding. For Radstone, this ultimately means that Caruth sets up an opposition between the 'normal' and the pathological': in other words, 'one has either been present at or has 'been' traumatized by a terrible event or one has not' (pp.18-19). It will be useful at this point to extend Radstone's analysis in order to examine how this binary opposition (normal/pathological) is further deployed in Caruth's work through her reliance on the notions of 'fullness' and 'truth' in relation to traumatic experience, and in particular how these ideas inflect her approach to the interpretation of literary texts.

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Caruth is a literary theorist, and is primarily interested in the ways that literary texts might express 'truths' about trauma. She sees such texts as uniquely equipped for this task in that they are able to incorporate 'the radical disruption and gaps of traumatic experience' (*Trauma*, p. 4). Reading trauma well means paying attention to these same moments of

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<sup>163</sup> Freud's reluctance to see traumatic experience as 'literal' in Caruth's sense led, as I have explained, to his abandonment of the seduction theory.

disruption or omission as they appear in a literary text, perhaps most obviously as they problematize or interrupt narrative. It is not difficult to find examples of trauma narratives that might be seen to function in this way; indeed Luckhurst suggests it is possible to outline an emergent international canon of trauma fiction that shares this 'implicit aesthetic' (p. 87). For Luckhurst the formation of such a trauma aesthetic is bound up with the notion that 'because a traumatic event confounds narrative knowledge, the inherently narrative form of the novel must acknowledge this in different kinds of temporal disruption' (p. 88). Most notably in the case of Holocaust literature the incorporation of different kinds of rupture into narrative also comes to be seen as a moral position that refuses to normalise extremes of experience; as a result of this 'formal choices that do not find ways of figuring this aporia become unethical' (Luckhurst, p. 89). Stef Craps and Gert Buelens go so far as to argue that, 'within trauma studies, it has become all but axiomatic that traumatic experiences can only be adequately represented through the use of experimental, (post)modernist textual strategies.'<sup>164</sup> Indeed, both Laurie Vickroy and Anne Whitehead emphasise this aspect of trauma narrative in their recent studies of trauma fiction. Whitehead suggests that these narratives are 'characterised by repetition and indirection' in addition to temporal and chronological collapse,<sup>165</sup> and for Vickroy, 'memory is explored through affective and unconscious associations rather than through conscious memories or structured plots.'<sup>166</sup> Luckhurst notes that an unexpected consequence of this emphasis on a particular set of formal rules is that, 'the aesthetic means to convey the singularity of a traumatic aporia has now become highly conventionalized, the narratives and tropes of traumatic fiction easily identified'(pp.89-90). Joshua Pederson appears to express frustration with the fetishisation of such narratives, then, when he

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<sup>164</sup> Stef Craps and Gert Buelens, 'Introduction: Postcolonial Trauma Novels', *Studies in the Novel*, 40.1/2 (2008), 1-12 (p. 5).

<sup>165</sup> Anne Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), p. 3.

<sup>166</sup> Laurie Vickroy, *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction* (Charlottesville, Va.; London: University of Virginia Press, 2002), p. 3.



suggests that theorists might like to, 'shift their attention away from gaps and toward actual text' (p.338).

It is of course difficult to gauge if Caruth's work has directly influenced fiction writers, but many texts that signify as trauma narratives certainly prove hospitable to the kinds of reading that she sees as properly ethical. Such approaches to reading are necessarily bound up in complex ways with ideas about how we might want to interpret texts and for Caruth such epistemological anxieties are also proper to the experience of trauma. She explains:

If Freud turns to literature to describe traumatic experience, it is because literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relations between knowing and not knowing. And it is at the specific point at which knowing and not knowing intersect that the language of literature and the psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience precisely meet (*Unclaimed* p.3).

Caruth situates her work as being preoccupied with exactly this relation between knowing and not knowing, and implies that she is concerned with the point at which both these terms are held in equal play. Yet I would suggest that the ethical emphasis she seems to place on not knowing, which takes place through her privileging of non-representation, is reliant on a paradoxical belief in the existence of a kind of 'fullness' of knowledge associated with sovereign subjectivity. See for example this statement:

Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature- the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance- returns to haunt the survivor later on (*Unclaimed*, p.4, my italics).

In emphasising this latency as a property of trauma, Caruth engages closely with Freud's work, specifically his concept of 'reminiscences'.

However, as I explained earlier in this chapter, Freud ultimately comes to see a quest for the 'truth' of an original, triggering event as subordinate to the way the traumatised/hysterical subject chooses to express and work through their understanding of that experience in a therapeutic context. Caruth's deviation from this position is evident in her reiteration of the idea that trauma cannot be known, or fully experienced, at the time of its occurrence. In persevering with this concept she leans on the idea that the ability to 'know' is a normative condition of everyday existence preceding and only undermined by the traumatic encounter. In other words, Caruth's theory relies on the postulation of a sovereign subject able to 'fully' comprehend and unproblematically assimilate the world around them in order to oppose to this a traumatised subject alienated from this prelapsarian state. As such, she manages to situate sovereignty as a normative ontological mode in a move that others the traumatised subject and brings them into being under the sign of privation.

Insistent reenactments of the past do not simply serve as testimony to an event, but may also, paradoxically enough, bear witness to a past that was never fully experienced as it occurred. Trauma, that is, does not simply serve as record of the past but precisely registers the force of an experience that is not yet *fully* owned (Caruth, *Trauma*, p.151, my italics).

Full ownership of the traumatic encounter is held out through the 'not yet' as a reasonable (albeit infinitely deferred), expectation for the future subject, with this figure of fullness also assimilated to the notion of an ultimate 'truth' at the heart of traumatic experience. This idea is also expressed in another circular statement that relies on a process of 'othering' when Caruth argues that trauma's 'truth' is 'bound up with its crisis of truth' (*Trauma*, p.8.).

Clearly, issues of interpretation are touched on here: how might we access this 'truth' at the heart of the traumatic experience? How might we

read it? For Caruth makes it clear that the disruption trauma causes in experiential terms for her imagined normative subject (dissonance affecting that subject's understanding of being-in-the-world), also extends to the non-traumatized subject who seeks to interpret the traumatic narrative. Her interpreting subject is conceived as having the ability to perform a kind of direct and easy translation of related experience into meaning, a process exploded by the traumatic encounter. She argues, 'psychoanalytic theory [...] listens to a voice that it cannot fully know but to which it nevertheless bears witness' (*Unclaimed*, p.9). Once more, the inescapable implication of her argument is that there must be a conventional means of attaining 'full knowledge' that stands opposed to the obfuscation of innate/readable meaning brought about by the experience of trauma.

I don't want to argue here for a kind of depoliticized relativism where truths would not be locatable, or, indeed, relevant. Instead, I want to note that Caruth writes herself into advocating an ontology of trauma that constructs a dichotomy between the privation of a traumatized other and a normative, cognitively 'full' subject. It seems to me that this formulation is an effect of the latent humanism of Caruth's critical thought. Her work continually presupposes a human subject that is fully cognizant, rational and agential in order to oppose to it an 'other' devoid of these capabilities.

In line with the aims of this thesis, then, I want to explore what happens in trauma narratives when that incomplete other appears under the sign of the 'animal.'

### **III. Interpreting traumatic animals**

Cary Wolfe has shown that the act of 'organic repression' that Freud locates as the origin of the human in *Civilization and its Discontents* (humans 'begin to walk upright and rise above life on the ground among

blood and feces') is based on 'what amounts to a sacrifice of the animal, and more broadly, of animality.'<sup>167</sup> Therefore whilst Freud saw his work as delivering a blow to 'human narcissism' through, in Michael Lundblad's words, 'the psychoanalytic discovery that the human mind cannot always control or even be aware of its unconscious instincts', he also secured the sovereignty of this human subject by positing its emergence as dependent on the abjection of the animal.<sup>168</sup> Consequently although for Freud this repressed animality remained latent in the human mind through the workings of the unconscious, Carrie Rohman argues that his work aimed 'to contain and control that unthinkable linkage.'<sup>169</sup> As Caruth's work on trauma in some ways inherits this way of thinking about subjectivity due to the fact she takes Freud's writings as her point of departure, it seems fair to make the assumption that the impoverished subject that emerges in her work might usefully be analysed in terms of its animality, as well as in the sense that the animal is also figured in psychoanalysis as a traumatic 'outside' to the sovereign human subject, constantly threatening to infringe its borders. A further reason for examining the animal in this context can be found in the fact that as objects of intellectual inquiry animals (and specifically textual animals) share with the trauma concept a privileged position in debates about interpretation. Their posited alterity is either made narratable through anthropomorphisation, or reduced to an impasse.<sup>170</sup>

In *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, Jacques Derrida turns his attention to the figure of the animal in the history of philosophy;

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<sup>167</sup> Cary Wolfe, *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and Posthumanist Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 2; Wolfe, *Before the Law*, p. 9.

<sup>168</sup> Michael Lundblad, *The Birth of a Jungle: Animality in Progressive-Era U.S. Literature and Culture* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 4.

<sup>169</sup> Carrie Rohman, *Stalking the Subject: Modernism and the Animal* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), p. 22.

<sup>170</sup> For an interesting example of a literary representation of these debates, see Elizabeth Costello's response to Thomas Nagel's *What is it like to be a bat?* in *The Lives of Animals* by J.M.Coetzee (London: Profile, 2000).

specifically, the ways in which a long line of philosophical thinkers have sought to construct and maintain a distinction between human and animal life. This complex and thoughtful work turns on what it might mean for a human to be caught in the animal gaze, beginning as Derrida reflects on his feelings of embarrassment at finding himself naked in front of his cat. Derrida is at pains to emphasise the singularity and specificity not only of this particular cat-encounter, but also of his cat herself. He writes:

I must immediately make it clear, the cat I am talking about is a real cat, truly, believe me, a little cat. It isn't the figure of a cat. It doesn't silently enter the bedroom as an allegory for all the cats on the earth, the felines that traverse our myths and religions, literature and fables (p. 6).

With this gesture Derrida makes it clear that his cat is 'unsubstitutable'; the story he is telling is irrevocably tied to her unique subjectivity as 'this irreplaceable living being that one day enters my space.' As such, he claims, she 'does not appear to represent, like an ambassador, the immense symbolic responsibility with which our culture has always charged the feline race' (p.9). Derrida declines to participate in what Phillip Armstrong suggests has historically been the principal mode of engaging with cultural representations of animals; that is, to read them as 'screens for the projection of human interests and meanings.'<sup>171</sup> As Susan McHugh explains:

Everybody knows the disappearing animal trick: rabbit goes into hat, magician waves wand, and presto! The magician displays an empty hat. Simplistic though it sounds, this old act illustrates how literary critics historically have rendered the animal a non-issue. Reading animals as metaphors, always as figures of and for the human, is a

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<sup>171</sup> Philip Armstrong, *What Animals Mean in the Fiction of Modernity* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 2.

process that likewise ends with the human alone on the stage. Now you see the animal in the text, now you don't.<sup>172</sup>

Derrida's emphasis on processes of looking, seeing, and, crucially, being seen foreclose the possibility of the magician's trick being successful by insisting on the visibility of his cat; she is allowed to look, too. However McHugh makes it clear that the sleight of hand that renders the animal culturally invisible has a particular relationship to the ways in which we read and understand literary representations of animals. The interpretative work that is called for, or desired, by a reader negotiating a literary text too often invites recourse to the figure of the human as the privileged 'key' to the complexities of that text. It should be important, then, to attend to the ways that textual animals might, as Philip Armstrong suggests, 'have significances, intentions and effects quite beyond the designs of human beings' (p.2). Rather than arguing away or denying the drive toward textual interpretation, it would instead be useful to productively complicate the interpretative work undertaken by the reader of literary texts by seeking to move this away from privileged ontological modes of reading and understanding.

Indeed, I would like to suggest that insights from the field of animal studies might go some way toward addressing some of the stalemates that can be seen to send theories of trauma into a perpetual argumentative loop. Where trauma studies becomes paralysed by competing versions of experience (mimetic/non-mimetic) and their possible modes of interpretation (the extent to which they might be considered as offering truths), animal studies engages with the ethical tension generated when attempts are made to appropriate or interpret another bodies' experience of being in the world in ways that offer a fresh perspective on the debates examined here.

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<sup>172</sup> Susan McHugh, 'Animal Farm's Lessons for Literary (And) Animal Studies', *Humanimalia*, 1.1 (2009), n.p.[accessed 10 October 2017].

It is useful at this point to turn to an example of the way work in animal studies seeks to avoid binary thinking when it comes to interpreting animal bodies by way of analysing Anat Pick's engagement with the animal scientist Temple Grandin. Grandin has written extensively about her autism and the ways it manifests in her cognitive life, principally with regard to the way her thought processes take place visually (or, in pictures) rather than linguistically. She maintains that this, alongside the intensely positive and negative affective responses she experiences from various kinds of tactile encounter, gives her a privileged understanding of the world as it is experienced by nonhuman animals. As a result of this, Grandin has worked on the design of animal holding and processing facilities in the US, with the stated aim of making these more humane and less traumatising for the animals involved. In order to do this, she is attentive to her own sensory responses when passing through the machinery, and in effect imagines herself into, or interprets, the mental state of the livestock which she sees as analogous to her own. Cary Wolfe argues that in this case, 'disability becomes the positive, indeed necessary condition for a powerful experience by Grandin that crosses not only the lines of species difference, but also of the organic and inorganic, the biological and mechanical, as well'.<sup>173</sup>

Here then, we have an example of an interpreter of trauma trying to empathise with a traumatised subject. Grandin does this in order to make certain claims about the central truths of that traumatic experience and she does so with a stated ethical aim. She is certainly interested in accessing a kind of 'fullness' of experience as it exists for the livestock in question, and she sees this traumatic encounter as, if not readable, certainly available to interpretation. In response to Wolfe's essay on Grandin, however, Anat Pick notes that even aside from the fact that, 'Grandin's ability to see from a cow's point of view allows her to enter into their midst like a spy', so that 'her insider's perspective makes killing them

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<sup>173</sup> Cary Wolfe, 'Learning from Temple Grandin, Or, Animal Studies, Disability Studies, and Who Comes After the Subject', *New Formations*, 64.64 (2008), 110–23 (p. 117).

easier,' Grandin's assumptions about her own ability to interpret animal trauma in some kind of truthful way actually lead her to miss what might be important about that experience to the animal in question.<sup>174</sup> Pick asks, 'does thinking in pictures really get one closer to the being of a cow?', before going on to point out that 'cows have elaborate social structures and complex familial attachments. Their lives rather than their minds are significant in ways that Grandin barely addresses' (p.66). Pick's intention is not to shut down the possibility of empathetic engagement with animal life; rather the opposite, she is preoccupied with theorising 'a creaturely fellowship' between humans and other animals (p. 68). However, she does draw attention to the kinds of choices that can be made when a decision to try and interpret or empathise with another subject's experience is taken, and how these might often fail to be opened up (particularly when that empathy is operating within a strictly humanist framework). It seems to me that the case of Grandin illustrates the tension at work between assuming that it might be possible to know or understand an animal's being-in-the-world (quite possibly you can't), whilst at the same time there perhaps being an ethical imperative to imagine, empathise with, or interpret animal subjectivity in order to think through the kinds of desires or needs an animal might have in various situations. Pick's critique makes it clear that one of the most useful ways to approach such a task would be to resist searching for singular, experiential 'truths' and instead to consider what a plurality of such truths might look like, and how these might intersect.

Such a project would of course be particularly necessary if, as is the case in the Grandin example, the animal experience under consideration is a traumatic one. That is, of course, to assume that animals are allowed to be traumatised, and that a traumatic encounter is readable, or given, rather than withheld or taken up as part of a larger cultural narrative that regulates the experience of suffering. To really engage with the idea that

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<sup>174</sup> Pick, p. 66.



an animal might be subject to trauma would be to have to rethink and transform a huge number of our current social structures, which function on the basis that experiences of trauma cannot and do not extend to the animal subject. Indeed, a large number of contemporary theorists of trauma have put forward a similar critique of trauma studies as it relates to the human. Pieter Vermeulen argues that, 'designating certain events and experiences as traumatic, far from being a mere academic exercise, not only reflects but also shapes contemporary power relations.'<sup>175</sup> Stef Craps also makes this point specifically as it relates to the global distribution of trauma and trauma studies' Eurocentric bias. He argues:

The founding texts of the field [...] marginalize or ignore traumatic experiences of non-Western or minority cultures [...] they tend to take for granted the universal validity of definitions of trauma and recovery that have developed out of the history of Western modernity.<sup>176</sup>

Craps points out that the privileging of the event-based model in classical trauma theory also works to obscure experiences of structural trauma that similarly require critical and therapeutic attention (*Beyond Eurocentrism*, p. 50). The global plight of animals could certainly be understood as traumatic on this structural level just as it could also be in the singular, specifically located moments of violence that pervade animal life. However, the novels I examine in this chapter are certainly not directly concerned with the everyday trauma faced by much of the global animal population. Rather, they are hospitable to a reading that would seek to think through the questions of subjectivity and interpretation raised by

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<sup>175</sup> Pieter Vermeulen, 'The Biopolitics of Trauma', in *The Future of Trauma Theory: Contemporary Literature and Cultural Criticism*, ed. by Gert Buelens, Sam Durrant, and Robert Eaglestone (London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 141–55 (p. 141).

<sup>176</sup> Stef Craps, 'Beyond Eurocentrism: Trauma Theory in the Global Age', in *The Future of Trauma Theory: Contemporary Literature and Cultural Criticism* (London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 45–61 (p. 46).

the examination of theories of trauma that has formed the basis of this chapter.

As such, my reading of the texts focuses specifically on the opposition of inside to outside that emerges out of trauma theory's model of sovereign subjectivity. I see an analysis of this binary opposition as able to offer insight into the problems of interpretation that I have laid out here in the sense that it speaks to the ways trauma theory *produces* its subjects and in doing so regulates the kinds of meaning that are available to those subjects. Caruth attributes the repetition of the traumatic flashback to 'the absolute inability of the mind to avoid an unpleasurable event that has not been given psychic meaning in any way.' In terms of the traumatic experience, she argues, this means that 'the outside has gone inside without any mediation' (*Unclaimed*, p. 59). Her comments function by drawing attention to a 'lack' that is posited as responsible for the psychological distress that commonly attends such flashbacks. She hypothesises that this mediation is necessary for the interaction of 'outside' and 'inside', suggesting that such an intervention works to effect some kind of transformation in either entity so that they might healthily cross over, one into the other.

In clinical terms, this mediating structure might take on a body and be understood as the analyst, offering a therapeutic intervention intended to work through the psychological distress arising from what Caruth's use of the word 'outside' makes clear is an external event. Yet Caruth's deployment of the inside/outside opposition also brings to mind a different figure that might take the place of this missing mediator: a host presiding over a threshold, in this case the psyche of the traumatised subject. Imagining this mediating figure as a host allows the opposition of inside/outside to be understood as produced, rather than natural. That is, it would reintroduce the question of subjective agency into an analysis of the traumatic experience by seeing the inside/outside of subjectivity as an opposition brought into being through, amongst other things, the

historical, social, and cultural contexts and identifications with which a host subject is in a constant case of encounter. As such, focusing on the inside/outside problem is a useful way to direct attention to the question that this chapter seeks to answer: how can spaces of meaning be kept open for nonhuman bodies in trauma narratives? To what extents are such narratives *hospitable* to nonhuman presence, and how do the processes of meaning-production that accompany nonhumans in these texts shape the limits of this hospitality?

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In the three texts that I read in this section of my thesis, animals appear as haunting presences. Certainly the texts I examine here probably would not gain easy membership to the 'canon' of trauma fiction I touched on earlier. I will, however, treat them as trauma texts simply because of the key role ghosts and hauntings play in each narrative. Whilst Luckhurst suggests that the ghost has become something of a cliché in trauma narratives, he also notes the sense in which a ghostly presence in a text acts as an invitation to interpretation:

Ghosts are the signals of atrocities, marking sites of untold violence, a traumatic past whose traces remain to attest to a lack of testimony. A haunting does not initiate a story; it is the sign of a blockage of story (p. 93).

In this chapter I will therefore proceed from two key assumptions: that the ghost acts as a signifier of textual trauma; and that the presence of said ghost is, as Luckhurst suggests, aligned with blockages or knots of narrative that present interpretative dilemmas. By choosing to analyse texts that deviate from the conventional model of fragmentation that trauma theory sees as the most appropriate literary response to the traumatic experience, and by focusing on the animal presences in these texts, I hope to contribute to the 'reiteration of traumatic subjectivity in

different kinds of register' that Luckhurst sees as crucial to a reimagining of cultural trauma theory.

In the final part of this chapter I undertake a very brief reading of Evie Wyld's *All the Birds, Singing*, arguing that the novel's adherence to an event-based model of trauma in its depiction of PTSD acts to shut down the possibilities the uncanny animal at its centre has to be something more than a metaphor for its human narrator's trauma. In Chapter Five I analyse the ways that *The Dogs of Littlefield* similarly acts to 'exorcise' the animal ghosts that haunt its pages, although in this novel such a rejection of nonhuman presence exists as a critical commentary on discourses of immunity after 9/11. Finally, in Chapter Six I conduct an extended reading of Fiona McFarlane's novel *The Night Guest* alongside Sara Ahmed's theoretical notion of 'strange encounters'.<sup>177</sup> I argue that McFarlane's text is hospitable to what Ahmed calls 'strange bodies', whilst also remaining attentive to the ways that the strangeness of these bodies is produced, rather than given. As such, the novel points to a middle way between the polarised imperatives to either reify or reject meaning that trauma theory brings to its analysis of literary texts.

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<sup>177</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (London: Routledge, 2000).

#### IV. The Traumatic Animal in *All the Birds, Singing*

Evie Wyld's novel *All the Birds, Singing* follows the story of its troubled narrator Jake both backwards and forwards in time; forwards from the moment she finds a dead sheep on her isolated farm (the second in a month), and backwards through her life before that moment, moving inexorably and in reverse towards a terrible act that haunts the novel but is not revealed until its final pages. These two timelines are presented to us in alternate chapters, with the present day events occurring on an unknown (presumably British) island, and those from the past taking place in Australia. Initially, we are led to suspect that the violence meted out to Jake's sheep is directly connected to events in her past life, but what at first suggests a straightforward act of vengeance is shown to be far more complex.

Predominantly, this is because the being Jake suspects to be the perpetrator of violence against her sheep is a large, dark animal of inconsistent form, glimpsed only for moments at a time and imbuing her with a sense of dread and horror. The elusive nature of this beast acts in the same way as the novel's structure does in that its meaning, like that of the narrative, is continuously in play, seemingly graspable at certain moments but then ultimately revealed as only partial. As the novel progresses, we are presented with several scenarios that might explain Jake's self-imposed isolation and her episodes of anxiety. We learn that she was once a sex worker, was held captive and sexually abused by a former client, and also became the target of threats from a colleague when working as the only female sheep shearer in an all-male workforce. Each time episodes like this are related they seem to offer an explanation for her distress in the present day, as well as the attacks on her sheep. However, none of them ever yield narrative payoff. Instead, due to the reverse chronology Wyld employs, they are shown to simply be causal effects of the happening awaiting us at the end of the novel, the imagined terrible nature of which builds with each false alarm.

Finally, however, the end of the novel takes us to her beginning. Rejected and hurt by a male friend, Jake puts the tip of her joint to a leaf and starts a huge and terrible bushfire that claims the life of one of her school friends and puts another in hospital, devastating property and killing hundreds of animals. After accidentally revealing her culpability she runs away from home, although not before being brutally beaten by a gang of local people that includes the dead girl's father. This points to one of the more interesting and problematic effects of Wyld's writing strategy: the deferral of meaning that characterises the narrative means that the reader may not pass judgement on Jake until the end of the novel, by which time, having spent so much time with her, it is less easy to do this

In this way the novel stages Jake's narration of her history as a process of working-through that leads us therapeutically back toward an originary, event-based trauma. Here, Wyld's obvious interest in how deferral might usefully structure a novel narrated by a traumatised subject also recalls the notion of 'belatedness' that is central to trauma theory. Caruth suggests that the 'inherent latency of the event' is responsible for the 'peculiar temporal structure, the belatedness, of historical experience: since the traumatic event is not experienced as it occurs, it is fully evident only in connection with another place, and in another time' (*Trauma*, p.8). We see just such an effect in Wyld's novel whereby the trauma of Jake's past both makes sense of and is brought into existence by her present circumstances. As such, the text shows its investment in the experiential structures of trauma that Caruth prioritises in her theory. Certainly the 'Australia' timeline chapters that interrupt the present day narrative progression call to mind the recurrent 'involuntary and intrusive experiences' that characterise medical definitions of post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD.<sup>178</sup> Because the inverse timeline of Jake's recollections disrupts the accumulation of meaning that would occur in a standard

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<sup>178</sup> Mardi Jon Horowitz, *Stress Response Syndromes* (New York: Aronson, 1976), p. 55.

chronological narrative, the Australia chapters are read as interruptions to, rather than advancements of, the plot. As such, they can be understood as both spontaneous and unwelcome in the manner of traumatic 'flashbacks.' Jake's self-imposed isolation on the sheep farm (she refuses invitations to socialise with other members of the remote community) similarly suggests another common PTSD symptom; a 'denial state' characterised by 'numbness or unresponsiveness to, or reduced involvement with, the outside world' (Horowitz, p.55).

Sightings of the creature that is killing Jake's sheep are figured as interruptions and intrusions in the same way as the Australia chapters. The animal appears and disappears unexpectedly, and evades all attempts at classification. Largeness is perhaps the only attribute of the animal that Jake consistently notices every time it appears. On several occasions she describes it as 'black' or 'dark' but this seems less a factual description than an effect of the aporia that the animal presents. Indeed, even when the creature's terrifying corporeality overwhelms her, its body still suggests instability and absence. On one occasion Jake makes an attempt to fire her gun at it and is unable to, explaining, 'it disappeared when I tried to aim, when I looked too hard [...].'<sup>179</sup> She compares it, variously, to 'a big dog' 'a fox or deer, but looking nothing like either of these things' 'a cat, because it moved in that way, loped like a cat,' whilst also noting that it is 'taller and wider than a man' (Wyld, pp. 28, 112, 176, 208). The arrival of the animal into the narrative also coincides with an influx of strange noises and supernatural disturbances. Jake is woken by a 'crack and a slam' and a sound 'like hands slapping fast on a wall' she also hears something clamouring around the house, running 'fast around the bedroom' and then carrying, 'on up the stairs, up and up the stairs that were not there because there was no room above mine' (pp. 22, 187).

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<sup>179</sup> Evie Wyld, *All the Birds, Singing* (London: Vintage Books, 2014), p. 208.

Thus the animal is established from the start of the novel as a complex interpretative knot. It is apparent, for example, that there are elements of the creature's appearances that can be understood as ghostly or supernatural. In this context its visitations suggest a haunting that is simultaneously a provocation: why does it visit? Why does it kill? We are also invited to consider the possibility that the animal might be a product of Jake's mental state; after all, she is clearly suffering from post-traumatic stress, could the creature be a kind of hallucination? Indeed, Jake is the only person to see the animal for the majority of the novel. Yet despite these formulations, it is impossible to deny the coarse realness of the creature, evident in the way Jake relates her impressions of the animal's body, the hair on its back 'thick and wiry', the shoulders 'dense and muscled.' Difficult to disregard, either, the violent traces the animal leaves behind – sheep torn open, buildings broken into in the night. Undoubtedly, the messy problem the creature presents is one that generates intense narrative pleasure for us. It is desirable, indeed imperative, for Jake to see this creature properly, so that she might have time to examine it and come to a realisation about its meaning. Simultaneously, the prospect of Jake coming into closer contact with the beast is terrifying- it's clear that it intends violence, for reasons we do not yet understand.

Therefore, whilst the animal functions as a kind of doubling of Jake in the sense that the slippery site of its body invites questions (and hints at answers) about what she means and how her narrative might be made whole, there is an important textual richness at work here in the sense that the creature never simply functions as a metaphor for Jake's unknown past. Instead, this animal figure offers such an excess of possibilities for interpretation that it necessarily remains an object of interest for us. It is regrettable then that the closing pages of the novel work to close down this interpretative space. Jake's final encounter with the creature takes place in the concluding chapter of the novel and directly follows the final Australia chapter in which the reader finally learns of Jake's arson. An immediate effect of this is that the significance of the animal to the plot is



substantially altered; it no longer seems causally entwined with Jake's past life but instead can be understood more crudely as a beastly manifestation of her guilt. Necessarily, another corollary of this is that the creature can no longer be conceptualised primarily in terms of its own peculiar history, agency, or desires; it becomes, rather, an extension, or even explanation of, Jake's self.

Jake is driving at night with her friend Lloyd when he suddenly demands that she stop the truck. When she does so he gets out and heads into the woods, with her following. It is at this moment that he too sees the creature, telling Jake "it's huge [...] It's just in front of us" (p.278). There is a crunch in the undergrowth; something moves deeper into the woods and Jake looks down to see that she and Lloyd are holding hands. Chapter and novel effectively end here, followed only by a brief reflective passage where Jake looks back to her childhood as it was before the fire. In the closing pages, then, the corporeality of the animal is withdrawn from the narrative. Although it appears that Lloyd has seen the beast, Jake can only make out 'a shadow beneath the green canopy', where 'maybe' something moves (p.227). Despite this, the meaning of the creature is still effectively left open (Wyld is far too interesting a writer to end with a crude reveal) and so the animal remains unidentified, its shape fluid, its nature unknown. Notwithstanding, something about the richness of what the creature might mean is lost, not only because the puzzle of Jake's past is solved, but also because in its final pages the novel reveals itself to be more interested in what it signifies for Jake to see the animal, than in what it might mean for the animal to see her.

Because the creature appears throughout the novel on the fringes of Jake's vision, even when it does not manifest itself to sight she senses and is vigilant to its presence. As such, there is a sense throughout the narrative that the animal is watching Jake, that it has business with her and returns to make some kind of demand. In being reduced to noise and shadows in the final chapter, then, the creature no longer exists as a

complex provocation, but instead reads as a metaphor for Jake's trauma and guilt. Its body quite literally disappears into the shadows and leaves, to quote McHugh once more, 'the human alone on the stage' (*Animal Farm's Lessons*, npn).

In this way, the creature becomes part of a relatively straightforward trauma narrative. It is a symptom, a repetition of the traumatic event and as such its role is to 'remain unavailable to consciousness but intrude repeatedly on sight' (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, p.92). In what can be understood as a conventional process of working-through, Jake is finally able to narrate her trauma, the therapeutic reward of this being the fact that she is no longer alone but is able to share her experience with Lloyd, as demonstrated by his newfound ability to see the mysterious animal and by their symbolic gesture of hand-holding that concludes the chapter. Therefore, the subjectivity of the animal is further diminished in the sense that it now simply represents an *event* that intrudes on Jake's sovereign subjectivity. This opposition of hostile outside to bounded inside is replicated spatially in the novel when it juxtaposes a violent exterior realm (the woods inhabited by the mysterious animal) with the isolated farmhouse housing a traumatised subject, a bordered space threatened with infiltration by this same uncontrollable outside. It is apparent, therefore, that in structuring its narrative both as a process of working-through and as an example of intrusive, event-based trauma, *All the Birds, Singing* is not able to keep space open for the creature that haunts its pages. This suggests, I would argue, that traditional, event-based models of trauma narrative are fundamentally inhospitable to nonhuman presences, a claim that I will address further in the next two chapters.

## Chapter Five

### Ditching the Dogs: Discourses of Immunity in *The Dogs of Littlefield*

#### Introduction

In her *Sunday Times* review, Christina Patterson called Suzanne Berne's novel *The Dogs of Littlefield* 'gentle' and 'moving', but suggested it was a shame that the author 'didn't stick with people and ditch the dogs.'<sup>180</sup> Given that the text is in large part, *about dogs*, and indeed, about people ditching dogs, Patterson's recommendation seems to somewhat miss the point of Berne's novel, which is a (thoughtful and provocative) exploration of borders in one small American town, and of the different ways outsiders come to be 'ditched'. As Patterson's bemusement demonstrates, the novel's dogs provide the most striking and unusual example of narrative non-belonging, particularly as many of them happen to be ghosts.

Indeed, Patterson's review ironically replicates the central conflict of the novel, summed up by the question: how might it be possible to live *without* 'ditching the dogs?' In this chapter I explore the ways that the meaning of the narrative's dogs (both living and ghostly) is closed down as part of Berne's critical commentary on therapeutic discourses of trauma. I argue that the text shows how contemporary approaches to healing from trauma are structured by discourses of immunity that once more establish and police the borders of a sovereign subjectivity, a claim I develop through a reading of Roberto Esposito's work. In order for the novel's

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<sup>180</sup> Christina Patterson, 'The Dogs of Littlefield by Suzanne Berne', *The Sunday Times*, 8 December 2013 [accessed 17 October 2017].

central character Margaret to move past her pervasive feelings of loss, she is forced to transform the ghostly dogs that haunt her from loved companions to traumatic metaphor, a process that is satirised in the text and never fully achieves completion.

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*The Dogs of Littlefield* is set in a fictional Massachusetts town of that name, sixth on a Wall Street Journal list of '20 Best Places to Live in America', and home to roughly one per cent of the nation's psychotherapists.<sup>181</sup> Margaret Downing, plagued by an uncertain but overwhelming sense of loss, lives here with her husband Bill and daughter Julia. Their new neighbour Dr Clarice Watkins has recently arrived in town to research the effects of global destabilization on 'the world's most psychologically policed and probably well-medicated population' (Berne, p. 47). Clarice finds the town filled with unease after an unknown person has begun poisoning dogs, dogs that in death have begun to appear to Margaret Downing in a ghostly pack, lurking in the bushes outside her home, their 'enormous baleful eyes' staring up at the windows (p.132).

Clarice intends to focus her monograph on 'good quality of life' in the expectation that the wealthy, white, middle class inhabitants of Littlefield will be especially balanced particularly as they are all in therapy and so 'investigating their fears rationally, with the care and absorption of scientists' (p. 242). Yet as she makes observations during the course of her research she comes to realise that the people of Littlefield are instead 'strangely infatuated with the idea of menace' and is forced to conclude that she has in fact 'stumbled on to the most unbalanced people of all [...] afraid of everything' (p. 242). She notes:

One can view the village of Littlefield as a carefully constructed refuge, an achievement that, these days, seems as admirable as it is

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<sup>181</sup> Suzanne Berne, *The Dogs of Littlefield* (London: Fig Tree, 2013), p. 4.

fragile [...] What is surprising to the outsider is that Littlefield does not consider itself to be a refuge. The citizens here believe they are no different from citizens anywhere. Although they stay apprised of current events it appears they believe that what happens in their village is equally serious, that their personal burdens are equivalent to any suffered elsewhere... (p. 152).

Clarice has her neighbour Margaret Downing in mind here; she will provide a case study for the first chapter of the planned monograph. Despite to all appearances enjoying a comfortable, stable and privileged life, Margaret is plagued by an anxiety so pervasive that Clarice imagines she is 'attending to something just beyond the range of human hearing, something normally audible only to dogs, or bats' (p.50). Whilst Clarice finds Margaret's anxiety unsettling, she is simultaneously conscious that her mother would dismiss Margaret as '*another whiny white person*' (p.50) Indeed, it is apparent as the novel unfolds that whilst the inhabitants of Littlefield might not see their privileged situation as providing a 'refuge' from personal hardship, they certainly conceive of it as a bounded space of comparative security when compared to the hostile and degenerative outside world. The townspeople see their existence as being vulnerable to this mysterious outside and imagine their community is constantly on the verge of either collapse or invasion. A child sends the school into 'full lockdown' by carrying a plastic pencil sharpener shaped like a pistol into class, parents fret as fighter jets fly over a football game ("they're going somewhere") and unusually heavy snow causes the children of the town to fear something is 'out of balance in the universe' (pp. 55, 44, 99).

The predominance of such tropes in the novel aligns it with the genre of literature known as 'suburban Gothic', described by Bernice M. Murphy as 'a sub-genre of the wider American gothic tradition that often dramatises anxieties arising from the mass suburbanisation of the United States and usually features suburban settings, preoccupations and

protagonists.<sup>182</sup> Despite the jet planes overhead and niggling anxieties about climate change, it is a menace from within (the spate of dog poisonings) that threatens to tear the community apart and sow seeds of distrust between friends and neighbours. As such, the novel exhibits another feature of the genre, which is that 'one is almost always in more danger from the people in the house next door, or one's own family, than from external threats' (Murphy, p. 2). However the interplay of outside and in, or more specifically of local and global community, is emphasised throughout *The Dogs of Littlefield* with the result that an easy separation of internal from external threats becomes almost impossible. Therefore the privileged site of anxiety (and horror) for the community in this novel is not simply the realisation of incorporated danger that characterises suburban Gothic, but more precisely a fear that the categories of 'in' and 'out' are not working in the ways they might be expected to. To put it slightly differently, this anxiety involves an understanding that the borders of community are permeable and an internal threat is always already bound up with an external one, and vice versa.

As such, I would argue that it is more helpful to read Berne's novel alongside the theory of Roberto Esposito, specifically his explication of the immunitary paradigm as it relates to community after modernity, which deals explicitly with the problematics of negotiating borders. Esposito shows how the immune mechanism that we are most familiar with in the biomedical context of vaccination ('the inoculation of nonlethal quantities of a virus stimulates the formation of antibodies that are able to neutralize pathogenic effects at an early stage') is identifiably also deployed in various other (legal, political, technological) contexts.<sup>183</sup> In essence, this mechanism, 'reproduces in a controlled form what it is meant to protect us from' (p.8). Esposito turns to etymology to show that the Latin noun

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<sup>182</sup> Bernice M. Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 2.

<sup>183</sup> Roberto Esposito, *Immunitas: The Protection and Negations of Life* (Cambridge, Eng.; Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2011), p. 7.

*immunitas* incorporates within itself that which it lacks, the *munus* that refers to office or tribute, and which Esposito identifies as linked to the reciprocal obligation and gift-giving that define the earliest understanding of *communitas* (p.6). As such, Esposito argues that immunity is necessarily a 'privative category' that 'only takes on relief as a negative mode of community' (p.9) and in politico-juridical language it signifies 'a temporary or definitive exemption on the part of the subject with regard to concrete obligations or responsibilities that under normal circumstances would bind one to others.'<sup>184</sup> It is thus possible to identify two key characteristics of the immune mechanism as Esposito posits it: firstly, it involves the controlled management and inclusion of a perceived threat; secondly, it is a negative mode characterised by the restriction and inhibition of relationalities that would seek to exceed the boundaries of the privileged organism.

Therefore, the immune are excused from processes of reciprocity (and relationality) by being protected from 'obligations or dangers that concern everyone else.'<sup>185</sup> As the immune community are exempt from responsibility to those outside that community they are able to establish and police borders that open and close according to the desires of the immune group, rather than in response to the pleas or demands of the (contagious) external subject. In the Littlefield community (inhabited, as Clarice's proposed monograph will argue, by privileged American subjects) the immune mechanism functions in order to guarantee these privileged subjects the safety they see as their right. As such, the community is characterised by controlled forms of *unsafety* that predominantly proceed by impeding the development of unruly relationalities. This means that the townspeople are continuously on the look out for citizens that don't belong and, as such, should be refused

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<sup>184</sup> Roberto Esposito, *Bíos : Biopolitics and Philosophy*, PostHumanities Series ; v. 4 (Minneapolis, Minn: University of Minnesota Press ; Bristol, 2008), p. 47.

<sup>185</sup> Timothy Campbell, 'Bios, Immunity, Life: The Thought of Roberto Esposito', *Diacritics*, 36.2 (2008), 2-22 (p. 50).

hospitality. A proposed off-leash dog park that has sent the town into meltdown (and is the supposed catalyst for the spate of dog poisonings) is just such an example of the immune cycle of freedom, transgression and control in action; this allowance of doggy freedom will be managed negatively (as a restriction of growth), just as Esposito describes, in that the park meadow will only be off-leash between eight am and ten am on weekdays, and for two hours on a Saturday and Sunday evening. This will be a probationary period during which the dogs can prove themselves worthy of such a privilege (Berne, p.4). However, those members of the community that see this move as (unforgivably) privileging the rights of dogs over those of humans point to the various ways that dogs have not 'behaved like good citizens in the past' in order to call into question the wisdom of incorporating an unwelcome virus (dogs) into the heart of the communal organism (the park) (p.77).

This management of subjectivity and inclusion (citizen or non-citizen) can be seen at work elsewhere in the community in that dogs are not the only ones under pressure to prove their credentials as 'good citizens.' Although it is Clarice's 'sleepy and benevolent-looking' dog Aggie that is purportedly to blame for her three week search for rental accommodation in the town, her new landlady Hedy Fischman pronounces 'with relish' that the townspeople are in fact simply too '*ray-shist*' to rent property to a black woman. Indeed, Clarice finds that her goal of blending in with the local population poses something of a challenge. The only other black people she has encountered in the town are 'a cashier at Walgreens and a bagger at Whole Foods' (p.48). Ahmed Bhopali, a young Pakistani law student, is the only other person of colour to feature in the novel, and as such is considered a prime suspect in the dog poisonings. This is because, Hedy declares, 'you cannot discount the Middle East', referring to Ahmed as the 'young Muslim man' she has seen around town who is 'very angry-looking and never says hello. Looks like he'd like to blow something up' (p.126). When Clarice points out that Ahmed is Hindu, and someone else presses Hedy to provide a motive for the Middle East's involvement in



small-town dog poisoning, she vaguely mentions 'religious differences' (p.127). Her racism is demonstrably shared by the Littlefield police force, who, Ahmed tells Clarice, have been harassing him for months, ticketing him for chaining his bicycle to a parking meter, for jay-walking, for sitting in the park after dusk (p.236). A dark-haired man with facial hair has been spotted painting graffiti on an office wall, and the police have proceeded to stop anyone matching that description, including Ahmed, twelve times.

Whilst Ahmed is not one of the novel's principal characters, the fact that his brownness alone (and more specifically, the racism that allows the Littlefield inhabitants to transpose South Asian for Middle Eastern) is a signifier of both prospective and realized guilt for the townspeople is one of the key ways that the text announces itself as post-9/11 fiction. When an interviewer mentioned to Berne that the novel appeared to her as describing 'a collective outbreak of hysteria-neuroses borne out of too much comfort, something akin to that suffered by the drawing room-confined middle-class women in turn of the century Vienna treated by Freud', Berne replied that whilst she had not considered a parallel with 'drawing-room' hysteria, she certainly felt that the label of 'collective hysteria' would be, 'a rather apt description of the current American political system.'<sup>186</sup> Berne gestures here to the mechanism of immunity as it exists in the West post-9/11, where the compulsive policing of borders has become a positive expression of patriotic nationalism.<sup>187</sup> Indeed, 9/11 is the event that both Esposito and Jacques Derrida use as an example of the pathological 'auto-immune' response that is able to develop when the immune mechanism fails.<sup>188</sup> Again, the term takes its meaning from the

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<sup>186</sup> 'Suzanne Berne behind the Picket Fence', *Bookanista*, 2013 <<http://bookanista.com/suzanne-berne/>> [accessed 17 October 2017].

<sup>187</sup> George Bush used the language of immunity and defence in his famous 'War on Terror' speech in 2001, when he announced: 'Our nation has been put on notice: We are not immune from attack. We will take defensive measures against terrorism to protect Americans.'

<sup>188</sup> For Derrida, unlike Esposito, the structures of immunity and auto-immunity are indispensable to community as we know it. He sees the auto-immune response as a 'death-drive' that is 'silently at work in every community, every *auto-co-immunity*' and claims 'no community <is possible> that

same process in biology whereby the bodily immune system malfunctions and begins to produce antibodies that attack its own cells. For Derrida, the auto-immune response is 'quasi-suicidal' in that 'a living being works to destroy its own protection, to immunize itself against its "own" immunity'<sup>189</sup>, whilst Esposito defines it as 'an immunity that is destined to destroy itself with the other' (Campbell, p.55).<sup>190</sup> Whilst Esposito suggests that Derrida gives auto-immunity a 'tragic characterization' that he himself would reject in favour of seeking aspects of the response that are 'potentially creative and productive', he is in agreement with Derrida that the destructive auto-immune effect is linked to globalization and the 'preventive immunization' that is generated when 'more human beings (but also ideas, languages, and technologies [*le technique*]) communicate and intersect' (Campbell, pp. 53-55). As such 'local enclaves' like the town of Littlefield 'can be explained as the immunitary rejection of that general contamination that is called globalization', the phenomenon that Clarice identifies when she notes that the townspeople see their personal burdens as 'equivalent to any suffered elsewhere' (Campbell, p.55; Berne, p.152).

In Littlefield, the hysterical auto-immune response that comes into being as a result of the community's over-immunisation (the policing of citizens) is most visible in relation to the town dogs. The restriction and inhibition of development that characterises the immune response as seen at work in the controlled introduction of the dog park turns back on itself in its most negative form when an unknown person begins poisoning the dogs (and they are, of course, not just dogs, but *pets*). The community

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would not cultivate its own auto-immunity, a principle of sacrificial self-destruction ruining the principle of self-protection.' In the case of 9/11 he points to the fact that the "terrorists" are not absolute others, but rather 'were often recruited, trained, and even armed, and for a long time, in various Western ways by a Western world that itself, in the course of its ancient as well as very recent history, invented the world, the techniques, and the "politics" of "terrorism." (*Autoimmunity*, 115.)

<sup>189</sup> Derrida, 'Autoimmunity' in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror*, 94.

<sup>190</sup> Jürgen Habermas, Jacques Derrida, and Giovanna Borradori, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida* (Chicago ; London: University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 94.

begins to disintegrate as its inhabitants are no longer able to trust in the 'shared values' that allow consensus on the way that the controlled inclusion of 'othered' citizens is decided, structured, and managed. Instead, an unidentified but internal agent has begun attacking the organism of the town from within, just as the immune mechanism does. Berne's description of the communities' auto-immune response to this, whilst humorous, also clearly mimics the kind of liberal discourse that commonly arises as a response to acts of terrorism post-9/11.

People no longer let their dogs out in their yards alone. Some dog owners drove to other towns to walk their dogs. More than a few were considering moving altogether. Task forces had been organised. A Take Back the Park march was planned for when the weather warmed. 'Our Dogs and What Next?' read an editorial headline in last week's *Gazette*. *What have been unleashed in this town are the forces of hatred and intolerance. A place bitten by fear is never the same place again. . .* (p.148, italics in original).

This being the case, it would be easy to embark upon a reading of the novel that would see dogs in general (and particularly Margaret's accusatory ghost dogs) as a metaphor for the uncontainable, globalised 'outside' that so terrifies the Littlefield inhabitants; indeed, Berne places the novel specifically in this context when she mentions the 'hysteria' of the American political system in her interview. Such a reading is of course possible, not to mention interesting, and it is certainly a part of the novel's meaning, but ultimately the project of Berne's text seems to be to call into question the possibility or ethics of processes of interpretation that substitute one thing for another in ways that unproblematically override signified with signifier. When working in this way, such a metaphor would close down the meaning of the accusatory ghost dogs that haunt Margaret because they simply stand in for an invasive other, and would similarly close down the subjectivity of Ahmed Bhopali, whose brownness would

simply equal a threat to (white) America. As one of the town inhabitants says to Clarice, “Obviously the dogs are a symptom of a more systemic problem, but we all take it personally” (pp.151-2). To put it a little differently, assuming that the function of dogs in the novel stands in for post 9/11 anxieties about the foreign ‘invader’ (in the language of *immunitas*) is to suggest that the way the community and its inhabitants are bound up with and emotionally invested in doggy relationalities is not readable in its own right. Indeed, reading the text alongside the theories of Esposito and Derrida as I have begun to do here, immediately makes it clear that the immune/auto-immune response is clearly mobilised by the problematics of inter-species living and can be read coherently in these terms without the substitution of an alternative, more authoritative paradigm. Amongst other things, this would point to the real joke in Berne’s novel – that dogs are enough to rupture this privileged community all on their own. This is not to say that I believe a reading of this novel in the context of trauma post-9/11 is without value. Rather the opposite; it is to suggest that focusing on dogs opens up a reading of the text that would analyse the relationship between trauma and the immune/auto-immune mechanism in order to uncover the ways that this is mobilised against and with both human and non-human subjectivity post-9/11.

Perhaps most obviously, the place of dogs in the novel draws attention to the way that value is inconsistently distributed across different forms of life. As I have pointed out, such distribution is of course controlled to some extent by the workings of the immune mechanism, which would equate an unwelcome, or viral life to a threat that necessitates negative management. This means that such unwelcome lives can never fully express or grow into the possibilities of their disruptive selves. So: dogs must be on leashes, and live in the community on sufferance, always subject to termination if they turn against the communal ‘organism’. As such tolerated (but also privileged, in many ways) subjects, the Littlefield dogs are allocated value, but this value is considered finite, and assigning too much of it to doggy lives is a sign of

pathology. Margaret, moved and obsessed by the dogs that haunt her, constantly describes herself (and is described by others) as having an unhealthy surplus of affect that marks her as different. She is 'a human tuning fork' who muses on the fact that she may have some kind of 'Sensory Integration Disorder' because everything bothers her, a permanent imbalance that makes itself felt as 'something unreasonable, morbid, a persistent boring dread (p.14). It is Margaret who discovers the first dog poisoned, lying dead in the park, 'white and motionless, almost too big to be believable' (p.7). The dog's body is uncanny from the start, so that the reader is perfectly able to identify the spectral canine on its return when it rears up against the car window as Margaret sits inside, 'enormous and white', nails clicking against the window and breath fogging the glass (p. 62). Soon, Margaret is being followed everywhere by watchful hordes of canine undead:

Sometimes she saw just one, but there were hundreds of them now, gray legions, small and large, some of them mangy and thin, patches of fur hanging loose, hides crawling with fleas and worms; some with ropes around their necks; some with legs crushed and trailing behind them; some still just puppies, fat bellies dragging along the ground. All of them with enormous baleful eyes. It was all the dogs of Littlefield, she had started to think, every dog that had ever been starved or beaten, run over, abandoned by the road, tied to a tree and stoned, torn apart in staged dog fights, drowned as a puppy in a sack. They'd crept back, crossing the years like miles, scenting their way home across an impossible distance, one by one, to gather under the oak trees in her backyard, in the softly falling snow, to stare up at her windows and wait for her to look out and see them. (p.132).

All these dogs are victims of abuse and murder, their ghostly bodies testifying to the brutality of both their lives and their afterlives. They appear to Margaret as a kind of rebuke, and it seems that their overarching desire is for visibility, they 'wait for her to look out and see them.' In life

these dogs were killable (although not grievable) non-subjects, but in becoming visible to Margaret, this changes a little; they make a demand on her to look that also requires an acknowledgement of invisible kinds of trauma. They have the power to hold Margaret in their gaze, peering at her with 'enormous baleful eyes' in a way that calls her to account. This is particularly evident during an episode in which Margaret and Bill host a Christmas meal that unites most of the novel's central characters in one room; Margaret, however, is unable to ignore the presence of the dogs outside. She is disturbed by an awareness of the difference in condition between her guests and the animals outdoors, and is:

Sorry for inviting people to dinner while out in the cold whirling darkness thousands of dogs slunk just beyond her lit windows, ears laid back, hackles raised, circling and circling her house, leaving not a single paw print in the snow (p.139).

Her expression of regret is articulated in a powerful image that expresses the spatial separation of included and excluded subjects (the bright, warm, room sheltered from the dark snow outside) whilst also simultaneously identifying Margaret as the agent of this division; she has invited the people inside, and the apology she makes is to do with her awareness that she has limited and managed her hospitality.

Margaret and Bill's daughter Julia is identified as suffering from the same surplus of affect as Margaret; she is painfully aware of her responsibilities to the animals in her life, and this is most evident in the ways she seeks to arrange that these animals are properly mourned:

Every time a pet died, Julia conducted rituals and burial ceremonies with somber devotion, the animal conveyed to its grave on a little red plush pillow Julia reserved for this purpose, covered by a handkerchief. Happy memories were recounted, followed by the Lord's Prayer and a poem, then the internment. Later, a moment of

silence at dinner, a candle lit in honor of the dead. She even buried mice and toads that drowned in the pool (p.16).

Julia's grief is evenly distributed, and extends from her own pets to frogs caught in the water filter of the outdoor pool. When she discovers a dead mayfly in the kitchen she tells her father, 'I think it's sad when something dies, no matter what it is', to which he replies, 'Sad doesn't really apply to bugs' (p.253). Julia is ignorant of the value judgments that regulate which lives are grievable, and her affective attachments are shown to be not only foolish but dangerous; she is hospitalised after climbing on to a frozen pond in order to rescue a small white puppy, which of course turns out not to be there, after all.

Neither Margaret nor Julia, however, extends their surplus of affect to the novel's most disposable lives: coyotes. These animals stalk the edges of the novel in the same way that they are shown to do in the community, the woods of which are said to be 'full of' them; 'occasionally they materialized at the edges of people's backyards during evening barbecues, dark and bony and somehow accusing, hovering behind rhododendrons and swing sets' (p.25). Margaret is reassured after she discovers the first murdered dog by thinking, 'if it was poison at all, someone had been trying to poison the coyotes' (p.25). These wild canids, then, are excluded from her circle of grief.

As it turns out, she is right; the novel finally reveals that the dogs have been killed by an environmentalist trying to 'complete the food chain and restore a natural order' by culling the coyotes who he argues have 'no natural predators in the New England suburbs' (p.262). The dogs have simply been 'collateral damage', a phrase that incorporates within itself the move from immune mechanism to autoimmune response; the proper inclusion of death within life which is posited here as preserving the 'natural' subjects of the community turns on itself to attack those same proper subjects, the dogs that live and belong in human homes. Here,

Berne points to the way that the immune/autoimmune response is always already imbricated in ideas of care, and gestures to the broader cultural implications of this as it can be seen at work in practices of conservation. The poisonous thanatopolitics of the environmentalist show that in this case the project of conservation is able to unproblematically adopt killing as a means of prolonging or enriching life, thus offering a quintessential example of immune logic in action. Further, the poisoning of the coyotes relies on an assumption about their sameness that sees these animals as infinitely replaceable, and therefore killable. When the one stands in for the many, a violent metaphorical logic is at work.

In this novel, then, care is unruly, and the proper functioning of the immune mechanism relies on it being properly managed and allocated. In Margaret's case, her excess of care, manifested in the dogs she sees, is ultimately seen as a sign of pathology. This is where Berne's novel engages closely with cultural discourses of trauma and the traumatised, particularly in terms of the kinds of working-through or acts of interpretation that are offered as potentially therapeutic in these cases. Crucially, Littlefield's psychological pedigree (home to roughly one percent of the nation's psychotherapists) is part of the novel's dark comedy. Clarice considers the inhabitants to be 'the world's most psychologically policed and probably well-medicated population', and Margaret muses, ' "you know, I bet if you ran out of the house yelling "Help!" doors would fly open and people would rush out with handfuls of Prozac' (pp. 47, 17). Inevitably, then, Margaret's ghostly canine followers inspire a frenzy of attempts at diagnosis from those around her, diagnoses which seek to close down and displace the meaning of the dogs by working out what they *really* stand for. This closing down is presented as not only a contrast but also a preventative response to the affective realisation that Margaret uses to make sense of the dogs on her own terms. In a particularly striking few passages, Margaret muses on the appearance of the dogs and is suddenly struck by the idea that although the dogs 'had



only seemed about her, not about anything else' what if instead, 'the dogs were for all of them?' (p. 138)

At last she understood. At last it had come to her: she was just like everyone else who had troubles and if she was interested in her own troubles, she was also interested in theirs, and therefore she was not alone, would never be alone, even if Bill left her, even if she spent the rest of her life weeping in her bedroom with the door closed. The world and its troubles would be with her (p. 141).

Whilst this realisation is not particularly politically profound (as we have already seen, Margaret's affect is still limited and does not lead to any kind of larger action), it is still radical in terms of the way the Littlefield community is normally seen to operate; that is, as being concerned primarily with inwardness and the strict policing of risky relationality that characterises the immune mechanism. By experiencing a sense of connection to others that extends outside of Littlefield (to 'the world'), Margaret returns to the reciprocity of the communal *munus* from which the immune subject is exempt. Linked as this realisation is to the presence of the dogs, it becomes evident that for Margaret to be 'cured' of their haunting is for her to necessarily be 'cured' of this openness to the outside that undercuts and threatens the normal functioning of the communal immune mechanism. The ghostly dogs, therefore, are an extremely dangerous kind of virus.

In order for Margaret to be cured she must perform an act of substitution, or interpretation, that will involve finding an alternative meaning for the dogs she sees by looking inward. The erasure, or more appropriately, *exorcism* of the dogs is necessary for Margaret's cure, and is understood by those around her to be part of and crucial to a healthy process of working through; to put it differently, if the dogs aren't dogs then Margaret's distress becomes manageable. Bill, her husband, 'thinks the dogs are a symptom of distress.' He attributes their appearance to the

strain Margaret is under as a result of their potential divorce, 'it was infecting her, doing something to her brain. He'd read about this kind of projection stuff in a copy of *Psychology Today* in Dr Vogel's waiting room. Neurotic obsession. Common for people going through a bad time' (p.111). The narrator offers Bill's diagnosis of Margaret to the reader with tongue firmly in cheek, just as she does with all the townspeople and their compulsion to diagnose their friends, neighbours and children with various psychological disorders. Indeed, Margaret explains that when she has tried to talk to Bill about the uncanny dogs, 'he thought he knew what she was talking about, which was worse than not being understood at all' (p.131). Instead of wanting the dogs gone, Margaret has 'started to crave' their presence, so that whilst seeing them feels like, 'a tremendous *irritation* [...] like the air is filled with bees, a repulsive feeling, intolerable', she finds that she can 'bear it.' Often she gets up in the middle of the night to go and look out of the window; '*I know you're there, I haven't forgotten about you*' (pp. 132-3).

This changes, however, after Julia climbs on to the frozen pond in search of the white puppy that vanishes as soon as she has taken a few steps on to the ice. After this event, Margaret explains that it is 'her job to stay home. In the days after she fell through the ice on Silsbee Pond, Julia had not wanted to be alone' (p.172). Margaret sees Julia's accident as a failure of care on her part and she understands this failure as linked to her preoccupation with the dogs; she has formed a foolish attachment that has diverted her emotional energies in a way that has proved potentially deadly. Just as it is her 'job' to look after Julia, it is also 'her job now not to see them', despite the fact that, 'they were there, they were always there' (p.172).

Just as Margaret has endangered the operation of the communal immune mechanism by opening herself up to the spectral dogs, (thus engendering an autoimmune response where the dogs, in the person of the ghostly puppy on the pond, threaten the life of her own daughter), she

is also shown to have done so by including a lethal doggy subject within her own home. This is the family dog, Binx, loved by Julia but seen most often with Margaret, the 'lunatic Binx: chewing up shoes and chair legs, barking at every squirrel that ran across the lawn, sending rugs flying as he skittered from room to room' (p.16). This exuberant canine subject breaches the terms on which dogs are tolerated in the Littlefield community, and this unruly subject must be negatively managed as the immune mechanism demands. Appearing throughout the first part of the novel barking, wailing, howling and running, Binx is abruptly neutered and stops barking, growling, and even his favourite pursuit- trying to bite the postman. A dynamic presence up until this point, Binx, now lies 'in the middle of the kitchen floor like a gigantic ink blot, hardly moving' (p.216). He has been prescribed anxiety medication (just like the rest of the town) and is now 'almost catatonic' (p.214). When Julia slips him a couple of extra anxiety pills before a walk to cheer him up, he manages to break free of his leash in the park and attack Matthew, the son of one of Margaret's good friends. For Matthew, stoned and frightened, Binx is unidentifiable, a creature that 'could not be categorized' but most closely resembles a coyote: 'Black gums. White fangs. Yellowish eyes' (p.232).

After this, Binx is 'destroyed.' As Matthew's mother Naomi (a psychotherapist, of course) explains, ' "I mean I love dogs, I have one too [...] But that thing wasn't safe around children"' (p.234). The destruction of Binx, become-coyote and become-killable, works to restore Margaret's pathological excess of affect; he becomes a sacrificial subject that allows the functioning of the immune mechanism (outsiders stay out) to return to normal by providing an explanation for Margaret's canine fears. As Naomi remarks:

"One minute she's looking at a bush, the next it's a dog. Well, no surprise, given the monster she had right in her house. That's what I told her. I said, Margaret, you are projecting, and it may even be helpful, a defense mechanism, given all your stress" (p. 235).

In the same way that Derrida points to the workings of autoimmunity in the fact that the ‘terrorists’ that the US sought to wage war against after 9/11 were not in fact ‘absolute others’ but ‘were often recruited, trained, and even armed, and for a long time, in various Western ways by a Western world that [...] invented the word, the techniques, and the “politics” of terrorism’, so Binx similarly becomes the ‘monster’ within the safe space of the house, his attack precipitated by the medication that should have managed and controlled him (*Politics in a Time of Terror*, p.115). By allowing Binx to be killed, Margaret acts to counteract the care, connection, and also *grief* she has felt toward the living-dead dogs that have followed her for so long, and so auto-immunity is restored to the ‘healthy’ state of immunity. In order to complete this process, she has to tell a different story about the dogs, one that is no longer hospitable to their presence. Naomi has offered her version of this, (as has Julia, who decides that the waterfall built as a memorial for the children Margaret lost to a series of miscarriages is ‘what her mother was seeing when she stared out of the kitchen windows’) and although Margaret’s is slightly different it still returns the meaning of the dogs back to Margaret herself, so that the affective opening-out that she had previously experienced is closed down and turned inward. She understands now that the white dog she saw for the first time in her car was ‘only a projection of her own fears and unmet needs’ (p.274). As Bill explains:

It was all her worries about Julia, that’s what she’d been seeing, she told him, when she thought she saw those dogs. She was very cogent about it now, almost businesslike. She did not believe in ghosts. It was all neurosis. Not sleeping, not eating, the difficulties they’d been having, trying to suppress her fears – all of that had made her unbalanced, so that her mind had shown her what she was afraid to see. Just as Dr Vogel said: anxiety. It wasn’t madness – she wasn’t going mad, thank God [...] but only anxiety, its next-door neighbour.

She was going to get a prescription. There was a certain medication. Naomi knew someone, a psychopharmologist (p. 246).

Here we see an effect similar to that observed in *All the Birds, Singing*, whereby the dogs (or puma-creature, in that case) simply stand in as a figure for the individualised trauma of the protagonist. However both novel and, we may imagine, Margaret, seem deeply sceptical of such a closing down of meaning. Having chuckled appreciatively at the therapeutic community throughout the novel, the reader can hardly be expected to buy into Dr Vogel's analysis now. The indirect discourse Berne uses also means that this neat resolution to Margaret's psychological difficulties is transmitted to the reader in Bill's voice, and we already know that he is deeply sceptical about the dogs, and that his perceived understanding of Margaret's relationship to her ghostly canines is 'worse than not being understood at all.' Not only is the diagnosis too convenient, too neat, too unimaginative, to be taken seriously, but the idea that a prescribed medication will help Margaret is somewhat entertaining in the light of Binx's recent pill-fuelled aggression. Berne's novel refuses such an easy act of interpretation just as it also refuses to discard the possibility that the undead dogs are just *dogs*. Further, although the environmentalist has confessed to laying poison in the park for the coyotes, there remains 'the question of Boris, a dog deliberately poisoned on a weekday afternoon a few days before Thanksgiving, outside an ice-cream parlor on a busy sidewalk' (p.264). Boris's death is not assimilable into the town's chosen narrative, and that seems to be because the act is ultimately meaningless, the auto-immune response taken to its extreme as the pursuit of death for death's sake. As Margaret understands it, 'someone had liked the idea of poisoning dogs and had decided to try it [...] simply to see what it felt like to kill something that someone else loved' (p.264).

The attempt to reduce the events surrounding the dog poisonings to the actions of one person, in order that they might go away, echoes precisely the community's need for Margaret's dogs to be the projections

of her troubled psyche so that they might be encouraged to go away, too. Imbricated as these two moves are in the desires for wellbeing of a community obsessed with psychological health, it is evident that Berne's novel is engaging with what have been referred to as the 'depoliticizing tendencies' of Western models of trauma treatment (Craps and Beulens, p. 4). This would refer to the kinds of working-through that Freudian psychoanalysis would posit as curative, just as it would to the paralysed, fragmented narrative voice of Caruth's trauma sufferer. Craps and Beulens point out that psychological healing often 'risks becoming privileged over material recovery: reparation or restitution and, more broadly, the transformation of a wounding political, social, and economic system', and Margaret's exorcism of her canine spectres, the success of which depends on her severing a newly formed attachment to the world beyond Littlefield, shows this in action (p.4). As Clarice observes, Margaret 'was weeping about everything. But did it matter? To notice and weep, to worry about everything and yet do nothing in particular' (p.241).

Furthermore, in asking a reader to look critically at this effect, Berne engages with the individualizing tradition of the suburban genre that she writes within and against. Catherine Jurca's ironically titled study *White Diaspora* examines the tendency of twentieth century literature set in American suburbia 'to convert the rights and privileges of living there into spiritual, cultural, and political problems of displacement, in which being white and middle class is imagined to have as much or more to do with subjugation as with social dominance.'<sup>191</sup> Jurca coins the term '*sentimental dispossession*' to refer to 'the affective dislocation by which white middle-class suburbanites begin to see themselves as spiritually and culturally impoverished by prosperity' (p.7). It is immediately possible to see Berne's novel, and in particular Margaret's unnameable grief, as expressing just this condition. Crucially, however, Berne acknowledges this as a hallmark of suburban American literature in order to try and

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<sup>191</sup> Catherine Jurca, *White Diaspora : The Suburb and the Twentieth-Century American Novel* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 4.

move beyond it. Margaret's problems, whilst easy to represent superficially in these terms, also simultaneously exceed them in that her spiritual impoverishment is engendered by the policing of affect and relationality that goes hand in hand with the workings of the immune mechanism, placing restrictions on her impulse toward a more unconditional kind of hospitality. Further, Berne is certainly not a writer uncritical of or even sympathetic to the kind of sentimental dispossession Jurca describes. Indeed, she faces it head on in Clarice's own diagnosis of Margaret's troubled condition:

The problems of Margaret Downing were all too obvious: the ennui of a loveless marriage, resulting in attempts to connect with external sources of emotional intensity: elaborate seasonal decorations; sentimental German music played endlessly on the piano; and, of course, the banal affair with a sexist male novelist, whose emphasis on sports culture epitomized the phallogentric world that simultaneously rejected and enslaved her, leading to the inevitable emphasis on youthful appearance amid the decline of middle age – blonde salon highlights, yoga classes, skin coddled daily with creams and moisturizers that cost as much as the yearly income of a bean farmer in Rajasthan – all adding up to the worst kind of social blight: the completely self-absorbed human being (p.240).

Here, Berne cheerfully and courageously pokes fun at the plot of the novel as well as at suburban literature (not to mention academia) more generally. She is able to do so because in fact the plot of her novel is made up of much more than this, which makes the suggestion that she 'stick with people and ditch the dogs' that began this essay all the more strange. The dogs allow the reader to move beyond seeing Margaret Downing in the terms above to thinking about her inwardness in more interesting ways. Indeed, although Clarice delivers this damning indictment of Margaret's lifestyle and character (and Margaret *is*, of course, self-absorbed), she herself is dissatisfied with this analysis, to the point that she is not able to

complete the grant proposal for the anthropological study that would take Margaret as its key subject. Instead, she recalls quoting Kenneth Burke to her students; ‘“a way of seeing is also a way of not seeing [...] To focus on object A involves a neglect of object B”’, a quotation that very deftly encapsulates the concerns of Berne’s novel. Her findings having proven too ‘problematic’, Clarice departs Littlefield without completing her grant proposal, a decision Berne described in an interview as ‘a triumph of moral intellect’ For Berne, Clarice was ‘imposing a narrative on the town and its inhabitants by trying to use them to prove a theory’, just as the therapists and townspeople do to each other, and to Margaret and her dogs (*Bookanista*, n.p.).

The conclusion of the novel, then, invites the reader to remain critical of the various ways that the imbrications of (living and nonliving) canine and human subjects have been explained or theorised by the town’s inhabitants, and also finally refuses to integrate or explain Margaret’s sense of loss in any real way. Most importantly, Berne refuses to discard (or exorcise) the dogs as real bodies that matter and mean and her novel calls attention to the dubious ethics of such processes of erasure. As the novel closes, Margaret sits in her garden, and notices something ‘moving in the deep blue twilight.’

“Hello?” she called, to whatever it was’ (p.280).



## Chapter Six

### **Beastly Encounters: Interpreting Strange Bodies in Fiona McFarlane's *The Night Guest***

#### **Introduction**

Ruth had always pictured the tiger just appearing in the lounge room, the way a ghost might; he was a haunting and required nothing so practical as a door. Now she saw him coming by road and through the high grasses of the drive; she saw him moving with intemperate speed over the beach and ascending the dune; she saw him in the dark garden, making for the open door.<sup>192</sup>

This passage from Fiona McFarlane's novel *The Night Guest* marks the moment at which Ruth Field starts to conceive of the mysterious tiger that has been visiting her at night as invasive; as entering from the outside, rather than being a body whose uncanny presence is proper to her home. As such, it is an important turning point in the text's staging of the way that Ruth's openness to the tiger and its meaning is gradually closed down by the intervention of her carer, Frida Young. In narrating this process McFarlane's novel engages with some of the ways that encounters with both human and nonhuman bodies might be recognised as products of their particular historical, social, and cultural settings, whilst at the same time necessarily exceeding these contexts.

In order to examine the questions of interpretative difficulty and the nonhuman that are the focus of this chapter, I posit Sara Ahmed's work on strangers as a valuable means of rethinking the ways that, as this thesis has suggested, trauma theory's event-based model installs a boundary

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<sup>192</sup> Fiona McFarlane, *The Night Guest* (London: Sceptre, 2014), p. 147.

between inside and outside that results in the creation of a passive sovereign subject. Ahmed shows that the figure of the 'stranger' is similarly produced through the management and installation of borders, so that it is 'an effect of processes of inclusion and exclusion, or incorporation and expulsion, that constitute the boundaries of bodies and communities, including communities of living (dwelling and travel) as well as epistemic communities' (*Strange Encounters*, p.6). For Ahmed, the best means of disrupting this endless operation of border policing is an engagement with interpretative difficulty as it relates to the stranger figure on whose behalf such boundaries are drawn. This involves the important recognition that this figure is produced (and thus readable) rather than characterised by aporetic alterity; the stranger comes into being 'not as that which we fail to recognise, but as that which we have already recognised as "a stranger"' (p. 3).

Recognising the stranger, then, would involve moving to see the inside/outside of (sovereign) subjectivity as brought into being through historical, social, and cultural contexts and identifications, amongst other things, with which this 'host' subject, fearing invasion at any time, is in a constant state of encounter. In order to move beyond this recognition of the stranger as produced, however, and to be able to approach this figure more generously, Ahmed asks us to become interested in strange encounters, encounters that necessarily involve 'surprise and conflict' and which are understood in relation to the contradictory possibility that '*we may not be able to read the bodies of others*' (p.p. 6, 8, italics in original).

I see Ahmed's arguments here as offering a particularly useful way through the problems of meaning-production that have occupied the second section of this thesis, especially if we think of strangers, or strange bodies, as being any kind of body that remains excluded from the sphere of sovereign subjectivity. In this sense, her theory suggests that it is possible to take an interpretative approach to strangeness that enacts a critical process of working-through when it recognises strange bodies as

produced (and seeks to contextualise this) as well as remaining open to the existence of an unassimilable excess in these same bodies by allowing them to still surprise. Reading the textual nonhuman in this way avoids the dual vanishing that occurs when its body is either worked-through by reducing it to metaphor, or left abandoned because it is assumed to exist aporetically outside narrative.

*The Night Guest* lends itself particularly well to such a theoretical approach because problems of meaning-production in relation to bodies are foregrounded in the text. Set in modern day Australia, the novel is narrated by Ruth Field, an elderly woman living alone who comes to believe that a mysterious tiger is visiting her house at night. Although the condition is never named explicitly, it is clear that Ruth has dementia. This is seemingly exacerbated by the arrival of Frida, a carer claiming to have been sent by the local community council (a claim which later turns out to be false). Frida gradually insinuates herself into Ruth's home and her presence triggers a series of memories for Ruth related to her missionary childhood in Fiji, memories which weave through the novel in a way that collapses Ruth's past and present. The uncanny tiger, whose presence initially delights Ruth, soon becomes a source of terror for her when she shares his existence with Frida.

The novel presents itself as a trauma narrative in its preoccupation with a colonial past that symptomatically haunts the present, and it is these legacies of colonialism that are associated with the closing down of meaning in the text, specifically in relation to Frida and the tiger. Whilst Ruth mistakenly assumes Frida is Fijian, a (mis)recognition that allows Frida to successfully enter her life, Frida also manipulates the meaning of the tiger by contextualising it through imperial narratives that situate tigers as an 'outside' threat to empire and its colonised subjects. Ruth's dementia functions as the backdrop to these conflicts, with Frida's abuse of her presented as another form of colonisation in that it involves a closing down of Ruth's imaginative world. In this sense, the novel engages

with the ways meaning and interpretation act differently according to the power structures within which they operate, and in doing this links cultural forms to the larger political and historical contexts on which they draw. As such, the text reminds us that, in Edward Said's words, 'the power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them.'<sup>193</sup> Ultimately however, I want to argue that the text remains invested in preserving the pluralities of meaning that circulate around strange bodies and invasive subjects, as demonstrated by the ways in which it implicates us as readers in the same drive to interpretation and restriction of meaning that it simultaneously critiques.

I begin my analysis of the *Night Guest* with a brief summary of Ahmed's work on the stranger in order to set out the critical context of this chapter. I then proceed to explore the ways that interpretative problems are figured in the text by using a slightly unusual structuring device. Following Ahmed's emphasis on 'encounters', I focus on four different instances of encounter that occur in the novel in order to investigate the ways that connections between embodiment and meaning-production are opened up and then closed down as the narrative unfolds.

## **I. Strange(r) Encounters**

In *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*, Ahmed sets out to critically examine the figure of the stranger across a number of political and theoretical contexts. She argues that the stranger, by being constituted as the outside of (Western) bodies, communities and nation-states, allows these things to come into sovereign being. She further insists that attention be paid to the specific ways that notions of the stranger are mobilised at different times and in different places, pointing out that contemporary discourses of globalisation and multiculturalism produce

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<sup>193</sup> Edward W. Said, *Culture & Imperialism*, First Vintage Books edition. (London: Vintage, 1994), p. xiii.

and reproduce not only the figure of the stranger, but the figure of the 'stranger stranger', in order 'to differentiate between some others and stranger others' (p.16). Such discourses rely, she explains, not only on the policing of borders but also on selective processes of welcoming. Her central aim is to argue that strangers are brought into being by such discourses rather than existing as pre-constituted subjects available to be read and recognised as other, and she explains that in order to deconstruct these processes attention must be paid to the social, political and historical relationships of force that attend specific examples of what she calls this operation of 'stranger fetishism'. She borrows and adapts the notion of stranger fetishism from Marx's commodity fetishism, positing it as a fetishism of figures rather than of objects, where 'what is at stake is the 'cutting off' of figures from the social and material relations which over-determine their existence.' This allows such figures to appear as though they ' 'have a life of their own"', which is to say that they come to be understood as fixed or natural subjects independent of these material relations.

Proceeding from this point, Ahmed's text examines the 'strange encounters' through which the figure of the stranger is produced 'not as that which we fail to recognise, but as that which we have already recognised as "a stranger"' (p.3). Specifically, she is concerned with embodiment in this context, and with the way that 'in the gesture of recognising the one that we do not know, the one that is different from "us", we flesh out the beyond, and give it a face and form' (p.3). Ahmed's task is to examine this process of 'fleshing out' the stranger, the ways in which a subject seeks to recognise the body of another 'not only by re-reading the body of *this* other who is faced, but by telling the difference between this other, and other others (p.8). This process of reading the other becomes necessary due to the defining characteristic of the encounter as Ahmed theorises it; the element of 'surprise' that is introduced when the encounter is 'premised on the absence of a knowledge that would allow one to control the encounter, or to predict its

outcome' (p.8). The surprising encounter contains within it the threatening possibility that '*we may not be able to read the bodies of others*', and this instigates the 'fleshing out' process in which the strange body comes to be defined by '*prior histories of encounter that violate and fix others in regimes of difference*' (p.8, emphasis in original).

Ahmed argues for the introduction of 'particularity' when approaching these potentially pernicious histories of prior encounter that are called upon to make strangers 'readable'. Particularity in this sense would not be a turn inwards to pay attention to the body or speech of the other, but would instead involve a move outwards to think of the '*modes of encounter* through which others are faced' (p.144). In order for this to happen, Ahmed argues that the encounter needs to be located in time and space by asking '*what are the conditions of possibility for us meeting here and now?*', with this question allowing difference between bodies to be understood as 'determined at the level of the encounter' by social processes that are not only at work in the present but that have been and will be active in other times and places (p.145). For Ahmed, there is an ethical possibility at stake in the idea that to focus on the particularity of an encounter in this way is also '*to open the encounter up, to fail to grasp it*'. That is, surprise would be understood as sustaining rather than frustrating the relationship of the bodies involved (p.145). Her preferred terminology for this kind of openness is the 'close encounter', which she argues is 'always a strange encounter, where something fails to be revealed' (p.181).

In light of Ahmed's conclusions here, then, I want to argue that *The Night Guest* exposes the particular kinds of affective work that Ruth does in order to produce (and read) the strangeness of the tiger. In doing so, it both draws attention to and elides the operations of stranger fetishism that work by the "cutting off" of figures from the social and material relations which over-determine their existence' (Ahmed, p.5). As such, Ruth's initial meeting with the tiger introduces the reader to what is in fact

the novel's main project – the uncovering and making visible of the relationships that are concealed when strange(r)ness comes to be understood as 'an ontological condition' (Ahmed, pg.5). Here the novel shows how the production of strangeness might occur on a material level by bringing different bodies into conversation with each other in order that the strange might be read against the familiar; or more accurately, so that the strange might be produced against the familiar. However the novel also emphasises Ruth's willingness to remain confused by, or fail to 'grasp' the tiger's body, situating her encounter with the tiger as a generous kind of reading of its strangeness, one interested in the particularity of a body that still never ceases to surprise.

## **II. Ruth: Tiger**

Ruth Field lives alone in an isolated house by the sea, and a tiger wakes her at four in the morning. Her awareness of the animal is auditory rather than visual; she doesn't see it (and won't until the close of the novel) but instead forms an impression of its activities from various distinctive sounds.

Something large was rubbing against Ruth's couch and television and, she suspected, the wheat-coloured recliner disguised as a wingback chair. Other sounds followed: the panting of a large animal; a vibrancy of breath that suggested enormity and intent; definite mammalian noises, definitely feline, as if her cats had grown in size and were sniffing for food with huge noses. But the sleeping cats were weighing down the sheets at the end of Ruth's bed, and this was something else (Berne, pp.1-2).

After comparing the tiger's breathing and sniffing to that of her own cats, Ruth then goes on to liken the noises it makes to those of another tiger she once saw eating at a German zoo, which had 'sounded just like this: loud and wet, with a low, guttural breathing hum punctuated by little

cautionary yelps, as if it might roar at any moment except that it was occupied by food.' However this visiting tiger differs in some important sense from that other, remembered tiger, in that as it busies itself with whatever 'large bloody thing' it is intent on eating the noise it makes is 'empty and meatless.' When Ruth calls her son Jeffrey in New Zealand, he wearily responds, "it's either a cat, or a dream"" and indeed, when she goes to investigate the lounge room is 'benign' despite 'a vegetable smell in the long hallway, and an inland feel to the air' (pp. 2-3).

From the first moment of its arrival, then, the tiger presents a problem for the reader. Ruth makes sense of the tiger's body by recalling other bodies that remind her of this new strange one, each one replaced by another that does not quite fit. Domestic cat, echo of a long-ago zoo visit, 'meatless' ghost and dream all at once, the tiger's body is both elusive and recognisable; it exceeds the known but holds out the promise of becoming knowable. Ruth brings the tiger into being by acknowledging the bodies that it is not, in order to grasp for the body-that-it-might-be. As such, the text offers us a tiger composed from fragments, fragments that come from and are rooted in Ruth's lived experience. In Ahmed's terms, Ruth tries to read the tiger's body by 'telling the difference between this other, and other others', laying bare the mechanisms by which strange bodies come to be produced (*Strange Encounters*, p.8). This textual moment also productively complicates the processes of border drawing that Ahmed sees as always present in encounters with strangeness. Indeed, it presents one possible response to a question she suggests should demand our attention: 'how does being-at-home already encounter strangeness? (p.88)

Ahmed spends quite some time in *Strange Encounters* thinking about and theorising the idea of home as it relates to the fetishisation of the stranger. She contends that the figure of the stranger comes into being through 'the marking out of inhabitable spaces, bodies and terrains of knowledge', and she is interested in dismantling the opposition between 'home' and 'away' in order instead to pay attention to the particularity of



how home is constructed and theorised at different moments (p. 79). Ahmed acknowledges that in being critical of this 'assumed' opposition between the strange and the familiar she follows Freud's work on the uncanny. Crucially, however, she departs significantly from Freud by rejecting the model of repression that subtends his own work in this area. For Freud, the *unheimlich* applies to 'everything that was intended to remain secret, hidden away, and has come into the open', by which he means anything that was at one time familiar to the psyche, an element 'that has been repressed and now returns.'<sup>194</sup> Ahmed's task on the contrary is to understand strangeness (and particularly strangeness at home) as produced rather than repressed, so that the strange(r) appears familiar not because it was once hidden within the psyche but instead because it appears 'as an effect of recognition and as a category of knowledge' so that 'when we "look out" for strangers we already know what we are looking for' (p.184). The corollary of thinking about strangeness-at-home in this way is that it is necessary to turn a critical gaze back toward the home as offering the conditions of possibility for the strange to appear as such, rather than extending this gaze outwards to seek the origins of this strangeness in a hostile outside. This means that rather than strange(r)ness within the home being understood as invading or visiting, the host subject would be asked to think about their own relation to this strangeness, that is, about the ways they might be implicated in both the emergence of strangeness in this space and in the ways they might choose to designate, or 'read' it as such. One possible result of this, Ahmed contends, is recognition of the fact that violence might be '*structured by, and legitimated through, the formation of home and community*' rather than being understood as 'coming from outside the protective walls of family, community or nation' (p.36, italics in original). If we follow Ahmed here, I believe we are able to see that when Caruth theorises the traumatic flashback as a result of the fact that 'the outside has gone inside without any mediation', she is reliant on an opposition

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<sup>194</sup> Sigmund Freud, David McLintock, and Hugh Haughton, *The Uncanny* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), pp. 132, 147.

that actively produces strange(r)ness in order to imagine the 'outside' of trauma. *The Night Guest* provides a useful corrective to such formulations. Although the tiger's recurrent visits certainly interrupt Ruth's existence in the manner of a traumatic haunting or possession, the text initially never suggests that the tiger (with the strange(r)ness it embodies) arrives from outside to infiltrate the bounded space of the home.

To think about strange(r)ness as produced is necessarily also to think about the ways in which a 'host' subject (or, as I prefer to think of it more neutrally here, a subject-at-home) might play a part in producing who or what might arrive, and/or when and how they might do so. Ahmed draws attention to the way that Derrida's theory of hospitality precludes engagement with such a politics of production by prioritising what she refers to as a politics of 'forgetting'. In order to explain this claim she focuses on the figure of the *arrivant* that Derrida first introduces in *Aporias*. For Derrida, *arrivant* can refer both to 'the neutrality of *that which* arrives', and to 'the singularity of *who* arrives' and this *arrivant* 'surprises the host – who is not yet a host or an inviting power – enough to call into question, to the point of annihilating or rendering indeterminate, all the distinctive signs of a prior identity.'<sup>195</sup> Ahmed argues that in its assertion that the identity of both host and arrivant are obviated in this way, Derridean hospitality is 'premised on the very failure to recognise the one who arrives.' In order to 'disrupt the identity of place and property [...] he or she must not be identifiable as coming from a particular place, and as having simply crossed a border, arriving here from there.' Although Ahmed values Derrida's commitment to imagining an opening or 'openness' to 'that which is yet to be assimilated', she argues that there is work to be done imagining and working through the relationship between this openness and '*the forms of assimilation that already function to differentiate others* (p.151). She explains:

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<sup>195</sup> Jacques Derrida and Thomas Dutoit, *Aporias : Dying--Awaiting (One Another at) The 'limits of Truth' (mourir--S'attendre Aux 'limites de La Vérité')* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1993), pp. 33, 34.

Such a hospitality is based on the *forgetting* of the names that are used, however, inadequately, to locate subjects in a topography of time and place. In contrast, what is required is a hospitality that *remembers* the encounters that are already implicated in such names (including the name of 'the stranger'), and how they affect the movement and 'arrival' of others, in a way which opens out the possibility of these names being moved *from*. This hospitality, premised on the surprise of an opening or gift, would begin by admitting to how the assimilation of others, and the differentiation between others, might already affect who or what may arrive, then or now, here or there (p.151).

In Ruth's encounter with the tiger, we find an example of what this kind of 'remembering' hospitality might look like in practice. Ruth remembers the 'other' bodies (cat, zoo tiger, uncanny ghost) that she has already assimilated into categories of knowledge, and then differentiates between these in order to make her visiting tiger knowable (that is to say, in order to allow the tiger to arrive). McFarlane makes visible this process of remembering and the production of strangeness that accompanies it. As Ahmed might put it, she 'admits' that such a process is operative in the encounter between Ruth and tiger. At the same time, however, the novel holds open the possibility that Ruth and the tiger's encounter might be premised on 'the surprise of an opening or gift'. This is achieved primarily by figuring Ruth's relationship to the tiger in terms of desire. When Ruth ventures out into her hallway to try and lay eyes on the tiger, who is nowhere to be found, she is aware of:

Another sensation, a new one, to which she attended with greater care: a sense of extravagant consequence. Something important, Ruth felt, was happening to her, and she couldn't be sure what it was: the tiger, or the feeling of importance [...] She felt something coming to meet her – something large, and not a real thing of course, she

wasn't that far gone – but a shape, or anyway a temperature. It produced a funny bubble in her chest (p.4).

The text makes it clear that the tiger *means* in some important way for Ruth, the sense of 'extravagant consequence' that she feels is understood in terms of an encounter ('something coming to meet her') that is also a movement forward, or an opening out. The feeling reminds Ruth 'of something vital – not of youth exactly, but of the urgency of youth' and she is 'reluctant to give it up' (p.6). This attachment performs important work in the text by positioning Ruth in a generous relation to the tiger, one that is desiring and open to surprise.

Therefore, whilst Ruth does try to read the tiger's body by bringing it into dialogue with other bodies, she also does not react to its strangeness by using these 'prior histories of encounter' to close down his meaning. Instead, the encounter with the tiger proceeds on Ruth's part with a kind of openness to *missing* his body. In this case, the desire – the 'extravagant consequence' she feels in relation to his presence – is not fixed to a definite subject but is instead experienced affectively as a shape, a temperature, a sense of largeness. This openness extends even further to a willingness to entertain the notion of her own subjectivity being subsumed by the tiger's. She is 'delighted' to imagine newspaper headlines reading "Australian Woman Eaten by Tiger in Own House", or, 'more likely', "Tiger Puts Pensioner on the Menu." As such, Ruth's encounter with the tiger can be understood as one of Ahmed's 'close encounters' in the sense that the material and psychical slipperiness of the tiger's body, the fact that it does not reveal itself in any fixed way, enriches and opens up the relationship between their two bodies.

By situating the unknowability of the tiger in terms of desire and excitement, then, the text shows that the generosity at work in Ruth's encounter with the tiger is not simply an ethical practice of responding to otherness, but also holds out the possibility that there might be joy or

pleasure to be found in such a generous, or 'close' encounter with strangeness. McFarlane sees the pleasure and joy to be found in surprise as one of the potential rewards awaiting a generous reader, a reader both hospitable to strangeness within a text and attentive to their own implication in the reading, or production of, that strangeness. However, in the second of the encounters that structure the narrative of *The Night Guest*, Ruth's first introduction to Frida, we are offered a meeting that is the inverse of the hospitable one that has just taken place between Ruth and the tiger.

### III. Ruth: Frida

Frida Young arrives the morning after Ruth's first nocturnal encounter with the tiger. Ruth is sitting at her dining room window, looking out at the sea that lies below her garden and the steep sand dunes that border it.

And in every way this was ordinary, except that a large woman was approaching, looking as if she had been blown in from the sea. She toiled up the dune directly behind the house, dragging a suitcase that, after some struggle, she abandoned among the grasses. It slid a little way down the hill. Once she had made her determined way to the top of the dune, the woman moved with steadfast purpose through the garden. She filled up a little more of the sky with every step. [...] Perhaps she had been shipwrecked, or marooned (pp.7-8).

Whereas the text carefully situates the tiger (or rather, Ruth's encounter with the tiger) as being produced by and originating within the space of the home, Frida's encounter with Ruth conversely takes place via the movement from outside to in that characterises discourses of 'stranger danger' (Ahmed, pp. 32-7). The first sentence here does a lot of work to establish this. Firstly, Frida is confirmed as an exception to the 'ordinary' landscape that serves as an extension of the bounded space of Ruth's

home. Secondly, the epithet 'large woman', particularly when followed by the observation that Frida 'filled up a little more of the sky with every step', presents Frida in terms of a kind of unusual, indefinable bodily excess. Thirdly, not only does Frida arrive from the outside in, Ruth further imagines that she has been 'blown in from the sea', making it clear that rather than being a visiting neighbour, or local, Frida is instead identified as coming from somewhere much further away: indeed, from a different element. Frida is thus immediately understood (by both Ruth and reader) as a 'strange' body, already out of place. Or to put it a little differently, Frida is not the kind of stranger that Ruth might expect to arrive. McFarlane continues to develop Ruth's sense of Frida's strangeness as the paragraph continues. By reporting that Frida is dragging a suitcase laboriously up the dunes, the text plays with what might be understood as common (or, less charitably, lazy) signifiers of 'strangeness'. Frida is figured as a perpetual traveller whereas in fact the case turns out to be filled not with her possessions but with 'enormous bottles of eucalyptus-scented disinfectant' (p.34). Finally, Ruth's reading of Frida's arrival culminates in her imagining that Frida may have been 'shipwrecked' or 'marooned'. The anachronistic language works here to multiply the ways that Frida might be thought of as 'not belonging' by suggesting that she may be out of time, as well as out of place.

Here, then, McFarlane exposes the process of reading by which Ruth makes sense of Frida's body, just as she does in the case of Ruth's encounter with the tiger. Although the two moments are similar, in the sense that McFarlane's task is to sort through and reveal Ruth's various impressions of each body, they in fact operate rather differently. The text lays bare the ways in which Ruth reads (and materialises) the tiger's body through a process of comparison and rejection in relation to other bodies. However, she also makes it clear that the tiger ultimately eludes any kind of fixity, an elision that fills Ruth with joy and to which she responds by remaining open and generous to his strangeness. Ruth acknowledges and is attentive to her own complicity in the production of the tiger as a

strange body: she knows that her attempts to read him assimilate him into her own experiences of similar bodies. In contrast to this welcoming manner of interpretation, the signifiers of strangeness that Ruth draws on when relating her impressions of Frida's arrival are self-evidently generic, rather than based in Ruth's own memories and experiences. The effect is that Ruth does not acknowledge her own implication in the strangeness that she attributes to Frida. As such, rather than engaging with the context of, or motivation for, her reading of Frida's approaching body – why the largeness, the movement out of the sea, the imagined shipwreck? – Ruth simply 'recognises' Frida as a stranger by means of positioning these sense impressions as natural rather than produced.

For Ahmed, such a process of recognition also becomes the means by which 'inhabitable or bounded spaces are produced.'<sup>196</sup> The recognition of strange(r)ness is one of the conditions of possibility for a subject to understand themselves not only as being at home (defined broadly here in terms of community, nation, family etc.) but as being in the position of host. Further, being a host subject necessarily means having the power to welcome or refuse that which is figured as strange without recourse to a 'remembering' hospitality. This removes the need to remain aware of the processes by which both strangers and bounded spaces are imagined into being. In this sense we return to the familiar idea of a sovereign subject-at-home that is always potentially at risk from a hostile outside (conceived of as the strange); an outside that threatens to disrupt the ways in which this subject is imagined as being fully present to themselves. As such, Ruth's house, made strange in the night by the presence of the tiger within, is returned to her as host once more when she recognises Frida as a figure of otherness. This recognition becomes possible, then, because Frida is understood as emerging from an outside opposed to the Ruth's homely space; the house and land that she surveys from her chair at the window.

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<sup>196</sup> Ahmed, *Strange Encounters*, p. 22.

The lack of generosity that characterises Ruth's reading of Frida is closed down even further when the text connects their encounter more specifically to the social and historical context of Ruth's own life, further engaging the questions about reading and difference that lie at its heart. The narrator reports that Frida's 'breadth and the warmth of her skin and the dark sheen of her obviously straightened hair looked Fijian to Ruth' and that this is enough to make her feel 'optimistic about the encounter' (p.8). At this point all we know about Ruth's connection to Fiji is that she lived there as a child, but it soon becomes evident that this was (as might be expected) a missionary childhood. Indeed, Ruth's memories of this time start to become increasingly important to her present existence. What is immediately clear, however, is that Ruth's profiling of Frida is highlighted as such in the text. It is shown to be an interpretation or reading of Frida's body that relies on and is produced by Ruth's past colonial encounters, rather than a reliable description of Frida's physical appearance. This is an effect of the indirect discourse used in the novel, focalised through Ruth. The text informs the reader not that Frida is Fijian but that she looks Fijian, and, importantly, that she looks this way 'to Ruth'. As such, the possibility of Frida's being Fijian is both opened up and obscured because the authority of omniscient third person narration leads us to assume that the idea that she looks Fijian is factual, while the insistence that this view is focal (Ruth's interior voice) reveals that it is in fact perspectival. In this sense, the text shows how supposedly factual notions about strangeness (in this case racial profiling) are in fact discursively produced. Therefore, although this is not the same kind of generous encounter that takes place between Ruth and the tiger, it does expose the inner workings of a meeting that is contrastingly ungenerous because it involves the assumption that Frida's body is readable, categorisable, and consumable.

However, whilst the text exposes the broader contexts that subtend Ruth's reading of Frida (her colonial childhood in Fiji), we also see that Ruth is deliberately inattentive to (although, crucially, not ignorant of) these. Therefore it becomes apparent that McFarlane is not interested



here in exploring another kind of generous encounter, but focuses instead on offering a fictional critique of the process of reading strangeness. This task is complex, so I will take some time here to explain how it is achieved in the text.

When Frida finally arrives at Ruth's front door after toiling up the dune that bounds the garden, Ruth asks, "Do I know you?" Despite the coldness this phrase might normally imply, we are told that she means this 'sincerely.'

Possibly she did know her. Possibly this woman had once been a young girl sitting on Ruth's mother's knee. Perhaps this woman's mother had been ill in just the right small way that would bring her to Ruth's father's clinic. [...] Maybe this woman came out of the old days with a message or a greeting. But she was probably too young to have been one of those children – Ruth guessed early forties, smooth-faced and careful of her appearance (p.9).

Here, then, Ruth tries to make sense of Frida by seeking to locate her in time and space. It is apparent, however, that this process of location is not neutral. Rather, it relies on returning to the broader social processes that are operational elsewhere and in other times – in this instance, Ruth's memories of her colonial childhood spent at her father's medical clinic in Fiji. Although Ruth seems to reject the possibility that Frida was a child she knew at this time (albeit without any real decisiveness) she still remains attached to the idea that Frida is Fijian (just not one of 'those' children from the clinic.) Thus, Ruth negotiates her understanding of both her own and Frida's identity by returning to her own lived experiences, just as she does with the tiger. The crucial difference, however, is that Ruth imposes a certain (racial and ethnic) identity on Frida, closing down possibilities for different kinds of meaning (or reading) as they apply not only to the encounter between the two women but more broadly to Frida herself.

However, McFarlane also invites us to doubt Ruth's interpretation of events so that in the passage above each sentence begins with an adverb of uncertainty ('possibly'; 'possibly'; 'perhaps'; 'maybe'). These call attention to Ruth's hesitation in the midst of the encounter. She is tentatively employed in seeking out ways to read and interpret Frida's presence. As such, the text shows that Frida ultimately remains unreadable, with the unease this generates for Ruth contributing at least in part to her willingness to reify Frida's body by naming her as Fijian. Our focus is therefore shifted from the properties of Frida's body – from the ways that a reader might seek to fix her identity as somehow 'real', or given – to what Ahmed calls the 'particularity' of modes of encounter. This involves focusing instead on 'the meetings and encounters that produce or flesh out others', in order to expose ways that 'others' come to be differentiated from 'other others' (p.144). In *The Night Guest* such a change of focus takes place when our attention is directed toward the ways that Ruth's personal history is brought to bear upon her meeting with Frida as a sense-making tool. The mode of encounter that occurs between Ruth and Frida is rooted in Ruth's reading of Frida as an 'other', rather than an 'other other.' In other words, Ruth decides to make the strange(r) readable, if not safe, through a process we should not think of as recognition but as a form of production that is active across time and space. This process 'fleshes out' Frida through acts of recollection and reimagining.

Furthermore, the text also draws attention to the way that the encounter between Ruth and Frida extends outwards to involve other subjects. Crucially, these other subjects also contribute to and effect the conditions of possibility for the unfolding of the Ruth-Frida relationship, and this is demonstrated most clearly in a phone conversation that Ruth has with her son Jeffrey. The movements of desire at work in the tripartite encounter that takes place when Ruth tells him about Frida's arrival can clearly be understood as colonial in the sense that they flow backward

(nostalgically) toward a reduction in meaning, a closing down of the possibilities Frida's body has to surprise.

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Jeffrey, who lives in New Zealand, phones moments after Frida's arrival. Ruth explains to Jeffrey that a 'government carer' has arrived, supposedly to look after her, and he insists on speaking to Frida. After a brief conversation, he seems satisfied that all is well, telling Ruth it could be "wonderful [...] exactly what we need." Ruth, still unsure about the situation, tells him that Frida is Fijian, 'mainly for her own reassurance.' His reply is brief, and dismissive: "'there you are, some familiarity'" (p.12). If Ruth's reading of Frida, and her communication of this to Jeffrey ('for her own reassurance') emerges in part from a need to make Frida readable, then Jeffrey's unquestioningly positive response vindicates Ruth's decision to fix Frida's identity in this way. Not only this, he chooses to refer to Frida specifically as an opportunity for 'familiarity' in a speech act that *produces* Frida as familiar rather than strange, whilst also hinting at the legacy of colonial appropriation of native peoples for labour. That is, Jeffrey assumes in his reaction to Ruth on the telephone that the identity 'Fijian' is knowable (or, for my purposes here, readable) to the point that 'Fijian' means 'familiar.'

This telephone conversation between Ruth and Jeffrey opens up and draws attention to one of the key questions in *The Night Guest*: how does Frida manage to insert herself into Ruth's life so easily, and, in doing so, cause so much violence? As the novel progresses, Ruth becomes increasingly dependent on Frida, who moves (uninvited) into Ruth's home, encourages Ruth to sell her car (without which she is isolated in her remote house) and begins to make requests for money. All of this happens without interference or protest from family and friends. As a major plot device it seems to demand an explanation that is not straightforwardly offered, in line with the interpretive strangeness of the text, and engaging

with the ‘particularity’ of this mode of encounter is a useful means of tackling this strangeness. Crucially, McFarlane suggests here (and will continue to do so throughout the text) that the conditions of possibility for Frida entering Ruth’s life in the way she does are dependent on legacies of colonialism that understand the ‘stranger’ as, in Ahmed’s words, ‘*knowable, seeable, and hence be-able*’ (p.133, italics in original). The conversation between Ruth and Jeffrey works as a kind of nodal point in the text in that it presents one of the first moments at which the reader is able to see, if not understand, some of the lines of convergence whereby the strange(r) is both produced and read as familiar.

In writing Jeffrey’s reaction here, as well as in the novel’s invocation of Ruth’s affection for Fiji and its inhabitants, McFarlane seems to be drawing on histories of Fiji’s colonisation that stress the occupying British officials’ regard for the Fijians as a supposedly ‘exemplary colonial people.’<sup>197</sup> This was in part a result of Fijian willingness to enlist in large numbers during World War Two, leading the British colonisers to see the Fijian people as ‘patriotic, devoted to duty and ready to lay down their lives for the Empire.’<sup>198</sup> Crucially, this perception of indigenous Fijians as subjects loyal to the occupying empire was reliant on and produced by an imagined opposition to the Indian population of Fiji, most of whom initially made the journey to Fiji between 1879 and 1916 to work as indentured labourers in the island’s sugar industry, and were subsequently blamed by the British for causing trouble in the colony after agitating for equality with indigenous Fijians (Denoon, p.304).<sup>199</sup> Despite the fact that the Indo-Fijian community grew rapidly in the early twentieth century, so that in the 1940s it surpassed the indigenous Fijian population<sup>200</sup>, British colonial policy held that ‘the rights and privileges of

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<sup>197</sup> Donald Denoon, Philippa Mein Smith, and Marivic Wyndham, *A History of Australia, New Zealand, and the Pacific* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. 323.

<sup>198</sup> Donald Denoon, *The Cambridge History of the Pacific Islanders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 304.

<sup>199</sup> Brij V. Lal, ‘Understanding the Indian Indenture Experience’, *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 21 (1998), 215–37 (p. 220)

<sup>200</sup> Jon Fraenkel, ‘The Origins of Military Autonomy in Fiji: A Tale of Three Coups’, *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 67.3 (2013), 327–341 (p. 327).

indigenous Fijians with respect to their customs, heritage, and land were virtually inalienable and should be paramount over any other claims.<sup>201</sup>In practice, this meant that the colonial regime under the first resident Governor, Sir Arthur Gordon, introduced a system of indirect rule through Fijian chiefs based in the eastern regions of the country, chiefs who had 'well-established relations with settlers and missionaries' (Lawson, p.800). The colonial administration then sought to indoctrinate what Stephanie Lawson calls the 'myth of cultural homogeneity'(p.800). They constructed and reinforced the notion of a uniform Fijian culture built on the model of the chiefly systems of the eastern regions, allowing them to prioritise the land rights of those who could now commonly be referred to as 'indigenous Fijians' over those of Indo-Fijians. This is despite the fact that, as Dominik Schieder explains:

It was not until the British annexation and the attempts of people like Gordon to unify the indigenous population for political and administrative purposes that a common ethnic Fijian identity, including a common language, was born. This was achieved mainly by the implementation of a neo-traditional socio-political order, based on a local eastern variation of Fijian chieftainship, but transplanted and imposed over the entire archipelago.<sup>202</sup>

This colonial 'myth of cultural homogeneity' has been operative socially, culturally and politically in Fiji for many years and its legacy is apparent in the history of political clashes between indigenous Fijians and Indo-Fijians, most obviously made visible by the series of coups that have taken place on the island since 1987.

The colonial history of Fiji, then, is one that clearly demonstrates the ways in which national identity is produced by, in Ahmed's terms, 'the

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<sup>201</sup> Stephanie Lawson, 'The Myth of Cultural Homogeneity and Its Implications for Chiefly Power and Politics in Fiji', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 32.4 (1990), 795–821 (p. 800)

<sup>202</sup> Dominik Schieder, "'Fiji Has a Coup Culture": Discussing Fiji's Ongoing Political Instability', *Paideuma*, 58 (2012), 45–68 (p. 58).

proximity of strangers within the nation space' (p.100). This is in contrast to the notion that such an identity defines itself in opposition to a stranger on the outside, or, to put it another way, a stranger to whom hospitality may be extended or denied. Rather, the nationalism of indigenous Fijians (and the accompanying primacy of rights that they enjoy over the Indo-Fijian community) is reliant on creating relations of strangeness within the national 'home', so that borders are defined and drawn within Fiji, rather than around its edges. In choosing Fiji as the location for Ruth's colonial childhood (and her memories and fixations in the present) the text draws attention to the ways that the production of bodies as, variously, strange or familiar (or 'at home' or 'visiting') is operative across time and space, so that the encounter between Ruth and Frida opens out into and is mediated by other encounters, in other places, at other times.

Jeffrey's speech act offers a clear example of stranger fetishism in practice. Frida becomes a 'figure' cut off from her social relationships, one that stands in for a group of people (Fijians) who have also necessarily been fetishized in order that Jeffrey is able to imagine them as homogenous, with the one (Frida) standing in for the many. Crucially, however, these occluded social relationships (i.e. Ruth's introduction to and reading of Frida) haunt the fetishized meetings between characters, so we are able to remain critical of attempts to reduce or fix the meanings of both these relationships and the bodies that are implicated in them. Further, by placing Jeffrey's reference to Fiji's 'familiarity' in the context of (a very small part of) Fijian colonial history here, we see that Frida's acceptance into Ruth's home is dependent on the production of the 'stranger stranger' against the 'stranger' which Ahmed argues is the condition of possibility for the stranger being 'taken in'. Historically, this process can be seen at work in the British colonial administration's decision to oppose the indigenous Fijian community (as the stranger) to the Indo-Fijian community (as stranger strangers), and I want to suggest that it is in this context that Jeffrey's comments should be understood as

reproducing this operation in order to read Frida as familiar, or knowable, in the present.

Such an action is reliant on the process of stranger fetishism (severing a person from its web of social relations) that I find useful to think of here as the practised and intentional reduction of meaning of certain bodies. In the context of Fiji, the indigenous Fijian community were put through a process of cultural flattening the direct goal of which was a reduction in the possibilities that they had to *mean differently*. After this, a formerly diverse cultural group could be imagined as united in opposition to an Indo-Fijian community understood as similarly standardised. As for Frida, Jeffrey chooses to understand her body in a similarly reductionist mode in the sense that he sees her as able to stand in for a homogenous group (Fijians) whom he believes to be knowable, because familiar. He is reliant on a sense-making process that imposes meaning onto certain bodies – which also involves ignoring the different ways these bodies might already be understood to mean – in order to produce them as (various degrees of) strange. As such I see this as a neo-colonial reading practice.

This reading of Ruth's telephone conversation with Jeffrey offers an explanation for the way that Frida is able to enter and eventually have some element of control over Ruth's home (and Ruth herself). I want to suggest that McFarlane is offering a kind of provocation to the reader, something along these lines: *look what happens when you think you know how to read*. The text draws attention to the way that the process of 'recognising' strangers might go wrong, and with it the production and regulation of inhabitable/bounded spaces. Recognising the stranger, then, might also involve recognising the stranger as familiar in their strangeness, and thus distinct from and also generative of the stranger stranger. Crucially, however this relies on the fact that the categories of recognition (or types of reading) being used to produce these different kinds of stranger are working for the host (the one who names the

stranger) in the way that they are supposed to. *The Night Guest* is able to further critique these kinds of over-confident readings by introducing Ruth's dementia into the texts as a means of exploring what happens when such processes fail.

Ruth's illness is first introduced in small and unremarkable ways, perhaps signalling only a benign self-neglect. For example, when Frida arrives for the first time, Ruth is having pumpkin seeds for breakfast and is accustomed to dressing in her sons' old t-shirts, although later she is horrified to realise that she has forgotten to wash her hair – perhaps for weeks. However, as Frida becomes more omnipresent, Ruth grows confused and begins to doubt herself. This comes to an initial climax when Ruth discovers Frida is staying in the house in one of the spare bedrooms. When confronted, Frida insists that she and Ruth have discussed the arrangement, and although Ruth begins to argue, (“‘that isn't true Frida, what you're saying to me now, it's not true. I'd remember.’”) she nevertheless experiences ‘a feeling of unravelling, all the same; an unwound thread.’<sup>203</sup> Ruth's health then begins to deteriorate after a physically abusive incident during which Frida locks her out of the house. After this point her confusion increases and although her narrative voice is still strong and lively, in conversation with other characters her responses are erratic and often childlike. Throughout this series of events, the tiger remains a constant presence, mainly making himself known to Ruth through changes in the night-time atmosphere of the house, which takes on the aspect of a jungle where ‘palms rattled their spears, insects rubbed their wings in the dripping trees’ (p.50).

In part, the introduction of dementia into the text is straightforwardly disruptive, acting as a device for McFarlane to explore what it might mean for the ‘proper’ recognition of strangers and strangeness to stop working, or go wrong. Yet such a reading of dementia in the text requires us (or at least gives us permission) to understand

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<sup>203</sup> McFarlane, p. 114.



Ruth's encounters with the tiger and Frida in the context of cognitive difficulty, albeit in very different ways. In the case of the tiger, the ethically valuable cognitive slipperiness of the big cat's body might be reduced to hallucination or misrecognition (Ruth's domestic cats are, after all, a huge part of her life at home). As regards Frida, Ruth's eagerness to attribute a Fijian identity to her might also be explained as symptomatic of the workings of a less reliable, older mind, a mind for which childhood memories and experiences are fresher, more easily accessible, perhaps even more desirable than those of the present day. However, whilst McFarlane is clearly attentive to and interested in the potential that the act of recognising (and so producing) strangeness has to break down, or glitch, in interesting and productive ways, to see dementia as the device that illuminates or gives order to this idea in the text would be to miss the truth of its emergence. In the text Ruth's dementia is not some kind of naturally occurring process but is rather produced by her encounters with other bodies. The question the text asks is not whether Ruth does or does not have dementia (whether what she sees or experiences is or is not 'real' in any sense) – indeed, that question is irrelevant here, as well as uninteresting. Rather, in raising the possibility but not determining that Ruth has dementia, McFarlane puts us in a position where we must continuously pay attention to and become aware of the limits of our own generosity. That is to say, we are constantly forced to confront the ways that we ourselves produce and then identify strangeness.

Therefore, on one level the text leaves space for us to remain vigilant to and critical of the ways that bodies (specifically Frida and the tiger) are produced as strange (or not) via their interactions with other bodies, bodies that might be understood as hosts (in the case of Ruth and Jeffrey). Yet the text also enacts a relationship with us that means we are forced to turn this critical gaze back on ourselves and reckon with our own implication in the production of strangeness, this time by paying attention to the ways that we may seek to reduce down, or even disregard, Ruth's impressions of the world. In this sense we may feel, as Frida does when

Ruth invites her childhood love Richard to stay with her, that we have 'a secret': by which I mean that we may wish to reach beyond Ruth's narration to make critical judgements about the accuracy of her observations and thoughts. For Frida, Ruth knows, the secret is that Ruth and Richard are 'innocents', that they are 'old, older than old, and that while they might still be capable of a sweet, funny romance, any physical possibility was extinguished for them both' (p.64). Frida's notion of this 'secret', then, relies once more on an interpretation of the different possibilities Ruth's body has to *mean*, with sexuality dismissed as not one of those possible meanings. As it happens, Ruth and Richard do have a sexual encounter, one that is pleasurable for both parties, who are 'both prepared to be practical' (p.123). Whether or not a reader may have shared Frida's preconceptions on this matter, the fact that Ruth focalizes the encounter means that Ruth's (and Richard's) sexuality is present and marked in the text. Therefore it must be taken into account as part of Ruth's embodied experience.

Furthermore, whilst it is apparent relatively early on that Frida is manipulating Ruth, as Ruth becomes more distressed and clouded the lines between what can be attributed to her now obvious confusion and Frida's manipulations become blurred. When Ruth eludes Frida and takes a trip to town she needs help to use the bus (she can't manage to find the right coins) and when she tries to make a purchase in the local butcher her purse is empty, the cards missing from their slots. It would be easy for us to choose to join the ranks of the people she negotiates in town – the man on the bus who gives her a 'sceptical' look, the young boy she talks to who seems 'startled', even 'a bit afraid' (p.194). When she calls Richard's house and thinks she hears Frida laugh ('a golden, bouncing swell, a brass ring, and unmistakable') it could be easy to assume, despite the evidence that Frida is becoming more involved in Ruth's life, that she is paranoid, or at least confused. Easy, again, to do the same when Frida returns home with pink lilies that Ruth accuses her of bringing from Richard's house, because he has written to her about his garden, 'full of day lilies, all of them pink',

but which she insists she has picked from her mother's home (p.132). Easiest of all would be to dismiss the tiger, as a kind of early warning sign, or simply a dream. Indeed Ruth herself begins to feel differently about the tiger as her relationship with Frida evolves and becomes more disturbing. Once a source of joy and possibility for her, she now groups him together with particular moments of upset and confusion that she sees as signifying mental deterioration. At one point she imagines expressing her concerns to Richard:

‘Please, Richard,’ she might have said, ‘how can I tell if I’m losing my mind? Are there definite signs? Please, is there some kind of test? What would *you* say to an old woman who heard a tiger in her house at night, who forgot to wash her hair, who didn’t notice her government carer had moved in? (p.117)

Where previously Ruth saw cohabitation with the tiger as full of possibility, and sought to make room for him and his multiple significances, she now finds herself forced into a position where discerning the ‘truth’ or reality of a phenomenon is not only understood to be possible (not to say desirable) but also an indispensable process providing the necessary basis for the maintenance of a kind of coherent subjectivity. Whereas previously Ruth was content to leave the nature and meaning of the tiger unresolved – indeed, found joy in his haunting of her life – now she wants him to be read so that she can be read, too. She wants others to be able to quantify and interpret her own experience of being in the world, and then instruct her on its significance: this means identifying ‘signs’ and perhaps taking a ‘test.’ If Ruth is beginning to doubt, or perhaps more accurately, *betray* her tiger, then why should we remain faithful to him?

There is a particular moment in the text, however, which acts as, if not necessarily a rebuke, certainly a reminder to us of our responsibility to read generously. Our temptation to second-guess Ruth by working out

what is and is not 'really' happening to her implicates us in the same system of stranger fetishism that the novel obliquely critiques. As such, we are able to affectively experience our own position of power when it comes to reading strange bodies – in this case, an ageing body fighting for agency. Therefore the experience of making sense of Ruth as a fictional character parallels the way Ruth makes sense of her perceptions of Frida, and has everything to do with a failure to recognise that 'truth' is not natural, or given, but is instead produced by and dependent on power relations (of which reading is one). Attention is drawn to the way we as readers are implicated in this process through a conversation that takes place after Frida has returned with pink lilies that Ruth believes to have come from Richard's garden:

Ruth held tighter to the lilies. 'They're from Richard,' she said.  
 'Poor dear crazy. Give them here.'  
 'I'm not crazy.'  
 'Confused, then. As usual, poor Ruthie's just a bit confused.'  
 'No,' said Ruth, but she recognised the word *confused* as approaching what she was, after her sticky bright dream.  
 'All right,' said Frida. 'Let's see. How old are you?'  
 'Seventy-five.'  
 'What colour are my eyes?'  
 'Brown.'  
 'And what's the capital of Fiji?'  
 'Suva.'  
 'No it isn't.'  
 'It is,' Ruth said. 'I lived there. I should know.'  
 'You *don't* know,' said Frida. 'You only *think* you do. That's what I'm talking about – confused!' (pp. 173-3)

Up to this point, Frida's manipulations of Ruth have been subtle and the use of indirect discourse produces an effect whereby the reader is both within and outside Ruth's consciousness; we see the world through her

eyes but are also able to maintain a critical distance from her narrative voice. As such, although the text cultivates suspicion toward Frida and alertness to her potential motives for exploiting Ruth (for example, she talks to Ruth at length about money troubles caused by her unreliable 'brother' George, who is later revealed to be her husband) definite proof of Frida's ill intentions has until now remained absent from the text. This has so far allowed us to doubt, or remain wary of, Ruth's impressions of the situation. This conversation, however, marks a rupture in the text, a moment of shock in which Frida's abusive treatment of Ruth becomes violently explicit, and a moment at which we are also forced to recognise the similarities between Frida's treatment of Ruth here and our own reading practices.

By moderating her language to call Ruth 'confused' rather than 'crazy', Frida's performs an empty tolerance that reveals the way in which this language substitution simply transfers violence, rather than mitigates it. As such it directs our attention to the ways in which we may have made similar judgements in relation to Ruth's narrative perspective. Even more disturbingly, however, Frida does not stop at the use of this accusatory language (the repetition of which is clearly having a successful impact on Ruth's own sense of herself – she recognises it as 'approaching what she was') but instead transforms this reading of Ruth (crazy, confused) from accusation into *truth*. When Ruth correctly identifies Suva as the capital of Fiji, Frida flat out refuses to accept this answer. As she explains, Ruth doesn't know, she only *thinks* that she knows. Here, for the first time, the text explicitly directs attention toward a threat that has lurked in its pages from the start: reading strategies that aim to identify and reveal forms of 'truth', not only within texts, but also specifically in terms of different kinds of bodies, enact violence on these texts, and these bodies. Who are you, we might want to demand of Frida, to say what is or is not true? Who are *you*, the text reminds us, to do the same?

This conversation between Ruth and Frida makes it clear that 'truth' in this text is fluid and dependent on shifting power relations. The fact that Ruth is correct when she names Suva as the capital of Fiji is irrelevant at this moment because Frida is the arbiter of truth and chooses to reject Ruth's answer. Concurrently, we are also placed in the position of making similar decisions about the 'accuracy' or 'truthfulness' of Ruth's descriptions of the world and as such are led to the realisation that we are a determiner of Ruth just as Frida is. At the same time, however, it is still possible to distinguish our consumption of the textual Ruth from Frida's deliberate gaslighting of her.

In the next section of this chapter, then, I wish to build upon the arguments I have made so far regarding the relationship between strange bodies, interpretative work, and violence. Examining two encounters between Frida and the tiger, I argue that in writing Frida's attempted 'exorcism' of the tiger the text explores the material effects of how bodies may be changed or harmed through the workings of stranger fetishism. I argue that the novel firmly situates these harmful effects as the product of the same colonial processes of meaning-reduction that are evident in Jeffrey's interpretation of Frida. In order to show how this works in the text, I turn once more to an analysis of the 'particularity' of the modes of encounter that occur between Frida, Ruth, and the tiger. Specifically I show how Frida's attempts to close down the meaning of the tiger are successful because they engage imperial representations of both tigers and Fiji in order to introduce a symbolic dependency into her relationship with Ruth. In order to be installed as Ruth's protector (and secure her space within Ruth's home) Frida characterises the tiger as a hostile 'outsider' through a deployment of these colonial representative strategies.

#### **IV. Frida: Tiger**

'I don't know Ruthie.' Frida headed back to the kitchen with her mop. 'Stranger things under the sun.' She shook her head, looking out at

the sea as she walked, so that Ruth saw she was taking the possibility of the tiger seriously; that the wide spread of her thoughts was growing wider still (p.149).

When Ruth tells Frida that she has heard a tiger visiting the house at night, she is at first met with 'jovial scorn' and told that there are 'no tigers in Australia' (pp.144, 145). Soon however, it is Frida who has 'settled into the possibility of the tiger', which she insists is probably 'man-eating' or, indeed, 'woman-eating'. This turnaround unsettles Ruth. Faced with this new version of the tiger, which is frightening not because he might be interested in eating her (she has of course entertained, and enjoyed that possibility before) but because he is *Frida's* version – she feels compelled to refute his existence, again and again. Indeed, this happens four times on one page alone. Despite Ruth's insistence that she must have made a mistake, Frida spends the night on the sofa in the living room. Although Ruth is partly annoyed by the idea that Frida is teasing her, she sees 'without wanting to, evidence of Frida's seriousness: her crushed hair, the displaced sofa cushions, the cups of tea' (p.153). Frida's interest in the tiger then culminates in two violent incidents where she supposedly confronts him whilst Ruth remains locked in her bedroom. After the first of these Frida is left with three scratches on her arm, and although she insists she has 'scared him right off', she commences building 'tiger traps' around the outside of the house, the largest of these being a large hole halfway down the dune below Ruth's garden. The second time Frida fights the tiger, she tells Ruth he is dead. She has killed him by cutting open his stomach and slitting his throat, dumping his body out to sea in a wheelbarrow.

Frida's decision to take the possibility of the tiger seriously completely changes his meaning for Ruth, because Frida now gets to decide who and what he is. Ruth realises 'the tiger was Frida's now; and not just this tiger, but the entire species' (p.163). Her words here draw attention to the way that 'Frida's tiger' is generic rather than individual. He

stands in for tigers as a species, a body representative of other bodies rather than the singular and complex creaturely (non)being that Ruth met in their first encounter. I argued earlier in this chapter that her reading of his body against other, different bodies constituted an example of the kind of 'remembering' hospitality that Ahmed suggests would be honest about the ways that a host subject is always already implicated in the recognition, or non-recognition, of whoever or whatever visitor might arrive. Frida, instead, embarks on a project of reducing the meaning of the tiger by making use of imperial stereotypes of the species, not in order to read and understand the individual tiger against and in relation to these, but in order to assimilate him to them. In doing so, Frida assigns different meanings to the tiger then mobilises these in order to draw and maintain an inside/outside opposition. This involves imagining a coherent and fixed inner space of subjectivity (Ruth's home, and Ruth and Frida within it) as opposed to a traumatic, invasive outside (the tiger). In this way, Frida seeks to displace the more real source of trauma in the text (her abuse of Ruth) through exploiting the boundary-drawing mechanisms that Ahmed has shown are endemic to the production of strange(r)ness.

When Ahmed talks about what she calls 'spaces of belonging', she identifies the nation as an exemplary model for such a space (p.99). For Ahmed the nation is produced through proximity to and distance from strangeness –that is, proximity and distance from subjects that are understood as belonging (or not) in the nation space, and the many and various degrees to which this non/belonging might be understood as taking place. In order for the nation to be imagined or produced successfully, Ahmed argues, a process of 'self-identification' must take place whereby 'the nation comes to be realised as belonging to the individual (the construction of the 'we' as utterable by the individual.' Ahmed explains that the tools of production allowing the nation to be conceived as a space of (individual and communal) belonging owe their operation both to material interventions that specifically seek to draw and enforce national borders, like 'the material deployment of force, and the



forms of governmentality which control [...] the boundaries between nation states, and the movements of citizens and aliens within the state', as well as the assemblages that structure the cultural imaginary. These comprise 'the repertoire of images which allows the concept of the nation to come into being in the first place' (p.98).

In *The Night Guest*, Frida uses both of these tools of production. She first engages with a colonial 'repertoire of images' in order to characterise the tiger as a man-eater, and then uses physical force to stage a battle with him in Ruth's home. By doing this, she is able to draw both a literal and imagined boundary between herself and Ruth (inside) and the tiger (outside). The ultimate goal of this is for Ruth to identify the space of her home as necessarily inhabited by a 'we.' Frida wants Ruth to understand her home as a space of belonging the coherency of which is contingent on Ruth's dependence on and investment in Frida as the enforcer of these newly drawn boundaries. As such, the complex set of relationships between Ruth, Frida and the tiger offer a reflection on national identity, nation spaces and hospitality in the context of traumatic events that, although specifically located, also open out other places, other times, and other relationships. This draws attention to the way that the production of spaces of belonging is never simply benign but involves actively producing (and excluding) strange(r)ness in order to secure the fantasy of the national subject as host. Or, in other words, the fantasy of a subject that reads, but is not themselves read. Most importantly, however, Frida's use of these tools of production relies on the curtailment of what I described earlier as the desire, or joy, that Ruth experiences in relation to his presence.

Firstly, Frida makes use of tiger tropes that have their historical origins in the colonial hunting campaigns of the British Raj in order to situate the tiger as particularly Indian. When Ruth mentions the tiger, Frida immediately draws a connection between the animal's arrival and Ruth's childhood in Fiji, which she calls 'that jungle you grew up in'

(p.144). Ruth protests ('I didn't grow up in a jungle [...] And there are no tigers in Fiji') instead insisting that tigers are accustomed to cold weather and 'live in India and China. Maybe Russia.' In response, Frida cryptically asserts that there are 'Indians in Fiji [...] everyone knows that, from the news.' Despite Ruth's dismissal of this ('just because there are Indians in Fiji doesn't mean there are Indian tigers. I thought everyone knew *that*.) Frida and Ruth's conversation draws a link between tigers, India and Fiji. Specifically, Frida connects India and Fiji in the context of 'the news', i.e. the recurrent coups that have dogged Fijian politics since 1987 and have been presented in the media as the result of on-going conflict between so-called indigenous Fijians and the Indo-Fijian population.<sup>204</sup>

Frida is also insistent on characterising the tiger as a 'man-eater', ('you're lucky you haven't been gobbled up in your bed'; 'Tiger on the loose, chances are it's a man-eater') and again perseveres in suggesting this aspect of the tiger's nature is related to its particular Indianness. She tells Ruth, with apparent relish, "I saw a TV show once [...] yeah, a documentary about man-eating tigers in India. You know what they say, once a tiger gets a taste of human flesh, that's all it wants to eat" (p.147). The characterisation of the tiger as a 'man-eater', as well as the particularly sensationalist description of the animal's supposedly insatiable proclivity for human flesh, is one hallmark of a particular kind of hunting discourse that was prevalent in nineteenth century India under the British Raj. European hunters sought to emphasise the dangers of man-eaters to the rural population as well as their own particular indispensable skill in managing and killing these beasts. This served both as a warning to Indian insurgents characterised as 'tigers' by the British and as a means of winning over 'the hearts of wary and non-cooperative colonial subjects' through a performance of what John Miller, following Anand S. Pandian, calls 'imperial benevolence in the face of animal

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<sup>204</sup> Mark Tran, 'Fiji's History of Coups', *The Guardian*, 5 December 2006, section World news <accessed 22 March 2017>.

aggression' (p.41).<sup>205</sup> Anand. S. Pandian has coined the term 'predatory care' to refer to this colonial project, a term that helpfully brings together the dual operations of cautionary force and benign protection that the pursuit and killing of man-eating tigers sought to make visible. It might be argued that the British administration's prioritisation of indigenous Fijian rights at the expense of those of Indo-Fijians provides another example of this kind of imperial 'predatory care', with the bodies being policed and managed in this context those of the indentured Indian population, serving as a warning to indigenous Fijians of the violence at hand if they cease to be 'good' subjects as well as an affirmation of the British officials' 'deep love' for the Fijian people (Denoon, p.304).

Frida's treatment of Ruth can similarly be understood as 'predatory care', not only in the sense that she commits to killing the tiger in what she presents to Ruth as an act of protection, but also in the way that throughout the novel she demonstrates her agency over both Ruth's body and her home through applications of force that are often framed as acts of necessary care. McFarlane brings these three very different kinds of power relationships into dialogue in order to draw attention to the tiger's body as a site of unease, or interruption, that requires a colonial kind of management, a management based on the juxtaposition of an unpredictable and violent strange(r)ness against a stable, protected home space.

Under the Raj and then continuing after Indian independence, tigers were killed in such large numbers that by the 1930's they were listed as endangered. During the Raj, tiger *shikar* had been 'on the itinerary of every visiting dignitary who was at all interested in hunting' and the tiger population in India went from about 100,000 individuals in 1600, to less than 2500 by the 1970s.<sup>206</sup> The British authorities partly justified this excess of killing as a necessary response to the purported danger the tiger

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<sup>205</sup> Anand S. Pandian, 'Predatory Care: The Imperial Hunt in Mughal and British India', *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 14.1 (2001), 79 (p. 81).

<sup>206</sup> Kailash Sankhala, *Tiger! : The Story of the Indian Tiger*. (London: Collins, 1978), p. 133; Susie Green, *Tiger* (London: Reaktion, 2006), p. 21.

posed to humans, whilst also viewing the killing of such powerful carnivores as an affirmation of masculine heroism. As such, tigers inhabited a strange dual status as both 'magnificent beast' and 'vermin.'<sup>207</sup> Kailash Sankhala, the first executive director of the famous Project Tiger conservation initiative which launched in 1972, notes the establishment in 1874 of the British Government's tiger eradication programme, and John M. Mackenzie claims that the East India Company established a rewards system for the killing of tigers in the eighteenth century, continuing into the twentieth, with the bounty paid out on tiger carcasses 'exceptionally high, reflecting perceptions of the creature's destructive powers' (p. 182).

The distinction between 'magnificent beast' and 'vermin' was inscribed into the cultural consciousness most powerfully through the prevalence in hunting literature of the time (itself a vast and popular market) of stories about man-eating tigers – Mackenzie points out that the hunting books 'are full of stories of beasts with over a hundred human victims to their credit' (p.180). Although the tiger was generally a vilified animal due to the 'combination of cruelty, furtiveness and treacherous elegance' assumed to be its essential characteristics, many hunters made a distinction between tigers that subsisted on 'wild' prey and those that hunted and killed both humans and their livestock (Mackenzie, p.180; Pandian, p.84). The former were deemed worthy of conservation as tiger numbers began to fall (mainly due to fears that large and impressive tiger trophies were not as easy to come by<sup>208</sup>), whilst European hunters who sought to make a name for themselves as specialised man-eater killers industriously hunted down the latter. Perhaps the most famous of these was Jim Corbett, a hunter turned conservationist who, whilst lobbying for protection for the Bengal tiger population (his influence contributed to the opening of the Hailey National Park, renamed the Corbett National Park in 1957) also authored the hugely popular *Man*

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<sup>207</sup> John M. (John MacDonald) MacKenzie, *The Empire of Nature : Hunting, Conservation, and British Imperialism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), p. 180.

<sup>208</sup> Pandian, p. 84.

*Eaters of Kumaon* (1944), in which volume he describes his adventures hunting down and killing man-eating tigers in various rural villages, most notably the 'Champawat Man-Eater' which he claims killed 200 humans in Nepal and 234 in Kumaon.<sup>209</sup> Corbett apparently saw no contradiction between his conservation work (he describes the tiger as 'a large-hearted gentleman with boundless courage'<sup>210</sup>) and the great number of tigers he hunted and killed over the years, and neither did his audience. Indeed his book captured perfectly the prevailing cultural understanding of the tiger as magnificent/vermin, so much so that it was used as a school textbook (Corbett, xv; Sankhala, p.134).

Necessarily, then, Corbett's descriptions of the kinds of tigers that supposedly became man-eaters were hugely influential and seen as authoritative. Aside from lurid accounts of the horrors of death by man-eater ('man-eaters, if not disturbed, eat everything – including the blood-soaked clothes'), Corbett describes man-eaters as always physically impaired in some way, whether by old age or injury. Man-eating takes place, he claims, 'when a tiger is suffering from one or more painful wounds, or when its teeth are missing or defective and its claws worn down, and it is unable to catch the animals it has been accustomed to eating'; this leads, tigers, he explains, to kill human beings out of 'necessity' (p.x, xv).

The fact that Frida has seen (or says he has) a documentary about 'man-eating' Indian tigers demonstrates the contemporary persistence of these common tropes of nineteenth century hunting literature, with the documentary's suggestion that once tigers taste 'human flesh' they will eat nothing else again pointing to the continuance of a tradition of representing tigers as, in Miller's words, 'the most recalcitrant of animals, inviting destruction by the unremitting violence of their otherness and their complete exteriority to human harmony' (p.37). In other words, Frida is engaging with this representational tradition in order to suggest

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<sup>209</sup> Jim Corbett and Maurice Hallett, *Man-Eaters of Kumaon* (London: Oxford University Press, 1944), p. 1.

<sup>210</sup> Corbett and Hallett, p. xv.

to Ruth not only that the tiger is not only dangerous but that he must certainly be destroyed – Ruth, she claims, is lucky she hasn't 'been gobbled up' in her bed (p.146). Ruth demonstrates her awareness of and conversance with this same set of images in her reply to Frida, recalling that she has seen 'a documentary of her own, possibly the same one' which suggested danger was posed only by "the old tigers with broken teeth" as Jim Corbett claimed years earlier (p.147). Ruth's disagreement with Frida is not the point here. Instead McFarlane points to the pervasiveness of such imagery in the cultural imaginary, the way that *The Man-Eater*, seeing Ruth only as "a meat tray in a raffle" begins to cast a shadow of representation over that other less fully formed, elusive, surprising tiger that she has known up until now. Ruth starts to see her tiger as what Dinesh Wadiwel calls a 'rogue' animal, an animal 'that no longer fears the human; indeed, may actively hunt and attack the human', its capacity to threaten a human-like violence, 'to reason, to plan, to strategise, to track, to stalk' being tied to its terror.<sup>211</sup> As Frida warns Ruth: "Tigers can be patient. They know all about lying in wait" (p.161).

In nineteenth-century India, the process of myth-making that surrounded man-eating tigers, the epitome of the rogue animal, also served something of a practical purpose. Aside from the fact that deploying such literary images of these animals served to, as Susie Green points out, cast anyone who hunted them as an 'heroic saviour', it also fulfilled an important role for the colonial administration in causing villagers who felt under threat from such tigers to begin to turn to British officials for protection rather than the professional shikaris (Indian hunters) who had performed this function in the past (Mackenzie, p.180). As Mackenzie points out, hunting during the late nineteenth century Raj had an important symbolic dimension, representing 'an increased concern with the external appearance of authority' in order to conceal what was felt to be the 'inner weakness' at the heart of the empire. As such, native villagers were presented in hunting narratives as utterly incapacitated

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<sup>211</sup> Dinesh Joseph Wadiwel, *The War against Animals*, Critical Animal Studies, volume 3 (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2015), p. 269.

with regard to the maraudings of man-eaters, their terror 'only resolved by the masculine intervention of the white hunter' (Pandian, p.87).

Corbett describes his encounters with village inhabitants in just such terms; in the case of the Champawat Man-Eater he claims that all fifty members of the persecuted village were living 'in a state of abject terror' and only began to feel safe enough to venture out of their homes after he and his men arrived, made a fire in the courtyard, and sat down to a cup of tea (p.2). Corbett's inescapable conviction, he says, after spending time in 'that stricken land' was that 'there is no more terrible thing to live and have one's being under the shadow of a man-eater' (p.13). This figuration of the tiger as 'an oppressive figure terrorizing the rural populace with the spectre of arbitrary violence' is one that Pandian argues is common to colonial hunting narratives, and speaks to Wadiwel's observation that the terror of the rogue animal lies in its 'levying a violence that might be interpreted as itself instrumental' (i.e. human-like) (p.269). The more important sense of the word arbitrary here, then, I would argue, is not that it points toward the man-eater's attacks as purposeless or random, but rather that it speaks to the sense in which the animal exercised an absolute right to take human life at will; in other words, it was understood as, in Wadiwel's terms, 'sovereign' (p.270).

In pursuing and killing man-eaters, then, hunters enacted a substitution – the reign of the tiger was over, and instead the hunter became 'kingly potentate, personification of sovereign force', extending the governing powers of the British administration further into the countryside (Pandian, p.88). This was despite the fact that the accuracy of many accounts of the damage done by man-eaters is certainly in doubt. Tigers were useful scapegoats for human crimes, and companies offering 'shikar' to Europeans were keen to market themselves – in one case silver bangles purportedly found in the stomach of a dead tiger were shown to the client that had made the kill, giving him a sense of 'heroic achievement' (Sankhala, p.135). The importance, then, lay rather in the second substitution of power that was made when villagers began to turn to the

British to kill man-eaters, rather than the Indian shikaris. Mackenzie argues that Europeans turned the shooting of tigers into 'a symbolic system of dependence' in which they played a 'protective function.' In other words the performance of dependence (the 'repertoire of images' that saw the Raj's hunters cast as defenders of vulnerable village inhabitants) was more important than its actuality.

Frida's two 'battles' with the tiger, and her characterisation of it before that, can also be understood as kinds of performance that seek to introduce symbolic dependency into her relationship with Ruth. This means that they cast Ruth as defenceless victim and Frida as her powerful and committed protector in a colonial operation that mimics that of the British Raj. Furthermore, the text mobilises the historical context I have discussed above in order to draw attention to the temporally and spatially removed encounters with strangeness that flow out from and structure Ruth and Frida's relationship with the tiger. That is, it lays bare some of the *conditions of possibility* that allow Frida to successfully establish this dependent relationship.

Frida first seems to introduce the prospect (and indeed, certainty) of her victory over the tiger through the vexed removal and cleaning of Ruth's living room rug, which she initially names as the source of the 'animal smell' Ruth attributes to the tiger's visit. The distinction between rug and tiger collapses as the conversation continues ('A kind've hairy smell, is that it?'), so that the rug takes on associations of animal hide, or pelt – a prized commodity during the nineteenth century when the British would go to 'ludicrous efforts' to acquire tiger skins (Mackenzie, p.182). These overtones become more explicit when Ruth describes Frida carrying the rug outside, 'corpse-like, over her right shoulder', beating it with so much force that 'dust and hair' rise in clouds (p.148). After this Ruth and Frida wash the rug together, Ruth enjoying the 'short, rough feel of the bristles under her fingernails' and describing the way in which 'for the rest of the day it fidgeted in the wind as if something trapped underneath were making half-hearted attempts to escape' (p.150). The



imagery used to describe the rug evokes connotations both of a vanquished animal foe (the corpselike rug, 'beaten', just as man-eating tigers were beaten toward the awaiting hunter<sup>212</sup>) and also the preparation of the tiger skin for sale as a trophy. Miller argues that the value of the colonial hunting trophy was not simply financial, but lay more explicitly in its 'emblematic power' calling attention to the 'military, rather than commercial, associations of hunting'; that is, of a victory won by force, holding a powerful 'symbolic charge.'<sup>213</sup> The episode with the rug is symbolically charged in just this way, casting Frida as hunter (and successful victor) before she even faces the tiger, as well as speaking to the way that her authority is tied to the policing of and control over the domestic sphere that is also often assumed as having a relationship to different kinds of care.

This continues later through another domestic activity: cooking. Explaining that they require "red meat for strength", Frida serves steak for herself and Ruth, an unusual extravagance that once again holds a symbolic aspect. Meat-eating was described as essential to the diet of imperial hunters, who were 'highly carnivorous', with meat being understood, , as providing the necessary energy for their 'position of command and leadership' (Miller, p.48; Mackenzie, p.305). Once again, Frida establishes herself as hunter and symbolic protector; after the meal she tells Ruth, "between you and me [...] your Frida is a match for any old tiger", calling attention not only to her own strength and capability, but also the fact that these attributes are to be deployed for (and belong to) only Ruth – ('your Frida'). In this sense, Frida enacts a false declaration of servitude that is in fact an assertion of power.

When Frida finally encounters the tiger she makes Ruth stay inside, returning after a disturbance to show Ruth her left forearm, 'where three long scratches already brimmed with blood' (p.158). She insists that she encountered the tiger but scared him so badly that he ran off "with his tail

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<sup>212</sup> MacKenzie, p. 181.

<sup>213</sup> Miller, p. 48.

between his legs”, her wounded arm simultaneously testifying to his potential for violence as well as her victory over him. Just as in the case of the marauding man-eaters, at issue is not the reality of the tiger or even of the potential threat he poses, but Frida’s appropriation of the role of Ruth’s defender through a symbolic performance of protection. Indeed, when Ruth asks to see her arm, Frida tells her not to worry, that it has seen worse than “a few fingernails”, the apparent admission that the wounds are self-inflicted seemingly unimportant. Instead, what matters is that when Frida asks Ruth “what on earth would you do without me?”, Ruth has “no idea”(p.160). McFarlane gestures here to the way that Ruth’s dependency on Frida has an affective dimension rather than being simply attributable to Frida’s ability to defend her through force. Once more, this relationship resembles the ‘predatory care’ of the imperial project with its twin goals of management by force and benevolence, with the symbolic dependency cultivated by the management and killing of man-eaters functioning on both a relational and a militarised level.<sup>214</sup> Indeed, McFarlane comes close to echoing Pandian’s term when she explains that writing *The Night Guest* was a way of exploring ‘the murkiness of different kinds of terrible care and caring terror.’<sup>215</sup>

For much of the novel, the (benign) authority that Ruth sees as governing and overseeing her emotional life is the British Queen, whose visit to Fiji in 1953 is the subject of many of Ruth’s reminiscences in the present. She recalls a ball held in the Queen’s honour at which she was kissed by a young doctor (the long-term subject of her desire). Ever since, Ruth explains, ‘she had felt an unshakeable gratitude towards the Queen, whose dark royal head had been visible, now and then, among the people in the ballroom’ (p.73). Ruth’s understanding of the Queen’s presence as

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<sup>214</sup> McFarlane makes it clear that in Frida’s case her care for Ruth is real enough, despite the fact that this is contradicted by her at times abusive behaviour. Ruth suspects Frida of ‘telling the truth’ when she insists that she wants Ruth to be happy, and after Ruth’s death a family friend who met Frida tells Ruth’s son that although she had concerns about Frida she still “got the impression that she really loved your mum.”<sup>214</sup>

<sup>215</sup> ‘Tigers, Suspense and Ageing: An Interview with Fiona McFarlane’, *The Wheeler Centre* [accessed 26 March 2017].

somehow both sanctioning and enabling her moment of intimacy gestures to the sense in which colonial authority depended not only on governing by force, but also, in Ann Laura Stoler's words, on 'shaping appropriate and reasoned affect.'<sup>216</sup> When Frida begins to take an interest in Ruth's tiger, however, she takes over this role as sovereign arbiter of Ruth's emotional life, imagined by Ruth as 'the Queen of Sheba' standing 'robed in magisterial light' (p.143). Ruth has surrendered herself to Frida's 'terrible care', a new protective authority taking over the duty of 'educating the proper distribution of sentiments and desires' (Stoler, p.2).

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By way of moving to conclude this argument, I want to return to the affect of pleasure, or joy, that I suggested was a key component of Ruth's relationship to the tiger on their first meeting. In figuring the elusiveness of the tiger's body as a generative source of enjoyment for Ruth, McFarlane presents their encounter as, in Ahmed's terms, a generous one. Ruth is shown to be a desiring subject, with that flow of desire geared toward openness, a hospitality toward the tiger's body that finds joy in the possibilities he still has to surprise, that is to say, joy in relation to what Ahmed calls the 'structural possibility' that his body may not be able to be read. When Frida takes over the tiger, (and not just this tiger, but the 'entire species') her efforts are geared toward manipulating and reducing his meaning by making use of the existing colonial representations that work to make tigers both frightening and ultimately killable. As such, her labours are concentrated on curtailing and redirecting Ruth's desire by shaping Ruth's affective relations with the tiger. Frida's performative battles with the tiger work toward this goal not only by fixing the tiger's identity as a 'man-eater' but also by enacting a complex negotiation of boundaries whereby she banishes the tiger to the 'outside' of Ruth's home, in the process installing herself as belonging within that space as its

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<sup>216</sup> Ann Laura Stoler, *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), p. 2.

beloved defender, or indeed, host. That is, Frida cements her status as a safe, or *knowable* stranger, by actively producing the tiger as the 'stranger stranger'; the one who must be expelled in order for her to be 'taken in' (Ahmed, p.133).

Frida's project is to undo this productive and essentially open set of relations Ruth holds toward the tiger so that he can be understood as having his proper place outside of the walls of Ruth's home. She rebukes Ruth for leaving the back door open at night to allow the cats to come and go, insisting "that'll be how this tiger of yours got in", a claim that causes Ruth to completely re-evaluate her understanding of the tiger so that she imagines him as an invader, rather than a body whose presence is proper to her home. We return now, to the passage with which I began this chapter, having seen how Ruth arrives at this point through Frida's manipulation of the tiger's meaning:

Ruth had always pictured the tiger just appearing in the lounge room, the way a ghost might; he was a haunting and required nothing so practical as a door. Now she saw him coming by road and through the high grasses of the drive; she saw him moving with intemperate speed over the beach and ascending the dune; she saw him in the dark garden, making for the open door (p.145).

After this, Ruth no longer feels safe outside. She worries that 'Frida's tiger' (she has lost him, now) 'might be nearby' and that 'he might come as night fell and find her. Frida might make him come; she might make him a real tiger, with real teeth' (p.179). Whereas previously Ruth's overriding emotions toward the tiger were those of curiosity and expectation, Frida's ownership of the tiger's meaning results in a curtailment of these movements of desire, so that they are experienced by Ruth as violence, or at least the threat of it. Ruth's understanding that Frida now has agency over the tiger, to the point that she may 'make him come', is also an awareness of the crucial role this new tiger has in keeping her inside, where she is safe from those 'real teeth.' In this sense, then, Frida's version

of the tiger is tasked with preventing Ruth from leaving the house as well as emphasising the border between inside and out. His supposedly hostile presence gives Frida leave to extend her authority over Ruth. She begins locking her inside the house when she goes out – “I can’t leave you here all alone with the door open and a tiger on the loose, can I?” (p.164) Once more force and coercion operate under the sign of care.

The establishment of this inside/outside boundary – Ruth on one side, tiger on the other – has two main effects. Firstly, it allows Frida to construct herself as the stranger to be ‘taken in’ by producing the tiger as the figure of the ‘stranger stranger’, the one who must be expelled as part of this act of taking in (Ahmed, p.133). This expulsion is symbolic but also literal. Frida’s battle with the tiger drives him from the house whilst Ruth remains locked inside her bedroom, hearing only the noises of an altercation.

The second notable effect of Frida’s ‘exorcism’ and the inside/outside opposition it creates is that the main source of trauma in the text (Frida’s physical, mental and emotional abuse of Ruth) is displaced onto the tiger. Whilst Ruth’s first encounter with the tiger enacts what Ahmed calls a ‘remembering’ hospitality, her subsequent encounters with Frida, and Frida’s with her (as well as, I have suggested, those between us and the text) move away from this toward a pernicious kind of relation that is focused instead on defining itself against strangeness. In the case of the tiger, Frida tells a story of violence and trauma that closely resembles Caruth’s model in its reliance on an outside/inside opposition that sets a hostile outside (the tiger) against a vulnerable and bounded inside (Ruth). Furthermore, she casts herself as the ‘mediator’ able to challenge and manage this outside threat, so that Ruth’s agency (and desire) is subsumed into a symbolic system of dependency (“I’m very well cared for”, Ruth tells a family friend – “Not only that, I’m *defended*”). What gets missed in Frida’s version of events, however, is the way that the origin of trauma in this text lies not in the threatened breaching of interior subjectivity that Caruth posits as definitive of the traumatic experience,

but rather the opposite: trauma makes itself felt in the forced separation of outside from in, the production of strange(r)ness at the site of the tiger that allows Frida to use his presence as a means of taking control over Ruth and her home.

## V. Ruth: Tiger

Ruth does finally get to see her tiger, after months of only hearing and smelling him. Indeed, she gets to see him even though he is supposed to be dead. Frida's staged expulsion of the tiger does its job; after writing herself a note reminding her to TRUST FRIDA, Ruth accompanies Frida to the bank to make a large withdrawal. As it turns out, however, Frida is also subject to a betrayal. Her boyfriend George has taken the money and abandoned her. A devastated Frida takes Ruth out into the garden, lays her down, and, after maybe or maybe not giving her an overdose of medication, tells her to rest there before making her way back inside to phone her son. This will give Frida "some time": for what she isn't sure.

The rest of the chapter takes the form of a long stream-of-consciousness narration from Ruth, moving through and combining memories, sense impressions and analysis of her own body, which appears to be changing in some profound way. At some point she looks down the beach and sees the tiger standing in the water, 'his throat wasn't cut, and he wore his own seared skin" (p.266). Ruth presents his body in terms of overwhelming colour, noise and movement: he is 'the colour of the gone sun', and sings 'in a low, familiar voice'. When he moves the flowers shake and the grass blows. She notices that he is 'totally unharmed', and this means that 'someone had lied about this tiger. A woman as large as he was, and as real as he was, had lied' (p.267). Although the 'lie' Ruth mentions here might seem to refer to Frida's insistence that the tiger has been killed ("his guts came spilling out [...] there was a lot of blood") the sense is unclear; she could just as easily be understood as suggesting that the 'lie'

Frida has told is about knowing anything about this tiger: anything at all. The truth, Ruth realises, is that there is 'no reason to be afraid of this calm tiger' and the chapter ends with her leaning her head into his chest, listening to his 'great heart' tick. The moment feels loving, kind – it reads like a reconciliation. The problem of the tiger is not solved. The novel ends.

In writing this moment between Ruth and the tiger, an encounter that clearly tells the story of Ruth's death, McFarlane opens up the tiger's body to new kinds of meaning in introducing a spiritual dimension to his presence. He remains a knot of interpretative difficulty, and the encounter that takes place between him and Ruth retains the quality of surprise that Ahmed sees as crucial to strange, generous encounters. However, McFarlane is just as interested in owning up to the ways that what Ahmed calls 'prior histories of encounter' might be used as tools for reading, and beyond that, as ways to 'violate and fix others in regimes of difference' as she is in exploring what unreadability might mean (p.8). I believe that her text exposes some of the workings of stranger fetishism by opening up to scrutiny the social, cultural, political, and historical relationships that it conceals, and drawing attention to the broader networks of relation that are operative in encounters with strangeness. This chapter has tried to identify and analyse some of these relations as they appear in the text, as well as seeking to show the ways that McFarlane draws together encounters with strangeness that at first blush might seem spatially and temporally distinct. In doing so, her text acknowledges that historical encounters may provide the conditions of possibility, as well as the (potentially pernicious) reading strategies, for encounters in the present. Whilst her characters may not be hospitable to strange(r)ness, her novel certainly is.

## Concluding Remarks

In this thesis I have argued for an engagement with contemporary loss narratives that seeks to keep space open for nonhuman presences and to theorise them beside the human rather than as metaphorical representations of it. The idea of considering the nonhuman *alongside* the human has been important to me here, and as the chapters in this thesis show, much of my analysis has been concerned with the ways that these two figures interact with and transform each other. As such I have not suggested that the purview of stories about loss should simply be expanded to 'include' the nonhuman, but instead have tried to explore some of the ways that this figure is always already implicated in those narratives. Indeed, this thesis has shown that nonhuman presences are often indispensable to the ways that humans represent and define their experiences of loss. Beyond the way that this might work metaphorically, I have argued that nonhumans play an active part in the way narratives of loss unfold. As such, over and against the closing down of meaning that occurs when nonhuman presences stand in for human desires and experiences, I have called attention to their agency in such narratives.

Such an argument has in part been made possible because the texts that I have chosen to address in this thesis already consider the representation of the nonhuman in narrative form to be interesting and worthwhile problem. As such I hope that it has showcased the richness of contemporary textual engagement with the nonhuman, because it seems to me that our contemporary moment is increasingly producing texts that are not only interested in the nonhuman in this way, but also see its presence as indispensable to the stories they want to tell. This is perhaps especially evident in the first section of this thesis, where the threat of global ecological crisis (and indeed its current unfolding) sees humans drawn into relations with nonhuman animals, objects, and things in new and urgent ways.



In exploring some of the reasons for this increasing engagement with the nonhuman in contemporary texts, this thesis has aimed to engage with the 'particularity of encounters' that Ahmed sees as crucial to an analysis of how otherness is produced. This has meant placing the texts I have read here in contexts that extend across time and space in order to explore the ways that the refigurations of subjectivity and relationality that attend experiences of loss do not occur in isolation. Rather, they arise from specific historical, social, political, and cultural identifications and encounters, and if these contexts are missed then we also miss the ways that we are historically brought into being as subjects by the abjection of whatever and whomever is considered to be nonhuman. In this thesis such an analysis of particularity has raised questions of citizenship, victimhood, nationhood, colonialism, and whiteness, amongst others. It is my hope that in doing so it has done some justice to the reality that the stories told about loss and the nonhuman both implicate and do violence to their subjects.

In concluding this thesis, however, I would like to reflect more specifically on the ways that both the contemporary and its contexts have been figured in my arguments. Whilst contemporary texts are often defined as those coming after World War Two, or the middle of the twentieth century, the term is malleable and in need of constant redefinition. Indeed, the texts that I choose to focus on in this thesis are all much newer than that: of them all only *The Hunter* is a twentieth-century novel (and only just makes it into that category, with a publication date of 1999). For my purposes here, the contemporariness of these texts has primarily come to be signified through the ways that they privilege questions of ecological crisis and border policing with reference to recent global events. However, it is also apparent that these texts have more in common than the kinds of contemporary crises they choose to examine. Specifically, they all show an interest in the workings of a settler consciousness as this relates to questions of loss, trauma, and the nonhuman. Not only does the

action and narrative of the texts discussed here all take place in national spaces that share histories (and present moments) of privileging whiteness through violence (specifically Australia, the USA, and the UK), but the authors themselves are also white subjects of these nations. As such, my thesis approaches the ethical questions of visibility and inclusion that accompany its discussion of loss and the nonhuman through texts that engage in various ways with violent settler histories. In this sense my argument can't be seen as representative of the engagement of a broad variety of contemporary texts with loss, (this thesis contains no work by indigenous writers, for example) but instead works to show how a group of authors that benefit from the uneven power structures of settler societies navigate legacies of colonialism when they write about loss and subjectivity.

Necessarily, the explicitness of such an engagement varies between the texts I have examined here. In Chapter One, I began by arguing that Catherine's fascination with the automaton and its hull in *The Chemistry of Tears* led her to a troubling awareness of her own imbrication in oppressive structures, an uncomfortable but necessary realisation only made possible when she cultivated an affective openness to slippery nonhuman subjectivities. Whilst the text focused most closely on the relationship between grief and environmental consciousness, I examined the contextual 'particularity' of Catherine's encounters with different subjects in order to highlight the ways that ecological crisis was linked in the text to structural systems of oppression (particularly white supremacy) that distribute humanness only to privileged subjects.

Chapters Two and Three also took ecological crisis as their theme, with a more specific focus on extinction. The workings of de-extinction projects again raised complicated questions about human responsibility and guilt in the context of anthropogenic extinction, affective responses that I suggested could be productively linked through a reading of Freud to human-animal psychological dependency. In Chapter Three I focused

specifically on Australian history and questions of national identity and the national past. I analysed performative white (specifically feminine) precarity in the texts, and argued that both novels suggested this might be mobilised as a means of advocating responsibility for acts of colonial and ecological violence.

In Chapters Four, Five, and Six I changed focus slightly to consider nonhuman presences in narratives of trauma, proceeding with a critical analysis of various forms of trauma theory during which I argued for the disruption of classical trauma theory's tendencies to reify the humanist, sovereign subject. A reading of *The Dogs of Littlefield* drew out some of the ways that these humanist structures of thought were also structures of whiteness that separated out 'good' and 'bad' subjects through processes of racialization and border policing, an analysis grounded by the novel's thematic preoccupation with liberal racism in the USA post-9/11. In Chapter Six I engaged with the relation between settler consciousness and land ownership through analysing borders, empire, and the limits of hospitality in *The Night Guest*. In this final chapter I also moved to reflect critically on the ways that a reader themselves might become implicated in ungenerous reading practices; ones governed by the same diagnoses of 'otherness' that subtend colonialism. Future work done in this area could usefully build on and develop some of the relationships between loss, colonialism, and subjectivity that I have reflected on here, particularly in relation to texts that both depict and critique whiteness. It would also be interesting to consider in more detail the particular and varied affects that emerge when the settler consciousness that links the texts examined here comes up against its own implication in both structural and directed violence.

Finally, however, I hope that by engaging in this thesis with the problem of how to generously interpret nonhuman bodies, I have shown that one possible means of keeping space open for their presence is to embrace the narrative pleasure found in surprise. I see this as one of the most

important conclusions of my thesis, as well as another area of interest for future research on loss and subjectivity. As my analysis of *The Night Guest* suggests, remaining open to the possibilities that both human and nonhuman bodies have to surprise can be a source of joy, as well as a way of recognising the agency of these bodies. Engaging with the affect of surprise, then, as Ruth's hospitable encounters with the tiger show, might also mean leaning into feelings of discomfort and fear as well as ones of delight and astonishment. It is my sense that such an engagement would be a productive and generous way of approaching textual otherness, as well as a means of recognising our own implication in its production and consumption.

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