

After the Thylacine: In Pursuit of Cinematic and Literary Improvised Encounters with the Extinct

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Introduction: Tainted Evidence

A coughing bark was one of its forms of vocal expression.¹ Or, more precisely, *coughing bark* is how one of its forms of vocal expression has been styled, part-imitated, translated into words; circumscribed for the purposes of description, classification, possession and preservation. The coughing bark, carrying undertones of canine sickness, refers to a non-human vocalisation, a vocalisation made by *Thylacinus cynocephalus*, otherwise known as the thylacine or the Tasmanian tiger. This non-human animal, a carnivorous marsupial, was officially declared extinct by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature in 1982. It was also acknowledged as extinct by the Tasmanian Government in 1986. Although the thylacine was once native to mainland Australia and Papua New Guinea it likely died out in those regions around 2000 years ago and the animal is therefore most associated with the island of Tasmania where a relictual population survived into the twentieth-century.² The last officially recorded thylacine in Tasmania, commonly referred to as “Benjamin”, died at Hobart Zoo in 1936.³

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¹ This coughing bark has alternatively also been described as, amongst other accounts, a “low-throated yap,” a “little sharp bark,” and a “low smothered bark” (Paddle 2000, 64).

² The taxonomic family Thylacinidae has a 24,000,000 year history (Paddle 2000, 7).

³ Despite its name, some have argued that the animal was a female although recent research suggests it was indeed have been male (Sleightholme 2011). Stephen Sleightholme visually dissects some of the naturalist David Fleay’s film footage of “Benjamin,” perceiving a scrotum in the shadows of the non-human animal’s underbelly in a section of film.

The species likely survived in small numbers for roughly fifty years after that date. There was a convincing sighting of the creature, for example, by Hans Naarding, a National Parks and Wildlife Service officer, in 1982 (Bailey 2013, 270-71). This century there have, however, been no credible sightings. The animal has vanished.⁴ The thylacine is therefore something that requires referring to in the past tense. We write *after* it.

Remnants of the animal endure, casts of its tracks, pickled specimens and parts, films, photographs and writings. There is an archive that can be studied and interpreted. Like all archives, however, it is shaped by specific technologies and by potentially suspect interests and needs.⁵ The archive provides partial knowledge about the Tasmanian tiger. It exhibits wants, gaps. Robert Paddle (2000), for instance, has foregrounded “the absence of any sound recordings of the thylacine” (63) and the difficulties that this presents for researchers interested in investigating its vocal palette.⁶ Comparable problems arise in relation to the olfactory record. The animal was reported by Naarding to possess “a strong musky scent” (cited in Bailey 2013, 271). Its odour has been compared to that of a dog, fox, horse, hyena or wallaby, proximate yet differing from each of them (Bailey 2013, 195-96; Paddle 2000, 49). Others have linked the scent with the vegetal, referring to it as “like some unknown herb” (Paddle 2000, 49). These efforts to impart the smell by way of words cannot be checked against an actual odour, cannot be commended or contested. There is no fresh stink hanging in today’s rain-drenched button grass. Similarly, there is no warmth, no residual body heat to be found in a recently vacated, flattened clump of tussock. There is no fresh tiger kill to inspect, still soft to the touch, holding a vital, rapidly ebbing, heat. There is no longer meat to the thylacine’s being. It no longer has a sensory roundedness.

There are still tigers, wedged in jars or stuffed and mounted, bent shapes in formaldehyde displaying faded colours. There are skins: dry, dulled, edged by a faintly organic yet elusive odour. These traces though are empty of animation. The thylacine persists only as husk, as hollow mammal. It *made* a coughing bark. Through echoes such as this *something* of the animal is made to endure. Through fragments, bones, hides, oral and written testimonies, films and photographs, we

⁴ There are still some who claim the animal is extant. For recent, balanced discussion of the evidence see the collection, *The Tasmanian Tiger* (Lang 2014) and the article “The Thylacine: Gone is Gone” (Freeman 2017).

⁵ For a discussion of how libraries and museums, common repositories of archives, are not innocent sites of storage see Griselda Pollock’s (2001) essay “Trouble in the Archives”.

⁶ In *Thylacine*, David Owen (2011) also draws attention to the difficulty of describing a sound in writing, the necessary imaginativeness involved in such an endeavour (41). In the context of a discussion of the thylacine, Seth Horowitz (2012) observes that “with every species extinction, we lose something from the acoustic ecology” (16).

shore against the tiger's ruin. It is provided with a muffled in memoriam, granted a kind of superficial, empty-eyed afterlife. This afterlife is highly problematic. Much of the testimony that bears witness to the thylacine, materials and accounts used as evidence of its nature, is tainted.⁷

In this essay, I will argue that many current ways of bearing witness to the creature can be regarded as ethically questionable. Drawing on Jacques Derrida's idea of "animal genocide" I will explore why much testimony can be considered unprincipled. I will also consider Derrida's observations regarding binary oppositions with their concomitant hierarchies. Such oppositions produce and maintain restrictive modes of thought and perception. Derrida, however, signals how such modes can be contested by working from within the very oppositions that produce them. An instance of a non-hierarchical portrayal of human-thylacine relations, specifically the Aboriginal petroglyphs of thylacines at Murujuga, will then be examined.⁸ I then outline the value of Bracha Ettinger's psychoanalytic theories and of the insights of Griselda Pollock for conceptualising a more ethical mode of testimonial encounter. Building on the work of Ilan Gur-Ze'ev, I link this mode of encounter with practices of improvisation. Finally, I turn to contemporary efforts to attest to the thylacine, analysing Julia Leigh's (1999) novel *The Hunter* and its film adaptation, also titled *The Hunter* (Dir. Daniel Nettheim, Australia, 2011), through the prism of improvisation as a necessary component of ethical witnessing.

The Fruit of the Poisonous Tree: "Them useless things"

Efforts to preserve something of the thylacine in the present are often intimately bound up with the processes that led to its destruction. These processes included bounty schemes and efforts to secure animals for scientific study and/or zoos. Robert Paddle (2000) has referred to a government bounty scheme which ran from 1888 to 1908 as comprising "rapid and deliberate 'species-cleansing'" (15).⁹ In addition to the government bounty scheme, the Van Diemen's Land Company began a scheme in 1830. The last payment for this initiative was made in 1914. Most archival material we consult to learn about the thylacine is irrevocably linked to trapping. The specimens we examine derive from tigers ripped from the grassland and woodland savanna that formed their habitat. The remains of creatures that were either killed immediately or captured to serve as

⁷ This testimony taints in turn. My own article, of necessity, makes reference to settler testimonies and can therefore be said to be stained by them, albeit knowingly.

⁸ I am grateful to Megan Berry, Robert "Ben" Gunn and Ken Mulvaney for their generous assistance during my time carrying out fieldwork in Murujuga relating to depictions of thylacines.

⁹ Bounty payments continued until 1909. The Van Diemen's Land Company operated a bounty scheme from 1830-1914.

spectacle in a zoo now populate many Australian and European museums. Sometimes only specific body parts are preserved. Eric Guiler (1985) has speculated that “there may be small quantities of preserved soft parts in small collections throughout the world” (50). He provides specific examples from the Institute of Anatomy in Canberra, Australia (two female genital systems) and from Holland (a reproductive tract). The animal was therefore frequently plundered for its organs, separated into parts which were then distributed, trafficked to various scientific institutions. Sometimes, the thylacine’s skin was preserved whole. In Melbourne and Sydney, for example, mounted specimens are exhibited behind glass, posed on laminate or industrial plastic, austere contexts that detach the animal from the difficult histories it formed a part of.¹⁰ These glassy-eyed, taxidermied thylacines appear uncomfortable in their tanned skins, stiff, jaundiced.

Unlike with many cases of human remains, there are seemingly no stakeholder views for these museums to take into account. These animal remains are simply treated as artefacts. Their display, their objectification, and the uses to which these body parts are put seemingly posing no ethical questions. The remnants of these creatures, these research subjects, are viewed as fair game. They comprise scientific material, data sources, which can justifiably be put to use by researchers to better understand the species that they derived from, formed a part of: the animal that they were.¹¹ The museum tigers were sourced in the name of scientific enquiry. We now pick over the bones of these non-human animals in an effort to understand them. Each was once individual, unique. Now they are grouped together as representatives of a species. The archive formed of their remains incarnating a substantial disavowal of loss.¹²

The International Thylacine Specimen Database (ITSD), with its catalogue of skins, skeletons, skulls, soft tissue and mounts, materials that are held in over a hundred collections spread across over twenty countries, details this archive of body parts. The gender of each sample is identified and information is provided about when it was acquired and where it was sourced from, photographs are also included, but the key to understanding how the animal is viewed resides in the name of the database. Each tiger is a “specimen,” a part or piece of thylacine regarded as an example of the species open to scientific study. Tiger remains are

¹⁰ I am thinking here of the thylacine displays in the Melbourne Museum and in the Australian Museum, Sydney.

¹¹ Here “the animal that they were” aims to connote Derrida’s “the animal that I am” [*l’animal que je suis*]. Derrida’s progressive exploitation of the double-meaning of “*que donc je suis*” (that I am, that I follow) in *The Animal That Therefore I Am* only works in the present tense (2006; 2008). As a creature of the past, the thylacine cannot be followed. It leaves no footprints (or *pas* in French). It is not.

¹² Griselda Pollock (2013) observes that the sense of retrieving the past which archives stimulate can function as a means to disavow the lostness of the past (19).

framed as scientifically useful things. As Vicky Cassman, Nancy Odegaard and Joseph Powell (2007) point out in the context of human remains, a word such as “specimen” enacts distancing between a person and what the word is working to define as an object (1).¹³ Aboriginal Tasmanians (Palawa), for instance, were treated as specimens, if not referred to as them, by settler colonials. Truganini (also Trugernanner and Trukanini), historically (yet erroneously) thought by some to be the last full-blooded Aboriginal Tasmanian, was shocked by the treatment of William Lanne’s body after his death and voiced concern that a museum would also want to take possession of her body when she died. Lanne, popularly viewed at the time as the last male Aboriginal Tasmanian, was dismembered with the aim of using his body for “scientific purposes” and body parts (his head) were stolen to this end.¹⁴ After her death, Truganini was initially buried in a cemetery but her remains were later exhumed in the interests of science. Her skeleton was subsequently given to the Tasmanian Museum and put on public display between 1903 and 1947: a “specimen” of her people.¹⁵

Many of the non-human animal remains catalogued in the ITSD database were sourced from creatures which were trapped either for the specific purpose of serving as scientific specimens or for other purposes, such as imprisonment in zoos, before subsequently becoming scientific material. The ITSD is therefore also a catalogue of progressive extermination. It coldly lists victims of species cleansing, visually records the skeletons, skins and organs of those victims.¹⁶ The database is a criminal history. It preserves traces of crimes, listing where evidence of acts of wrongdoing took place. The careful cataloguing of vertebrae,

¹³ The term “human remains” whilst distinguishing between a living human and a deceased one, referring not to a person but to what remains of them, still instantiates a valuable link between the living and the dead. Using this term, preserved body parts constitute a kind of *survivance* as Derrida understands the term. He describes *survivance* as “that which is neither pure and simple life nor death” and which is “not thinkable from [within] the opposition between life and death” (Derrida 2010, 193) (my translation). In this sense, “human remains” and “animal remains” survive death and life, carrying into the future (193-194). This liminal status—remains are no longer part of a living entity but are not entirely divorced from their vital origins—permits them to be viewed as granting a kind of afterlife to a deceased body that the term “specimen” precludes. It is for this reason that I have opted to use the term “animal remains” here.

¹⁴ For a discussion of Lanne see Cove (1995, 47-49) and Lawson (2014, 122). Lawson also discusses the fact that the reality that Lanne and Trugernanner were not the last Aboriginal Tasmanians was “openly acknowledged in British discussion of Tasmania” in the nineteenth-century (122). The contemporary Aboriginal community in Tasmania is substantial despite the efforts at genocide perpetrated against their ancestors.

¹⁵ See “Trugernanner (Truganini) (1812-1876),” (Ryan & Smith 1976).

¹⁶ The scientific vocabulary, by its very nature, is pared of affect and therefore cold. It effects a distancing under the guise of a desire for objectivity that might be critiqued in contexts such as this when it reproduces the objectifying perspective of settlers.

their counting, the appraising of the length of skulls, of alimentary canals, form examples of the willingness to maul to measure, the violence that accompanied a scientific drive to understand. Heinz Moeller's (1997) *Der Beutelwolf*, with its many pictures of preserved thylacine bodies and body parts—is the nearest paper equivalent to the database and its numerous photographs.

The testimonial languages used to describe and discuss the Tasmanian thylacine, including that employed by the ITSD, are those of its settler oppressors, its murderers.¹⁷ This reality appears not to trouble many who write about the creature, who word it, who even claim affection for it. Col Bailey, for example, collected oral histories about the animal's habits from former trappers. His *Tiger Tales* (2001) is sourced from those who actively contributed to its extinction. Bailey (2001) acknowledges that the animal was “subjected to an insidious and long-lasting campaign of extermination,” (2) a campaign he decries. His book, however, uncritically reproduces testimonies from those who contributed to this extermination. It also features photographs of the killing fields, what Bailey refers to as “tiger country,” with captions to the images recounting that many creatures were caught in these areas. Eric Guiler (1985) similarly makes extensive use of accounts from bounty hunters and exonerates those hunters. He writes of the trappers who worked for the Van Diemen's Land Company: “[...] these men contributed toward the plight of the thylacine today, but they cannot be blamed for doing so, and from the records of their activities on the properties we have some *most worthwhile data* on this elusive animal” (115).¹⁸ Guiler records, however, that the trappers described tigers as “bloody useless things” (1985, 115).¹⁹ The words “useless things” as a form of depiction are minimal yet incredibly violent, demonstrating how language can act to bludgeon what it refers to, what it signifies. The thylacine is reduced to an object of contempt, to stuff qualified as without purpose, a nothing of a thing.

Many other authors make uncritical use of trapper accounts or of other accounts referring to the killing of thylacines including David Owen (2003) and Robert Paddle. Hunters sometimes do develop an extraordinary intimacy with their prey (Vigneault 2011, 325). Trapping (if it is accepted to be a kind of hunt-

¹⁷ This difficulty, the tainted archive, also impacts efforts to attest to the violence perpetrated by settlers against Aboriginal Tasmanians. The “Aboriginal perspective” is frequently gleaned second-voice from settler accounts. See, for example, Greg Lehman's (2015) warranted criticism of Nicholas Clement's *The Black War* which purports to offer both settler and Aboriginal views of the conflict (261).

¹⁸ My emphasis.

¹⁹ Guiler attributes this description to the trapper H. Pearce. Col Bailey (2016) records Bob Wainwright (a son of George Wainwright) referring to tigers as “those things” (240).

ing) is, however, a detached activity.²⁰ In snaring, for example, a wire, with its interminable metal patience, stands in for the hunter. Snaring is a kind of impatient outsourcing of the hunt. It requires a knowledge of intended prey but enables the snarer to avoid engaging in pursuit and inflicting violence on that prey directly, personally. There are forms of hunting that are direct and that also involve profound respect, even love, for quarry, forms that recognize issues of sustainability and that accord non-human animals a complex intentionality.²¹ The trappers in Tasmania were, however, bent on eradication, driven by the promise of financial gain and by confusions and myths concerning the thylacine's predilection for mutton.²² They were not hunting the tiger as a source of food. They simply wanted to trade its corpse for money. It was merely regarded as a commodity.

There are also numerous photographs of the thylacine. Suzanne Paquet (2009) emphasizes that photography was particularly well suited to the modern

²⁰ For a discussion of trapping and its relationship to hunting see Matt Cartmill (1993, 29-30).

²¹ For a discussion of hunters who accord animals an agency and intentionality see Tim Ingold's (2000) *The Perception of the Environment*. The incipient field of research of non-human animal phenomenology also requires mention in this context. Dominique Lestel, Jeffrey Bussolini and Matthew Chrulew, for instance, have argued for the roles of invention and interpretation in the ways that animals construct their worlds (Lestel et al. 2014). Their exploration of invention in non-human animal life-worlds is of particular interest in the context of this essay as it opens towards the idea of improvisation as a practice performed by non-human animals. The case studies Lestel and his collaborators detail are not, however, benign. They deliberately focus on knot-tying orangutans and chile-eating cats to illustrate the importance of studying hybrid human/animal communities which occupy territory that is conceived of as dynamic, relational and shaped by mutual inhabitation, sustaining inter- and intra-species communities (144). Lestel et al. wish to counter the idea of the "inevitable intertwining" of the human and the animal as somehow compromising to research (143). Viewing this intertwining as inevitable and enriching, as Lestel et al. do, nonetheless risks obscuring the violent appropriation of non-human animal habitats and the coercion of non-human animals upon which these commingled worlds are founded. This appropriation and coercion was not inevitable and its detrimental effects in terms of ambiguous transcendence are clear. "Chasing a ball of wool like a kitten", the non-human animal equivalent of Iris Marion Young's work of feminist phenomenology "Throwing like a girl" has, however, yet to be written (Young 1980).

²² Through studying the jaws of a thylacine skull held at the Australian Museum, Marie Attard et al were able to deduce that thylacines likely consumed smaller prey relative to their size (Attard et al. 2011). It is therefore possible they might have hunted lambs but seldom sheep. Sheep attack were likely usually carried out by packs of wild dogs (just as on the mainland, particularly in relation to lambs, they are nowadays perpetrated by dingoes, dogs, foxes and pigs). I am grateful to Mark Mortimer for sharing his insights regarding sheep predation.

desire for collecting, owning and classifying (31). This desire also manifested in the increasing popularity of zoos with their collections of “exotic” birds and mammals. In *Paper Tiger*, Carol Freeman notes that “all photographs of living thylacines were taken in zoos” (2014, 129).²³ The snapshots therefore depict convict creatures, sentenced to serve as spectacle in cities such as Hobart, London and Washington. John Berger suggests that modern zoos have forged identities for themselves as a kind of museum dedicated to furthering knowledge and enlightening the public (Berger 1980, 21). Berger understands the actual experience of visitors as, however, implicitly aesthetic rather than straightforwardly educational in nature, the cages acting like frames around pictures at art galleries (23). The animals are judged by aesthetic criteria, appraised for how well they acoustically or visually perform the imagined image each visitor holds of them. Many such sightseers leave disappointed, let down by the pervasive lethargy of the creatures on display, the poor show they have put on. For Berger, the animals have been reduced to a numb passivity, each padding and fretting their stage “waiting for a series of arbitrary outside interventions” (25) such as feeding time. Their existences are artificial and isolated, callously slight.

In her analyses of the zoo photographs, Freeman subtly teases out how the images enact a kind of violence through the way that they construct their subjects. In reference to a bordered photograph of a thylacine and one of a Tasmanian devil reproduced together in *Wonders of Animal Life* in 1915 she observes that “the frames act with their captions to enclose and secure the figures inside them, like the bars of the zoo cage, and they create an impression of depth in the picture that distances the animal from the viewer” (Freeman 2014, 145). Additionally, Freeman describes processes of manipulation of photographs designed to conceal the reality of a thylacine’s incarceration, to grant it a simulated liberty. Despite implicitly identifying the photographs as taken by people responsible for atrocities against the animals or complicit with those responsible, Freeman nevertheless has no qualms displaying these perpetrator perspectives, reproducing photographs that adopt a perpetrator’s gaze. Through this, she obliges her readers to share that gaze, a gaze that views the thylacine as specimen or vermin.

Additionally, the inhuman gaze of the camera burdens the thylacine with becoming an object of knowledge and an exotic type. When photographed, like working class and colonised people in the nineteenth century, tigers were “subjected to a scrutinizing gaze, forced to emit signs, yet cut off from command of meaning” (Tagg 1993, 11). Susan Sontag (1979) suggests “there is something predatory in the act of taking a picture” because “to photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of

²³ This observation might be nuanced to all known photographs or photographs accepted as genuine that feature live thylacines are from zoos.

them they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed" (14). This violation also applies to the photographing of thylacines.

Film footage of tigers also exists, seven films were made of captive thylacines between 1911 and 1933 (Sleightholme & Campbell 2015, 282).²⁴ Five of the films were produced at Hobart zoo and the other two at London zoo. The most famous of the Hobart productions was filmed by the naturalist David Fleay. Taken on 19th December 1933, it lasts approximately 45 seconds and features "Benjamin". The tiger has a snare mark on its right leg, its body bearing visible testimony to its violent capture. Fleay's film is a sadistic film exercise in torment. He ignores the animal's clear anxiety. The thylacine continually seeks to withdraw from the cameraman, its efforts to evade Fleay repeatedly thwarted by the wire fence of the small enclosure (Chare 2014). The tiger seems to yawn yet this action is actually agonistic gaping, a threat display (Attard et al. 2011, 297; Paddle 2000, 51). It signals the tiger's apprehension.

Fleay, although probably cognizant of this behavioural cue, continues his task regardless. Images of thylacines displaying agonistic gaping, showing terror, are frequently chosen to represent the animal. Photographs of "yawning" tigers feature, for instance, on the book covers of Julia Leigh's novel *The Hunter* (the photograph is credited to Fleay and dated c1925), Paddle's *The Last Tasmanian Tiger* (dated 1933 and so therefore certainly "Benjamin") and the World Wildlife Fund report, *The Tasmanian Tiger*, authored by Steven Smith (this cover uses a cut-out from a still from a 1928 film). These are all horrific pictures of a creature in distress, images born of fear and menace, as is Fleay's film. The naturalist so frightened the tiger that at one point it nipped him on the buttocks (Bailey 2013, 52). As testimony to the thylacine, the film is unethical, the footage taken by force, Fleay's actions visibly traumatizing the animal. Fleay and the photographers employ a phallic gaze, a gaze that seeks to master and possess. Their animal subjects are caught on camera only under duress.

Spoor of the (deferred) moment

All the examples I have so far discussed use the language of the oppressor to depict and describe the thylacine, re-presencing it for us in the present by way of a tormentor's perspective. Our knowledge of the creature is, for the most part, derived from settler accounts of the animal, often from people who actively sought its extermination. We therefore embrace testimonies provided by perpetrators of what Jacques Derrida refers to as "animal genocide". Genocide is usually linked to ideas of race or ethnicity but Derrida also extends it to species. He outlines the term in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, suggesting that "animal

²⁴ This footage has been interpreted as evidence of the tigers being reduced to "bare life" by zoo conditions (Narraway & Stark 2015, 15).

genocide” takes the form of both literal extinctions (such as that of the thylacine) and what might best be termed habitational extinctions in which animals are granted “an artificial, infernal, virtually interminable survival [...] outside of every presumed norm of a life proper to animals” (Derrida 2008, 26). The latter might involve battery-farmed chickens or fish-farmed salmon or zoo inmates, animals that live their lives in human-made environments, contrived, constricted habitats. This aspect of animal genocide appears akin to cultural genocide.

In *The Last Man*, an exploration of British genocidal practices towards Tasmania’s Aboriginal population, Tom Lawson (2014) discusses the cultural dimension to the definition of genocide as it was originally conceived by Raphael Lemkin in response to the Shoah. For Lemkin, genocide could encapsulate “the cultural undermining of the communal basis of a population group as well as any violence done” (Lawson 2014, 20). For Derrida, it seems a comparable kind of cultural undermining can be inflicted upon non-human animals such that their lives are radically transformed by domestication or farming. I would argue that this type of undermining can also be linked to specific practices of representation, particular cultural practices, which comprise a figurative attack upon the animal they depict and, at times, ostensibly, preserve.

Derrida (2008) is well attuned to the problem of language in relation to the animal, as his neologism, his “monstrous hybrid,” “*animot*” (41) demonstrates. The word *animot* forms a means by which to speak a singular multiplicity, a way to signal a “plurality” that “cannot be assembled within the single figure of an animality that is simply opposed to humanity” (47).²⁵ It also draws attention to “the nominal language of the word” and to “the voice that names and that names the thing *as such*” (48). The word as it refers and classes, divides and conquers. LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) describes naming as “the first appropriation” (Jones 2009a, 202).²⁶ To name is to render bounded, to know, to understand, and ultimately to possess. Finally, for Derrida (2008), *animot* is an invitation to think the ascribed absence of the name and of the word to animals as “something other than a privation” (48). In a sense, through his manufacturing of a synthetic word, a fusion-word, Derrida may therefore be described as engaging in a practice of improvisation.²⁷ In music, improvisation sometimes involves working from a model, from pre-existing concepts or configurations (Nettl 2015). The improviser labours with and against this pre-given, lending a new twist to the pre-existing. Most activities, perhaps all activities, involve improvisation and

²⁵ Translation amended.

²⁶ LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) writes in the context of Black emancipation. Jones (Baraka) was an African-American writer, academic and civil rights activist.

²⁷ Derrida specifically engaged with the topic of improvisation in his monologue “Play – The First Name” which he performed on 1st July 1997 at a concert by Ornette Coleman (Derrida 2004).

present possibilities for either its amplification or minimization. The unforeseen event that is deconstruction is no exception.

It is possible to read one of the most celebrated passage from *Of Grammatology* as a manifesto for improvisation:

The movements of deconstruction do not entreat [*sollicitent*] structures from the outside. They are not possible and effective, nor can they aim their blows [*ajustent leur coups*], except by inhabiting those structures. Inhabiting them *in a certain way*, because one always inhabits, and all the more when one does not suspect it. Operating necessarily from the inside, borrowing all the strategic and economic resources of subversion from the old structure, borrowing them structurally, that is to say without being able to isolate their elements and atoms, the enterprise of deconstruction is always in a sense carried away [*emportée*] by its own work. (Derrida 1976, 24)

The word “*emportée*” which is translated in the 1976 English version as “falls prey” might better be rendered as “carried off” or “carried away”. *Emporter* does, however, connote hunting making the reference to falling prey, to seizing or taking in order to devour, apposite. Predators can carry off [*emporte*] their prey.²⁸ Gayatri Spivak’s choice of word for her translation is presumably influenced by her recognition that in French the word *trace* (a key term in *De la grammatologie* (Derrida [1967] 1974)) can mean “track” or “spoor” (Spivak 1976, xvii).²⁹ Derrida also refers to speech’s delusion [*leurre*] of presence mastered—the idea of the phonic sign as indifferent to difference and as providing an immediately present meaning—as forming a lure [*leurre*]. He suggests phonocentrism therefore employs a hunter’s stratagem (Derrida, 1976: 139). For Derrida, “to recognize writing in speech, that is to say difference and the absence of speech, is to begin to think the lure” (139). There are dimensions of deconstruction that can be allied to hunting.

The trace, however, as Derrida understands it does not index something pre-existing in the sense a paw print in mud might a passing animal. The trace rather inhabits the sign as a structuring absence. It indexes an absent presence, meaning’s other, the other that enables a sign to mean. It is not an empirical mark but instead an arche-trace, a concept that “destroys its name” (Derrida 1976, 61). Derrida writes of the need to “rip [*arracher*] the concept of the trace from the classical schema” (61).³⁰ This provides an example of deconstruction as a violently subversive inhabiting of structuring principles of the logocentric. De-

²⁸ I am grateful to Emmanuel Château-Dutier for his insights regarding the semantic possibilities of the word “*emporter*” and for his general observations about hunting in relation to *Of Grammatology*.

²⁹ See also Derrida’s discussion of the spur as trace or mark in *Spurs: Nietzsche’s Styles* (Derrida 1979, 39-41).

³⁰ Translation amended.

construction possesses a predatory aspect, sometimes operating as a kind of predacious improvisation. In his elaboration on the arche-trace, Derrida *tracks* difference through speech, suggesting that phonic elements “would not appear as such without the difference or opposition which gives them form” (62). Form emerges, for him, by way of “a passage through the spoor [*empreinte*]” (62).³¹

The spoor, the trace, makes its unmarked mark through permitting the emergence of meaning. This absence of any presence renders the trail a cold one. Derrida knowingly hunts for that which is not there. It is a hunt that cannot end in kill or capture. In *Of Grammatology*, hunting is revealed to be an unsettling, improvisatory practice that draws on resources at hand as a means to bring those very resources into question. This brief engagement with Derrida’s thinking on animality and on hunting is of value here for foregrounding the role of language as both a site of oppression and resistance. Derrida draws on language to bring into question some of the assumptions and values it sometimes appears to concretize and to call attention to what is yet to come, an unforeseen. This working through language, however, is often taken up by scholars working with deconstruction in ways that focus exclusively on the linguistic sign (despite Derrida’s broader conception of signification and textuality). In this sense, deconstruction becomes a set of “methodical procedures,” a series of purely literary approaches gelled into a tradition, that fail to display the inventiveness Derrida associates with deconstruction, an inventiveness that “marches ahead and marks a trail” (Derrida 1989, 42).

The two examples of contemporary testimony to the thylacine that I will consider look beyond struggles over linguistic meaning (its expansion or reduction). They are best understood not solely through recourse to ideas related to deconstruction but also to the psychoanalytic theories of Bracha Ettinger which enable a consideration of dimensions to subjectivity that pulse or quiver beneath the linguistic sign. Ettinger’s thinking explores not where signs lead but what exists subjacent to linguistic signs, separate from them. She examines a different kind of unforeseen. Through her notion of the Matrixial, Ettinger strives to register what lies beyond the linguistic sign. Before examining the Matrixial in more detail, I want to first accord a place to depictions of the thylacine that were not produced in a settler colonial context, focussing on a number of petroglyphs portraying the creature which were created in mainland Australia at Murujuga in the Pilbara region. These works form a touchstone for how to depict non-human animals in ways that are not objectifying and ethically suspect.

³¹ Translation amended.

Faced with Loss: Improvised Connections at Murujuga

Accounts of how the thylacine was perceived and understood by Tasmania's Aboriginal communities are rare and always reported second-hand by colonists, translated into the language of the oppressor.³² The Aboriginal Tasmanian community survives despite British efforts at its eradication in the early nineteenth century. Much traditional knowledge is, however, lost.³³ Historical reports suggest the many tribes that inhabited Tasmania at first contact had varied outlooks regarding the creature. For some communities the tiger was a food source (Smith 1980, 21; Moeller 1997, 114). Others manifested considerable respect for the thylacine, possibly burying its remains in the same way they would human bodies (Freeman 2014, 44). The diversity of the Aboriginal communities extant in Tasmania at contact is preserved through the varied names for the thylacine that were recorded. Col Bailey observes that the animal was known as "Corinna" on the East coast, "Crimerrar" in the Port Sorrell area, "Lagunta" on the South East coast, "Loarinnah" in the west and north-west and "Ka-nunnah" or "Laonana" by Bruny Islanders (Bailey 2016, 126).³⁴

To my knowledge, there are no extant visual images of the thylacine produced by Tasmanian Aborigines prior to first contact. The situation is different in Murujuga, most recently home to the Yaburarra (also Jaburara), where a number of petroglyphs depict tigers.³⁵ The Aboriginal community at Murujuga, like the communities in Tasmania, endured immense violence from settlers including fatal attacks, most notably the Flying Foam Massacre (Gara 1983). These cruelties had a devastating cultural impact and led to the displacement of the surviving Yaburarra ending an ancient tradition of making rock art in the area. The petroglyphs featuring thylacines were likely produced at least 3000BP, at a time before the tiger had become extinct on the Australian mainland (Mulvaney 2015, 225). There are approximately twenty five depictions of the creature in the block-hills and valleys of Murujuga, their sandy stripes incised into the russet of the gabbro or granophyre [Figure 1].

³² My own discussion of Aboriginal cultures is also articulated through this language although I strive to use it in a more self-aware way.

³³ Ryan, for instance, discusses stone and rock carvings produced by Tasmanian Aborigines, the significance of which is now unclear (Ryan 2012, 8).

³⁴ There was no thylacine population on Bruny Island but the Aboriginal community there presumably came to know the animal through trips to mainland Tasmania (Guiler 1985, 13) or by way of oral accounts from visitors. For further discussion of Aboriginal Tasmanian terms for the thylacine see Guiler (1985, 13).

³⁵ Murujuga is not the only site in mainland Australia where Aboriginal depictions of thylacines can be found. Eric Guiler and Philippe Godard discuss a number of different examples of Aboriginal rock art featuring the creature in *Tasmanian Tiger* (Guiler & Godard 1998, 41-45).



Fig. 1: Petroglyph of thylacine at Deep Gorge, Murujuga (2014). Photo: Author

Ken Mulvaney identifies stylistic variations in the images which he suggests “is consistent with this animal being present and depicted in the rock art over a considerable time span” (2015, 234). A block near the entrance to what is now named Deep Gorge includes depictions of a thylacine on opposing faces. The two tigers are portrayed in contrasting directions. One, the tiger’s stiff tail artfully rendered, shows less weathering than the other and is stylistically distinct [Figures 1 & 2]. The seemingly more recent image inverts the colouration of a thylacine, the dark stripes that transverse its pale yellow brown body here rendered instead as orangey pink and the body as dull red-brown.³⁶ The image that appears to have been created earlier [Figure 2] does not include obvious striping but the thick head shape Mulvaney associates with thylacine imagery is clearly present. Given patina accrues on petroglyphs in Murujuga gradually, it is likely that these two depictions, with their similarities and studied differences, were produced thousands of years apart.³⁷ They index the enduring importance accorded the tiger within the local Aboriginal community.

³⁶ The colours of each block vary dependent upon lighting conditions. Sometimes incised rock conforms reasonably closely to the body colour of a thylacine and non-incised rock to its stripes.

³⁷ For a discussion of the difficulty in dating petroglyphs at Murujuga see my article “Vision and Indifference” (Chare 2018).



Fig. 2: Petroglyphs of thylacines at Deep Gorge, Murujuga (2014). Photo: Author



Fig. 3: Petroglyph of thylacine used in *thalu* ceremonies, Patterson Valley, Murujuga (2014). Photo: Author

Another petroglyph at Murujuga portraying a thylacine which appears on a prominent block in what is now known as Patterson Valley has been identified by Mulvaney as having been used as part of *thalu* or increase ceremonies [Figure 3] (Mulvaney 2009). These ceremonies aimed to safeguard the reproduction of essential necessities.

Mulvaney notes how the interior of the image of the creature 'has been subjected to abrasion and pulverising to an extent that pounded hollows (large cupules) are present' (2009, 43). The boulder also has pecked and scored lines that radiate outwards from the central image [Figure 4]. These lines, which clearly required considerable time and effort to produce, are sometimes continued across the surface of surrounding blocks [Figure 5]. Nearby rocks contain numerous depictions of macropods. These all exhibit similar weathering to the thylacine and can therefore be viewed as having been produced contemporaneously to it. Macropods such as kangaroos and wallabies were often hunted by the thylacine. The lines connect the quadruped to the macropods, linking the hunter to its prey. These petroglyphs, Mulvaney demonstrates, are placed in a spatial and, likely, symbolic relation.³⁸



**Fig. 4: Incised lines on petroglyph of thylacine, Patterson Valley, Murujuga (2014).
Photo: Author**

³⁸ There is another set of petroglyphs at Murujuga in what is now referred to as Gum Tree Valley that also associates predator and prey, in this instance an eagle surrounded by large macropods. It was also likely used in *thalu* ceremonies.

Mulvaney speculates that the lines radiating from the thylacine are designed to form a metaphysical link between the tiger and its key sources of sustenance. This use of lines, carrying from a specific image and block to others close by, is unique to Murujuga and unique to this set of petroglyphs. Mulvaney therefore reads these expressly associated images as comprising evidence of a deviation from usual *thalu* that was prompted by Aboriginal recognition of a decline in the local thylacine population. The decline may have been caused by over-hunting, by rivalry from the dingo which may have competed for similar prey, from disease or for other reasons. The unique lines coupling hunter and prey mark a technological innovation that supplements the usual practice of pounding rock (evidence of which features in other *thalu* sites). The thylacine image has been pounded, almost to the point of obliteration, but, in a departure from convention, a break with tradition, it has also been joined to its common quarry. This join evinces a practice akin to improvisation. The invention present in the Patterson Valley petroglyphs is one that builds on existing ceremonial practices in response to changing circumstances. It can therefore be understood as improvisation of the kind that departs from a pre-existing system (Nettl 2015, 70; 73). The practice is grounded in traditional *thalu* but builds on it.



Fig. 5: Pair of incised lines carrying onto blocks proximate to the petroglyph of the thylacine used in *thalu* ceremonies, Patterson Valley, Murujuga (2014).

Photo: Author

Mulvaney interprets the evidence of this improvisational approach to the ceremony, the many incised lines, as indexing desperation. This is an improvisation which, Mulvaney implies, grows out of a sense of urgency, the evident wanting of the thylacine population (or its disappearance) leading to increased efforts to aid it. The power of traditional ceremony was coupled with a new, improvised dimension as members of the Aboriginal community strove to hold the animal in the present, to guarantee its continuance. This desperation to ensure regeneration was likely bound up with the reality some Aborigines were intimately connected to the thylacine. It may have been totemic for them in the way still extant wildlife continues to be linked with the identities of people in contemporary Aboriginal communities. At Murujuga, the thylacine was the responsibility of specific people and the well-being of those people would have been linked with its well-being. If they hunted it then they were responsible for not over-hunting it, for ensuring its welfare.

Contemporary Aboriginal communities retain an “ethic of caring” for their homelands, a love for Country (Watson 2009, 37). Country as a term refers to “a particular area of land or water from which a person’s primary identity and sense of spiritual association and belonging derives” (Sculthorpe et al. 2015, 14). It describes an ontological relationship between person and place: an Aboriginal *wa* where they are from, their Country is a part of them. In *Nourishing Terrains*, Deborah Bird Rose (1996) describes Country as “a living entity [...] with a consciousness, a will towards life” (7). She also draws attention to how Country is “multi-dimensional—it consists of people, animals, plants, Dreamings; underground earth, soils, minerals and waters, surface water, and air” (8). At Murujuga, the thylacine was a part of Country alongside, within the people from there. The connections forged in stone between the thylacine and its prey attest to this sense of interconnectedness. The lines that link tiger and macropods were born of a feeling of kinship and a sense of responsibility towards the former, motivated by a desire to arrest the thylacine’s dwindling numbers.

The petroglyphs used in the *thalu* ceremony were created as a means of vitalising the thylacine. This image of the tiger, like others at Murujuga, is designed to nurture and sustain it. Unlike settler imagery of thylacines from Tasmania, it is not picture-making at a distance but from within, the lines that link the thylacine with its putative prey and the lines that trace the form of these creatures upon the rock, all emerging from, a part of, a broader whole. The lines embody interdependence. This contrasts with representations of the thylacine produced by settlers. In those images the thylacine is viewed at a distance, framed as an exotic object, a pest, a commodity. The Aboriginal understanding of Country as it manifests through images such as the *thalu* petroglyphs demonstrates an alternative way of conceiving the relation between human and thylacine to these settler representations. Country was conceived independently to the violent logic that undergirds settler perspectives of the tiger. I now want to

examine another way of envisaging human-thylacine relations that, in contrast to the images at Murujuga, is elaborated against the backdrop of settler perspectives. Like the *thalu* petroglyphs it involves improvisation but unlike them it is not designed to keep hold of the creature, to avert its loss, but to re-find it and to work through its loss, sidestepping the violence of settler imagery. To understand how this ethical relating manifests in recent aesthetico-cultural portrayals of the thylacine, I must first give a brief summary of the psychoanalytic theories of Bracha Ettinger.

Aesthetics and Improvisation: Bracha Ettinger's Matrixial

Central to Bracha Ettinger's psychoanalytic thinking, which builds on the ideas of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, is the concept of wit(h)nessing which describes an aesthetic process that occurs at the intersection of creativity and witnessing. This process, which for Ettinger is closely bound up with her art practice and the act of painting, fosters a partial overcoming of the originary repression of the Thing, the now unknown not-I, the other, the mother, which called the "I" towards being by way of initial joint subjectivizing during intra-uterine encounters. Wit(h)nessing comprises a bearing witness through encounter, through a becoming "with," an exchange that resonates with anterior intra-uterine experiences. These intra-uterine experiences form a dimension to subjectivity referred to as the Matrixial, a proto-subjectivity which manifests through "sensing in asymmetrical ways between partners – becoming-mother and becoming-infant—a co-affecting otherness, perceived sensorially, hence aesthetically, and registered in the becoming-infant who co-emerges with a subjectivizing other, the becoming-mother, neither becoming without this pairing" (Pollock 2013, 11). The sensations that accompany and engender co-emergence involve "sound, rhythm, movement [and] pulsation," (11) shifting, swerving intensities exchanged between interrelated, discretely intimate bodies.

Wit(h)nessing forms part of metramorphosis which Ettinger (2006a) describes as "a co-poietic activity in a web that 'remembers' these swerves and relations, inscribes affective traces of *jouissance* and imprints of trauma and encounter, and conducts such traces from *non-I* to *I*, from one encounter to further encounters" (144). Metramorphosis constitutes "a passage-lane through which affected events, materials and modes of becoming infiltrate and diversify onto the nonconscious margins of the Symbolic through/by subsymbolic webs" (143-144). It is a form of affective "communication," of pulses, of vibrations, of what Ettinger refers to as "subsymbiotic tunings that do not function on the level of distinct units of signification" (144). In the Matrix, difference is rendered indistinct. There are senses of otherness but as yet there is no sign for the other.

Ettinger (1996) suggests that in "the matrixial borderspace behind the phallus, the signifier loses his crown as the major creator of sense" (95). In art-

works that nurture encounters with the matrixial there is severality in place of alterity. This severality can filter from artwork to “writing-art” (95). Here Ettinger draws attention to how the textual (in the limited sense of words on a page or screen) can provide an access to encounter that is comparable to that provided by the visual, of which her preferred model is her own practice of painting. Griselda Pollock (2013) has analysed how Matrixial aesthetic wit(h)nessing can inform art writing, leading to the emergence of a kind of writing that “is not an imposed interpretation” (149). It is this kind of writing, writing that does not overlay its subject, does not scourge it with meaning, that I will go on to argue Leigh fosters in *The Hunter*. The refusal to force signification upon the thylacine in the novel is one that I will suggest also carries into the film adaptation. Wit(h)nessing and metamorphosis as they register through experiences of artworks and writings on art, through novels and films, provide an ethical framework through which to reconceptualise our relationship to others.³⁹ These others, however, are usually conceived of as human others.

For Pollock (2013), the Matrix shows that “I become human always *with* an *unknown* human and humanizing *co-other*” (138). Humanity is therefore a product of copoiesis. It may be “brutally compromised when any other human being’s *humanity* is violated by cruelty against its originary human vulnerability” (138). Humanity can be undermined through violence to another human but there seems no scope here to address violence against the non-human. The non-human animal is excluded from humanity, it cannot be said to possess an originary human vulnerability. It therefore risks falling outside an ethics grounded in human subjectivity and the idea of humanity. Humanity in this context seemingly equals exclusivity. Yet the reality is that the state of being upon which the ethical framework provided by Ettinger is founded, the linking of mother and infant (as affective entities) as together-in-difference or what Ettinger (2006a) refers to as “separation-in-jointness,” involves a mother that is an “*unknown* human” (141) in an encounter with a human yet to become, a life not yet bound by any humanity. The mother as co-other humanizes the infant but from out of a state of unnameable alterity, of encountered affect. In this sense, the ethics Pollock describes may provide a valuable template for also relating to animals in that the Matrix forms a space-time of human and non-human animal non-differentiation, the cut of difference between human and non-human animal having not yet eventuated. The distinction between human and non-human animal that is frequently central to distinguishing humanity from animality is firmly of the Symbolic realm. Copoiesis is a co-creativity, an aesthetic potential, linked with pre-Symbolic psychic experiences (Ettinger 2005).

³⁹ For a thoughtful discussion of the ethical importance of Ettinger’s thinking see Judith Butler’s (2011) essay “Disturbance and Dispersal in the Visual Field”.

Ettinger's idea of copoiesis has inspired a number of thinkers, two of which are particularly relevant here. Jean Hillier (2017) has explored how the idea of copoiesis as it is defined by Ettinger might inform management policies related to introduced vertebrate species in Australia, species which have previously been framed by the Australian Wildlife Conservancy (AWC) as part of an "ecological axis of evil" (1). Ecological assemblages are, for her, milieus that potentially invite shareability (as well as traumatic encounters) between humans and those non-human animals that have been labelled pest species. The bulk of Hillier's analysis is informed by the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari yet her brief engagement with Ettinger gestures towards how Ettinger's ideas might productively be taken up in the context of human and non-human animal relations.⁴⁰ Another thinker to engage with Ettinger's conception of copoiesis is Ilan Gur-Ze'ev who analyses how copoiesis can be conceived of as an improvisational practice.⁴¹

Gur-Ze'ev (2010a) links copoiesis as improvisation with *orcha* (אורחה), with a process of wandering. He explains that in Hebrew, *orcha* "means a convoy of camels and humans with their belongings moving in an endless desert towards their destiny" (278). *Orcha* therefore describes human and non-human animals on a shared journey. Copoiesis as it is expressed through the concept of *orcha* constitutes a historically situated response to social and cultural conditions that fashions "an *improvised continuation* as an alternative to deterministic-mechanistic continuum" (279). For Gur-Ze'ev, copoiesis as improvisation therefore comprises an open response to contemporary concerns. This response—which is living, becoming—produces a "unique, nomadic hospitality" (278). Hospitality worthy of the name manifests the ability to improvise (275). Ettinger (2006b) has described the m/Other as manifesting a "compassionate hospitality" (220). This hospitality towards the yet to become other that is the intrauterine infant carries into aesthetic practices that strive to accommodate experiences of others, their traumas, without overwriting them, without obscuring them through the use of pre-determined categories and forms. Ettinger's paintings, which represent an important dimension to her thinking in their own right, form one such practice.

Writing of her art, Ettinger (1993) describes how in the practice of painting, the non-face (by which she means the encounter with gaps in memory, with the traumatic) as creative motivation "prefers circling around and around, as we say, in centrifugal movements" (28). These movements are sometimes "the reserved, cautious, attentive movements of the trapper" (28). Here, despite the use of the term trapper, the artist is figured more as a watchful hunter, a patient one: "It all begins in oblivion. Force nothing. Wait for the moment to approach —"

⁴⁰ For a discussion of Ettinger's indebtedness to the ideas of Deleuze and Guattari but also her divergence from them see Brian Massumi's (2006) essay "Painting: The Voice of the Grain".

⁴¹ I am grateful to Marcel Swiboda for drawing my attention to Gur-Ze'ev's work.

(29). The hunt is not one that results in violence but rather one that ends with a moment of encounter, a sidestepping of meaning, of moments of mastery, and an opening to the unknown and the forgotten. The trapper, as Ettinger observes, does not force this encounter, they await it. Here, the improvisational dimension to such an approach to creative practice becomes clear. This practice is not pre-conceived, seeking to influence by way of the pre-planned. It is not, however, purely random. Ettinger suggests that “intention is an angle of trapping, a point of departure, so as not to be carried away by vertigo” (29). The intent, the artist’s angle, is encounter. Their knowledge of the medium, of its behaviours and potential, is exploited to the full with the objective of facilitating an encounter that involves receiving rather than determining, wandering rather than seeking. It is an encounter that emerges from out of an “accidental voyage” (30). Through *process*, “one element becomes the trapper, giving new dimensions to already existent elements as well as to those elements of work-in-progress” (54).

Aspects of the Novel: Figuring Improvisation...

Julia Leigh’s *The Hunter* includes encounter, or its lack, as a theme. The central character, a hunter working for a biotechnology company which has tasked him with locating the last thylacine, masquerades as a naturalist, Martin David, from an unnamed university. The hunter, referred to simply as M throughout the narrative, must kill the tiger and take samples. His accommodation, organized by his employers, is owned by a woman, Lucy Armstrong, whose husband Jarrah went missing in the wilderness the previous summer. Lucy, who has two young children (a daughter, Sass, and a son, Bike), is still grieving, numb. A local couple, Jack Mindy and his wife, look in on her regularly and try to help out.

M initially appears closed to Lucy and her children, to encounter, to hospitality. He appears at a loss. His relations with others are portrayed as functional rather than intimate. He is brusque and impassive. One evening when hunting, he remembers a fleeting holiday fling with “Jacinta,” “a fake name,” a relation of convenience. “Jacinta” is stored as part of his “wank bank,” to be used on his sorties into the wild, a means to relax, a pair of breasts and a mouth to be remembered and put to use: “Aim away, until...done” (Leigh 1999, 49). At first, Lucy only catches his attention as “fuckable,” (18) rapidly assessed for her erotic potential, a prospective object for sex. Gradually, however, M grows close to Lucy and affectionate for her children. His life becomes entangled with theirs. M’s life is also intertwined with the thylacine. At one point, as M goes to sleep, he imagines the tiger waking up. It is at this threshold between sleep and wakefulness—this bleary-eyed, fuzzy, hazy time—that a kind of crossover occurs: “Somewhere, he thinks, cherishing his last thought before sleep, somewhere, out there, the last tiger stands with her back to the rising wind and slowly shakes herself awake” (33). In this moment, human and tiger are figured as occupying

distinct worlds, one sleeps as the other wakens, one lives by day, the other by night, yet there is also a sense of connection, of continuity, the tiger taking up the hunt where the human leaves off.

In some cases, hunters attain intimacy with their quarry. The thylacine trappers studied their victims, came to possess a kind of understanding of them. M recognizes this. There is an oblique reference to Bailey's *Tiger Tales* which M is clearly familiar with (Leigh 1999, 38). M also observes in the context of the thylacine, that "with the old brutish men will pass the best first-hand knowledge of their prey: first one, then the other" (38). He here describes a kind of symbiosis, the trappers require the thylacine to exist, without her they too head towards extinction (Himmer 2009, 49). He knows this and yet he persists in his endeavour: "There is a symmetry to this that pleases M, a peculiar aesthetic, and that he is a part of it, and knows it, only makes the pleasure more exquisite" (Leigh 1999, 38). What differentiates M from those thylacine hunters who preceded him is this self-awareness. He knows he too is the last of a breed. Once he makes his kill and collects his bounty, in a sense he kills himself. This reality, this finality, manifests in how M behaves when he ultimately does find the tiger and shoot it. He hesitates, mesmerised by the sight of the animal, and after mortally wounding it, he hesitates again before finishing it off, consoling the dying creature with the whispered words "you won't die alone" (164). These words acknowledge their shared fate and also *figure* compassion as Ettinger conceives of it, an interlacing of human and non-human animal, an interlacing of beings.

The words *figure* compassion, signal its existence, as, for the most part, the novel only *illustrates* psychic structures. As a means of illustration, the thylacine stands for an enabling copoiesis rather than embodying such a shared creativity. It is linked to creativeness in the novel, nurturing M's thoughts. He imagines transforming into the thylacine (Leigh 1999, 91). Later, he describes his spine growing strong like the tiger and that: "his eye has narrowed, yellowed, deepened" (93). Here he assumes the impossible gaze of the thylacine as other, undoing a stable distinction between the Self and an other. Ettinger (2010) suggests that "Matrixial awareness engenders a disturbing desire for jointness *with* a foreign world, with the unknown other, the uncognized, with a stranger who by definition is never a total stranger in the feminine when unthinkingly known in a nonconceptual way" (205). The hunter's becoming thylacine should not be interpreted as a moment of violent over-identification or of narcissistic empathy but as a vision of compassion, of non-appropriative openness to others and therefore of the potential for what Ettinger (2006a) calls "differentiation-in-co-emergence" (140-141).

This compassion is shown to emerge only slowly. It requires repeated wanderings by the hunter in the rugged, wet valleys and flats, amidst the scrub, among the eucalypts, for this kind of relation to the thylacine, this mode of encounter, to slowly develop. The epigraph to *The Hunter* is a quotation from Barry

Lopez's (1986) *Arctic Dreams* referring to the Inuit word *quinuituq* which is translated as "deep patience" (176). This patience is linked by Lopez with hunting, with "the long wait at a seal hole for prey to surface" (176). There are different kinds of patience referred to in Leigh's novel. M, for example, views patience as a sign of professionalism (Leigh 1999, 85). He regards keeping impulsiveness in check as a key virtue in his role as hunter. His extended waiting, ostensibly for the purpose of finding the tiger, mutates, however, becoming purposeful in itself, enabling the hunter's mind to wander, imagine, and improvise.

Improvisation only becomes possible once the hunter foregoes calculation, planning, and relaxes control of his thoughts, allowing subjective musing, creative reflection.⁴² Early in the novel, M's fondness for cataloguing, for inventorying, is signalled. One of his favourite meditations as he is hiking is 'a mental gear check' (Leigh 1999, 24). Inventorying is associated with commercial practices (Häusermann 1935, 445). The hunter's mental bookkeeping is therefore in keeping with his role as a gun for hire, he is a part of the company's inventory and, in turn, possesses his own assets that he must manage. M is also a numbers man. We learn at the beginning of the novel that numbers are his salve. When his flight to Tasmania encounters severe turbulence, the hunter thinks that a religious man might now begin to pray. M counts instead: 'one...and two...and three' (Leigh 1999, 3). He cherishes the abstract, finds succour in it. Quotidian understandings of numbers, of mathematics, sometimes equate them with certainty. As Norbert Weiner (1915) once observed, "'mathematical certainty' has become a byword" (568). M may value numbers in this way. He is shown not to like uncertainty or inexactness. When he is advised of "roundabout" where the thylacine was sighted by a middleman for his employer, the imprecision grates (Leigh 1999, 29). He thrives on exactness and a linked capacity to control events. Early in the novel, shocked at the disorder in Lucy's house and at the company deigning to lodge him there he expresses dislike of the imprecision of it all (8). The hunter is presented as patient, prudent, diligent, moderate, and reflective. He withholds and, as Roman Bartosch notes, he is also largely withheld from the reader (Bartosch 2016, 265).⁴³ There are, however, moments where his ability to regulate situations is compromised and he opens himself to improvisation. These moments, such as the becoming thylacine, are crucial to the plot. Improvisation, a responsiveness to the irregular and the unforeseen, is what enables M to connect with others, both human and non-human.

In *The Hunter*, the use of ellipses sometimes signal a loss of mastery on M's part. When M counts on the aeroplane, for instance, the ellipses represent pauses, the passage of time between calling to mind each number but these intervals

⁴² Derrida (2004) has linked improvisation to the incalculable (337).

⁴³ Bartosch (2016) provides a thought-provoking interpretation of *The Hunter* as a questioning of the idea of "becoming animal".

between numbers also make difference, their differentiation possible, separating and linking them. The ellipses figure both a refusal of the cut of difference that is associated with the phallic paradigm of mainstream Lacanian psychoanalysis and an acknowledgment of that cut. As M counts therefore, drawing on the abstract to protect him from the concrete, he gestures towards what nestles in difference, in-between difference, alongside it, subjacent to it, the Matrixial. In the moment of remembering “Jacinta,” the suspension points occur again. They can be interpreted as authorial shorthand for the passage of time, signalling an unwillingness to provide a messy description of masturbation, but may additionally indicate a loss of control... M points away, directing his body, yet after this intentional choreographing of his wank, he relinquishes command of the situation. Masturbation provides fertile ground for improvisation, weaving desires with imaginings in the search for satisfaction. The ellipsis registers this kind of onanistic improvisation and the loss of composure that accompanies it. It is different to the kind of improvisation, bound to copoiesis, which M comes to embrace later in the novel but indicates from early on that the hunter’s sangfroid is not encompassing, total.

The fantasy of “Jacinta” is not the only instance of masturbation in the novel. Later on, M gets an erection thinking about Lucy: “two deft minutes later it is dismantled” (Leigh 1999, 86). He oddly objectifies his body here, his erect penis treated as if it is a discrete piece of equipment rather than a part of him. It becomes a tool akin to his rifle. His desire for Lucy, which is lent substance by the impromptu erection, is clearly viewed as an unwanted distraction. M cannot permit himself to need another, to open himself to another. The erection, as unforeseen, has to be taken down. M’s effort to reassert control, however, simultaneously forms a kind of assault on the phallic. Although the phallus is not the penis, the penis as metaphor readily cloaks it. The two scenes of masturbation can therefore be read as revealing fragility within the phallic. The hard, the rigid, is limited. It comes and goes, is not constant, not enduring. This critique of the phallic, like the references to the Matrixial, occurs on an illustrative level. The references to masturbation, to the penis, are absent from the film adaptation, such “dirtiness” purged from its vision of *The Hunter* but, as I will show, similar dynamics are in operation. The film, however, differs from the novel in that it transcends illustration. The novel’s inability to generate a potential encounter with the Matrixial is, in part, linked to the reality that writing is often highly regimented, tightly controlled (as, of course, is film). Writing, unless “automatic,” appears too planned, measured, too tight, to allow for significant improvisation.

In his 1964 essay “Hunting is Not Those Heads on the Wall,” however, LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) cautions against attending too much to form in relation to creativity, to the end product at the expense of the process, the doing that is making, creating. Possibility inheres in the emergence of writing, the

crafting, a possibility evacuated from the words fixed upon the page, settled upon. For Jones, the artefact (such as a novel) is akin to a trophy head. It is lifeless. The hunt is what is of import, “hunting is *not* those heads on the wall” (Jones [1964] 2009a, 200).⁴⁴ The heads on the wall are only of interest for what they signal or index in relation to their process of production, the hunt that was their making. This hunt is improvisational. The writer uniquely negotiates a pre-existent vocabulary, bows to or bends rules of grammar and syntax, anxiously invoking or striving to quell anterior voices, as a means to generate their singular text.⁴⁵ Using Charlie Parker’s saxophony as a positive example of creativity, Jones condemns imitation, the pre-conceived, the pre-determined, praising uncertainty, the embrace of the unforeseen (200). This process, the thinking behind any art, the doing, the making, is linked by Jones with “walking.” Walking, as action (rather than verb or descriptor), “is not past or future” (199). Jones’s mind wanders to walking as a means to illustrate the presentness that is creativity.⁴⁶

This presentness, the process of a creative practice, the labour of writing with its improvised dimensions, what Jones calls the hunt, is absent from most published works and *The Hunter* is no exception. As artefact, the novel is calculated, carefully gauged, exquisitely minimalist. Leigh’s austere prose, a prose as cautious as the man it is made to measure up to, the hunter himself, appears the antithesis of improvised writing. This is no stream of consciousness (although the novel contains M’s interior monologues, imitating such a stream). It is pre-meditated story-telling yet pre-meditated story-telling that forms a profound meditation on the value of improvisation. Through his walking, for example, M gains access to wandering. Faced with difficult terrain, the hunter is forced into the *moment*, “forgetting time, forgetting destination” (Leigh 1999, 36). His mind here wanders away from the pre-determined, alive only to the vagaries of the present as it manifests through the surroundings he must navigate. This immedi-

⁴⁴ Jones’s call here to focus on process rather than product can be seen as expressing a familiar need for him, that of recognizing the importance of the verb over the noun. He entitled an essay, extracted from his book *Blues People*, “Swing – From Verb to Noun” (Jones [1963] 2009b). The shift from verb to noun is a shift Jones associates with White appropriation and an obscuring of Black inventiveness (Mackey 1992).

⁴⁵ In this context, Harold Bloom’s (1973) view of poets in Western culture as engaging in the creative correction of their predecessors, in controlled misinterpretation, “deliberate, even perverse revisionism” (50) can be understood as a description of one of the dimensions of improvisation operating in the writing of a literary text.

⁴⁶ Tim Ingold (2011) also conceives of walking in ways that can be considered as inventive and improvisational. Jacques Derrida (1999) links *aporia* (an impasse to thought) with walking, suggesting that as a “*non-way*” (Derrida’s emphasis) it “is the condition of walking” (73). Invention, in such a conception, requires an enabling prevention.

acy differs from an immediacy M will later describe, an awareness of exact location, a preparedness for any eventuality (117). *The Hunter* beautifully compares and contrasts the improvisational and the pre-planned, the unforeseen and the foreseen yet without incarnating the former. It is not an improvisatory text. The novel is too determinedly economic, too certain, for that. It is, however, a crucial text about improvisation and one from which, of course, a reader will improvise their unique response.

Wit(h)nessing the Thylacine: Improvised Encounters

Through its illustration of an alternative psychic register to that governed by the phallic paradigm, the novel *The Hunter* provides rich groundwork upon which the film adaptation can riff, constituting the pre-existing material that forms the basis for improvisation, the story offering stuff to be reshuffled, revised, recreated (Wallace 2015, 188). There are significant differences between novel and film, particularly in terms of the fate of the thylacine which is presented in more redemptive terms in the latter (the hunter kills the creature but, unlike in the novel, refuses to provide his employer, in the film a German-based military biotechnology company called *Red Leaf*, with the genetic material they commissioned him to source). The film also sets up more complex relational dynamics. Jack Mindy is highly protective of Lucy and envious of Martin David. He contacts *Red Leaf* suggesting Martin is becoming distracted, prompting the company to send a rival hunter who murders Lucy and Sass (in the novel Sass is badly injured in an accidental fire and Lucy suffers a nervous breakdown and is sectioned). The rival pursues Martin in the wilderness and is ultimately lured into a leg-hold trap and shot dead.

The film is also more securely located. Protesters that Martin encounters have a “Save the Upper Florentine” banner. The Upper Florentine is in the south of Tasmania. It was a locus for protests against logging in 2009. The last thylacine to be snared and sold into captivity (it was imprisoned at Hobart zoo) was caught in the Florentine Valley by Elias Churchill in 1933 (Smith 1980, 30). In the Armstrong house there is also a poster of the Tarkine on the wall. This area is in the north west of Tasmania. Some areas of the Tarkine were inhabited by thylacines in the past. The film, however, strongly implies that the thylacine’s territory is in the Upper Florentine.⁴⁷ Locating the creature in this locality enables *The Hunter* to give a topical geographical context against which to explore the interplay of environmental concerns and local economic concerns: the towel dispenser in the local pub has a “Save our Native Forests” sticker overwritten by

⁴⁷ I write of “territory” as tigers likely had home ranges. They inhabited tracts of land rather than continually drifting.

the word “jobs” in marker pen and, at one point, “Go home Greenie scum” is written in shit on Martin’s vandalised Mitsubishi 4x4.

The more complex set of relationships in the film, the even greater intricacy of parallels that are introduced (Martin and the thylacine as hunters; Mindy and Martin as competitors for Lucy’s affections; Lucy and the thylacine as prey; the hunter and his rival), is, perhaps, the most interesting surface element of improvisation in relation to the novel. They represent a clear amplification of the book’s emotional workings and tensions. The aspect of improvisation that most interests me here, however, is in the film’s efforts to attest to the thylacine. This bearing witness is bound up with its capacity to embody the Matrixial. The novel illustrates phallic and Matrixial modes of relating as they play out through testimony whereas the film is able to register both modes. As far as the Matrixial is concerned, this must of necessity involve improvisation as the Matrixial is not available in the novel as a psychic register to be imitated. The Matrixial is not *represented* in the film, which would be an impossibility, but, as I will go on to explore, it is alluded to, resonates within the fabric of *The Hunter*.

There are two different ways of attesting to the tiger in operation in the film. One looks to the past and the other looks forwards, signalling a testimony seemingly yet to come. Perpetrator images of the tiger provide examples of the former. Martin studies film and photographs of the creature as he seeks to understand his prey. He watches Fleay’s footage and reviews snapshots of farmers and trappers with thylacine they have killed, the past carried into the present. A digitally resurrected thylacine also appears twice in the film, once obscured by trees and scrub and the second time moving silently across snow covered heathland abutting sclerophyll forest.⁴⁸ The colour CGI tiger was modelled on Fleay’s black & white film footage, footage that recorded how the non-human animal moved, comported itself. This footage was shot in a zoo, in conditions likely to significantly impact how the creature behaved. Paddle (2000) notes that “observations of behaviour on individual specimens in the last years of a species’ existence are far more likely to report aspects of abnormal behaviour in inappropriate contexts and environments” (9).⁴⁹ The zoo at which Fleay produced his appalling films comprises one such context.

⁴⁸ As Ben De Bruyn (2016) remarks, the film adaptation mutes the thylacine. In the novel she voices “an unholy strangled hissing roar” and then, when mortally wounded, a “wheezing” (De Bruyn 2016, 156; Leigh 1999, 163). This muting might be interpreted as depriving the non-human animal of agency. Its death in the film is seemingly welcomed rather than actively resisted. For further discussion of this scene with its resurrected thylacine see my review article “Trauma and Testimony” (Chare 2014).

⁴⁹ In a phenomenological context, Lestel et al. (2014) discuss intentionality, directed attention, as it manifests in non-human animals (133). The impact that captivity had on thylacines can be seen to have caused an inhibited intentionality.

In the scenes of the CGI tiger, *The Hunter* therefore presents us with a tiger in the wild, ostensibly in the present, that likely moves with a captive mentality, marked by the trauma of its historic imprisonment. The film's digitally reanimated thylacine, its representation of the non-human animal, seems to bring us close to the extinct creature yet actually anchors it in a violent past. The mass of pixels in the main scene featuring the tiger does not quite convince, appearing not quite fully there, superimposed. Particularly while alive, the blanched thylacine appears too light of foot in the snowy terrain, comes across as hollow.⁵⁰ It does not look at ease, at home in the landscape. Freeman (2013) justly describes its movements as "stilted" (196n7). As it pauses, seemingly inviting David to kill it, the thylacine is also subject to a clumsy anthropomorphism, made sorrowful, melancholy. At this moment, difference is abnegated, the non-human humanised, its singularity cruelly effaced.⁵¹ The other as other is here made intolerable, represented as only bearable if rendered a sign of the same. Here, *The Hunter* cannot show the thylacine to be other.

Pollock (2007) suggests representation provides the salve of signification in relation to traumatic experiences, enabling distancing from trauma (180). In this context, most recent efforts to attest to the thylacine can be read as pushing the traumatic reality of its extinction into the background despite their references to tragedy. The scene of the tiger's death, the film's restaging of the moment of extinction, conforms to this tendency although the sterile CGI renders the sign not quite capable of becoming balm. It is a scene imbued with Christic undertones, the snowy hillside rendered Tasmania's Calvary: a site where the thylacine must die to atone for humankind's sins towards the non-human animal. Martin carrying the dead thylacine is the Deposition from the Cross. This easily readable symbolism, prefigured by Martin's playing of Antonio Vivaldi's *Gloria*, performs distancing of the kind identified by Pollock. There are, however, other aspects of *The Hunter* which resist such distancing. Despite the film's substantial representation of the novel, with its clear narrative, its sharply drawn characters, there is also a sense of a pressing absence, of something behind the scenes, an uncontained. This absence is affirmed, alluded to, in varying ways.

⁵⁰ Jane Stadler (2012) describes it as possessing "an uncanny, spectral weightlessness" (np).

⁵¹ Unlike other literary representations of the thylacine, Leigh does not write from inside the creature's head in a clumsy obliteration of difference. The film here in its effort to speak the non-human animal's emotions therefore differs from her novel in a markedly negative way.

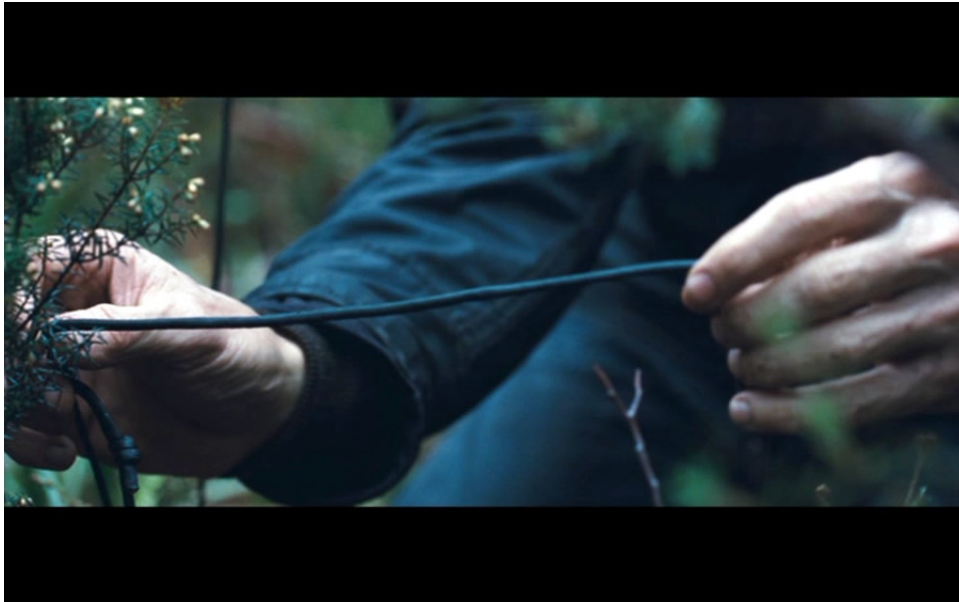


Fig. 6: *The Hunter* (Daniel Nettheim, Magnolia Pictures, 2011): Setting a trap.



Fig. 7: *The Hunter* (Daniel Nettheim, Magnolia Pictures, 2011): Setting a trap.

One such way is through the repeated imagery of Martin setting traps [Figures 6 & 7], an activity that is improvisatory, a response to surrounds, each trap made to measure for a given environment, bespoke. The imagery as motif links with that of Martin walking as a means of suggesting the importance of waiting within the hunt. The traps, in their patient deadliness, await the unsuspecting thylacine. Ultimately, however, they do not catch the creature becoming markers of failure, signalling the tiger's stubborn absence. They wait for something that, it becomes clear, is not there. Through the trap as motif, *The Hunter* alludes to something whilst simultaneously withholding it, implies its existence without lending it substance. This withholding can, of course, be interpreted as a means to build suspense, a technique akin to that adopted in classic films such as *Jaws* (Dir, Steven Spielberg, USA, 1975), where showing less increases tension and expectation. The relatively low key appearance of the thylacine towards the film's end, however, belies such a reading. I want to argue that the motif functions more as an effort to lull the audience into what Ettinger (2006b) refers to as "floating attentiveness" (221) and Pollock (2011a) as "receptive reverie" (195). Receptive reverie is, to some extent, analogous to the analyst listening to the analysand in a clinical setting in psychoanalysis in that it describes an openness to "unspoken undertones" as they register through speech and gestures, rhythms and ruptures (Pollock 2011a, 195).⁵²

Receptive reverie is also nurtured by the many scenes of Martin walking through rainforest and moorlands. Through time – signalled by the common cinematic shorthand of clouds scudding across the sky, salmon pink, mauve, deep blue, grey, varied colours and moods at different times of day – this walking becomes wandering, drifting, as the hunter finds no trace of his prey. It is a wandering that is occasionally interrupted by purpose, such as when the hunter investigates a glint that turns out to be Jarrah Armstrong's water bottle, a glint that reveals Jarrah's remains and his fate, his murder. Often though, Martin simply traverses terrain. He has a search pattern but with the passage of time there is a sense his belief in the effectiveness of this method is waning. He is following a plan, has a purpose, but his walking is purposeless. He has become nomadic, a status he retains at the film's conclusion when he tells his employer: "I'm going to see the sights". *The Hunter's* dialogue ends on a wandering note.

The audience is encouraged to follow him, to embrace reverie and thereby open themselves to encounter. This encounter will not occur through signification, not through a *sign* of the thylacine, but it will resonate with the traumatic loss of this non-human animal. The creature is conjured indirectly through figures such as the traps but more through the sense of an absent presence that

⁵² For an examination of how transference might usefully be employed to make sense of spectator responses to film and to describe moments of reverie akin to those discussed here see Chare (2016).

Martin is circling, an absence that the viewer cannot master or possess. The viewer is presented with no image to describe, to experience, to consume. Rather the thylacine is registered by way of an allusive, elusive approach, one that resists “semiotic closure” (Pollock 2013, 121).

Through the repeated unsuccessful setting of traps, the fruitless hiking, through Martin’s patient failure, something begins to insist. Jacqueline Rose (1986) compellingly argues for repetition “as the constant pressure of something hidden but not forgotten” (228). Rose is here referring to how repetition can cause unconscious material that is usually obscured from the self to manifest to the self. Here, however, repetition acts to signal an “other” to that Other which we normally recognize as the thylacine. I am referring here to a radical alterity, to something that is other to our languages of entrapment, beyond the distancing effects of the sign. This alterity registers through an affective aspect to the film, one communicated by way of specific, repeated visual effects, namely the use of reflections, and through the acoustic, the euphonic, specifically aesthetic voices.

The film begins with Martin reflected in his hotel room window, ethereal. Trees and sky are reflected on the windscreen of his 4x4 as he first drives to the Armstrong house and then regularly thereafter, making what we see unclear, obscuring our view of Martin—late in the film as he drives we see his face as if through a diaphanous veil—and occasionally causing whiteout. At one point when trapping, he is shown reflected in a bog, his contours muddied, rendered uncertain. These reflections are deliberate, their inclusion in the film intended, yet also improvised. As elusive visual effects, fleeting, fragmentary, changeable, they are, by their nature, partly unforeseeable. The unsettled images cumulatively gesture towards the film’s efforts to communicate something outside the orbit of the phallic, a thing resistant to the lure of definition, refusing the confine of outline, rejecting the appeasing sense and substance of the sign. This thing is the Matrixial, an invisible that is “composed of I(s) and unknown non-I(s),” a relationality that operates beyond the hierarchical pull of binary logic (Ettinger 1993, 9). Reflections, virtual images, are the products of interface and therefore relational yet they resist hierarchizing, reflections comprise separation-in-jointness. In *The Hunter*, the reflections do not serve as figures for the Matrixial but imply it, allude to it.

This process of allusion permits the film to foster moments that refrain from possessiveness. The violence of visual technologies, their invasiveness, is a clear theme in *The Hunter*. It is indicated strongly when Martin falls prey to an infrared trail camera. The device captures him investigating a wombat carcass strung between some branches. He extracts the camera’s memory card and views it later on his laptop, finding himself keeping company with creatures such as Tasmanian Devils and quolls, caught alongside them. He too has involuntarily become archived, his presence catalogued by a modern image recording technology. The event can be understood to give Martin insight into the dynamics of

hunter/prey that are played out through image capture, he comes to know firsthand the “soft murder” of the camera (Sontag 1979, 15). The film camera, the camera Martin is oblivious to, the camera Willem Dafoe, the actor who plays the character of Martin, knowingly ignores, obviously also embodies these dynamics.

In *The Hunter*, the camera occasionally incarnates a predatory look. There are shots of Martin being watched by others, an unknown gunman and, later, his rival who registers as a blur at the bottom of the frame as he observes Martin in a point of view shot. Mindy also views Lucy rapaciously at one point: he either desires her or desires Martin and covets her relationship with him. This last reading is encouraged by Mindy wiping his cheek after Lucy kisses him, seemingly in disgust, which could be interpreted as evidence of a homoerotic subtext. Such scenes, however, present a camera consciousness aligned with the human, even if it is an inhuman humanity (Deleuze 2005, 21). Film more broadly as a mechanical form of representation might be conceived of as embodying an inhuman gaze that is ill-suited to fostering ethical encounter. Certainly the Fleay footage discussed earlier should be regarded negatively as bound up with efforts at mastery and as embodying a violent logic of difference, both enabling factors in the non-human animal genocide of the thylacine. The meditation on image capture and its violence that is interior to the narrative of *The Hunter* runs parallel to a challenge to this will to visual mastery, the aforementioned aesthetic encounters encouraged by the repeated reflections.

The Matrixial is also implied through the use of music in the film, not the often gloomy, melancholic score, but the use of opera.⁵³ In one scene, the hunter is shown assembling his Keppeler KS V Bullpup Sniper, a particularly compact tactical rifle more associated with law enforcement and target shooting than hunting, a rifle that implies Martin has a military background. As he puts together the weapon, he listens to the Swedish mezzo soprano, Malena Ernman, singing Handel’s *Ombra mai fu*. The metallic snaps and clicks of the rifle as it is fitted together puncture the aria, enacting a kind of acoustic violence towards it. The scene consciously depicts Martin as a person of contrasts, coldly sensitive, and also unconsciously invokes the phallic and the Matrixial, the sharp, the cutting alongside the resonant, the encompassing. *Ombra mai fu* is a song for a plane tree, a paean to the natural world. It indicates Martin’s aesthetic sensibility and also his love of the wilderness, a love he himself clearly does not fully recognize until this particular job.

Opera music also plays when Martin is shown bathing. The theme of washing, of a need for cleansing, runs through the film. In his downtime, the hunter is repeatedly shown taking a bath. His desire for cleanliness also extends to his

⁵³ For an alternative interpretation of the significance of Martin’s choice in music see Narraway and Stark (2015).

emotional life, in the beginning he will not allow himself the “dirt” of feeling. The presence of opera, a medium that stretches words into sounds, privileging affect over signification, celebrating coloratura, permits Martin’s capacity for compassion to reveal itself. He is shown to be a man of sentiment. The music also forms a potential threshold between the audience and the Matrixial. Pollock (2013) summarizes Matrixial logic as proposing “that more archaic than the subject split from its others and the world is a proto-psychic dimension shaped affectively in *co-emergence* with an unknown but co-affecting other: prior to subjectivity and even intersubjectivity is *trans-subjectivity* and its figure is neither subject nor object but a *transject* lying alongside the later formed subject/object relation defined by a phallic order” (6). This proto subjectivity is “perceived sensorially, hence aesthetically” (11). The highly affective opera singing permits such a perception. The opera, as a sensory means of opening to the Matrixial, comprises the acoustic equivalent of the reflections, the visual ambiguities, mentioned earlier. It is also improvisational, the singer elaborating the libretto, embellishing it.

The camera in *The Hunter* also manifests a capacity for aesthetic enjoyment in relation to the beauty of the Tasmanian countryside. It is an enjoyment that registers through verdant poetry composed of aerial and medium shots of the wild. This poetry is, however, occasionally exploded by rifle shots, by acoustic violence that divides such scenes into a before and after, embosoming quiet replaced by still aftershock. These loud cracks that shatter reverie figure the phallic as does Mindy’s disturbing imitation of a thylacine vocalisation which sticks in the craw of the listener, seeming odd in the man’s throat, not at home there. He strives to simulate, to possess a language that is not his, to disarticulate the non-human expression and own it for himself. Both the visual rhythms of the reflections and the sounds of the singers as affective give access to the pre-cognitive aesthetic register that is the Matrixial, a register where the cut of difference between human and non-human animal is unknown. As I will outline in my conclusion, this aesthetic register which is constituted of affect before it becomes bound to signification is of profound ethical import. Through acoustic and visual “patches” of affect, the film *The Hunter* improvises a kind of hospitality able to accommodate the trauma of an other, the thylacine, without containing it, signifying it, through irredeemably tainted pre-determined signs and forms.⁵⁴ This hospitality invites compassion from the spectator, enabling a means of encounter with the tiger’s traumatic absence that draws on archaic encounters between mother and infant. Pollock (2013, 117) writes of compassionate connectivity with the unknown. It is an unknown of this kind that remains out of sight and out of sound, which rests behind them, yet asserts its presence. *The Hunter* fosters resonance between the archaic trauma associated with the formation of

⁵⁴ For an alternative discussion of how imagery of non-human animals can be conceived as offering hospitality, one indebted to deconstruction, see Valérie Bienvenue (2017).

the subject and the historical trauma of the non-human animal genocide perpetrated against the thylacine (Pollock 2013, 49-51).

Conclusion: Burning Com-compassion: Overlaps and Overlays

In the novel *The Hunter*, the fate of Tasmania's Aboriginal people is briefly alluded to. M chances upon "a ring of blackened stones" which he imagines were laid by Aboriginal Tasmanians (Leigh 1999, 57).⁵⁵ He thinks of De Witt Island, where he believes the government tried to establish an Aboriginal sanctuary (in reality, Indigenous Tasmanians were confined on Flinders Island) which failed. M then recalls that in 1936 it was suggested that De Witt Island be used as a home for thylacines. This was a genuine proposal although as Eric Guiler (1985) observes, the island is "a miserable place [...] which has no suitable habitat and very little prey for thylacines" (30).⁵⁶ Through his thought processes, it is clear that the hunter identifies continuity between the treatment of Aborigines and thylacines.

Such an overlap was briefly discussed by Steven Smith in his 1980 report on the status of the Tasmanian tiger. Smith (1980) observes that "the fate of the Aborigines had many parallels with that of the thylacine, with which they co-existed for thousands of years" (21). Both the Aborigines and the tigers were subject to bounty schemes although for Aborigines the bounties were for specific individuals (Lawson, 74). Nicholas Clements (2014) states that for frontiersmen, "the blacks were merely dangerous animals and their attitude to killing them resembled that of a game hunter" (50). For some settlers then, both tigers and Aboriginal Tasmanians were non-human animals, pests. This kind of thinking is also evident in rhetoric of the time that was employed in the British press, with a reporter in *The Cornwall Gazette* believing settler's would "hunt [Tasmanian Aborigines] down like wild beasts" (cited in Lawson 2014, 130). Tom Lawson suggests that the British press forged a vision "of an apparently friendly colonial population being continually tormented by the irritant of the 'Aborigines' or 'savages'" (131). Once the settler population could no longer bear this ordeal, as the press constructed it, they "pursued Indigenous Tasmanians with vigour, just as a hunter pursues its prey" (131).

Both the thylacine and Tasmania's many Aboriginal communities endured immense violence which may partly be explained by the effects of a phallic paradigm in which otherness, as a reminder of the formative trauma of separation that undergirds subjectivity, registers as a source of anxiety and a prompt to vio-

⁵⁵ Steve Himmer (2009) interprets this event as evidence of M casting himself in "the role of both colonizer and colonized" and of entering into "a bloody, discomfoting trinity with the hunted—human and animal, white and Aboriginal" (49).

⁵⁶ In 1967 the Fauna Board of Tasmania decided on Maria Island as an appropriate sanctuary. This island has suitable habitat to support a thylacine population.

lence. This same paradigm impedes effort to attest to the violence perpetrated against them, a violence that ultimately led to the extinction of the tiger. Witnessing that unfolds simply or solely on phallic terms, purely as signification, threatens to enact further aggression by distancing traumatic realities of history. In *The Hunter*, however, when Martin burns the non-human animal remains of the thylacine, he destroys all sign of the creature, reducing it to cinders. This can be interpreted both as a metaphor for the impossibility of attesting from within the phallic paradigm and as a critique of the dominant tendency to objectify the tiger (one absent from the novel). The act of burning leaves no opportunity for the creature, already commodified, to be reduced to “specimen” status.⁵⁷



Fig. 8: *The Hunter* (Daniel Nettheim, Magnolia Pictures, 2011): Feeling loss.

The burning is also an act of cremation, a funeral rite. Martin cries upon killing the thylacine. His grief can be interpreted as directed towards the lives of those lost in his pursuit of it but the way he tenderly places his hand on the thylacine's corpse also indicates he feels its loss [Figure 8]. The gesture is one of

⁵⁷ In the novel, M does treat the thylacine as a specimen. Earlier, however, upon discovering thylacine bones he treats them with reverence, meditating on the implication of human and non-human animals, on interspecies relations. The skull is also akin to Yorick, encouraging M to think of his mortality, of his becoming human remains alongside these non-human animal remains (Leigh 1999, 159-60).

compassion. Burning the corpse is also a compassionate act. It is an act reminiscent of the cremation of Manganinnie in the film of that name. When settlers first arrived in Tasmania, cremation was common custom among some Aboriginal Tasmanian communities (Hiatt 1969). Truganini, for example, left a request to be cremated and for her ashes to be scattered at sea (Lawson 2014, 183). As previously discussed, this wish was initially ignored. Truganini was buried, then exhumed and her skeleton was subsequently put on public display. It was only in 1976 that her desire was finally honoured (186).

The film *Manganinnie* (Dir. John Honey, Australia, 1980), an adaptation of a children's novel by Beth Roberts (1979), takes its name from the central character, a Tasmanian Aboriginal woman who becomes separated from her community and witnesses her husband murdered during "The Line", a settler initiative (historically unsuccessful) intended to corral Aboriginal Tasmanians in one part of the island.⁵⁸ There is clear assonance between the names Truganini and Manganinnie and it is easy to hear Truganini's fate echoed and revisited in the film, which appears an effort to work through settler guilt regarding both the Black War and Truganini's posthumous treatment. Manganinnie is seemingly granted a traditional funeral although with a settler child as a mourner rather than members of her community. As Clements (2014, 31) observes, in reality during the Black War it was often impossible for Tasmanian Aborigines to perform proper funeral rites for their kinsfolk. Settlers also frequently violated the human remains of Aborigines in the name of scientific endeavour. In contrast to these horrific realities, *Manganinnie*, a product of hindsight, grants the deceased Aboriginal woman some respect in death. In *The Hunter*, hindsight also informs the esteem Martin as hunter is shown to display for the thylacine. He scatters its ashes from a cliff top; ashes that he had stored in the water bottle of the murdered man Jarrah, therefore also indirectly according him funeral rites. Both films depict individuals ensuring that mortal remains are not desecrated in the name of science or commerce or a combination thereof.

The films additionally employ female characters as the putative last of their kind. Griselda Pollock (2011b, 287-290) has remarked that gendered narratives are frequently employed in portrayals of mass execution (Pollock is here writing in the context of the Shoah), drawing attention to how woman as sign and aesthetic object gives a bearable face to mass murder, enabling distancing and disavowal to occur. Manganinnie and the nameless thylacine function to link death with the feminine and to place the horror of collective extermination at a remove. In *The Hunter*, however, this distancing is sometimes overcome through encouraging reverie and providing spaces for potential encounter with the Ma-

⁵⁸ As Catriona Moore and Stephen Muecke (1984) observe, *Manganinnie* repeated the myth of the total annihilation of Tasmanian Aborigines at a time when politically extant communities in Tasmania were beginning to assert themselves (38).

trixial. It is noteworthy that the shot of Martin scattering the thylacine's ashes includes graphic matching [Figure 9]. The ashes that billow in the wind, an amorphous haze, are echoed by the hunter's condensing breath. Life and death combine in this carefully staged shot. The superficial bringing together of human and non-human animal echoes a more profound subjacent encounter that permits wit(h)nessing. At times, *The Hunter* offers an alternative to the caging that is the act of representation, a refusal to solely attest to the thylacine as it appears to us from behind the zoo bars of language, securely dissociated and differentiated. This alternative, as it cannot draw on resources of signification, improvises by way of an exploitation of repetition, differing repetitions that register cumulatively as the pressure of another dimension to subjectivity, a dimension that provides alternative ways of relating to others to that of the phallic.

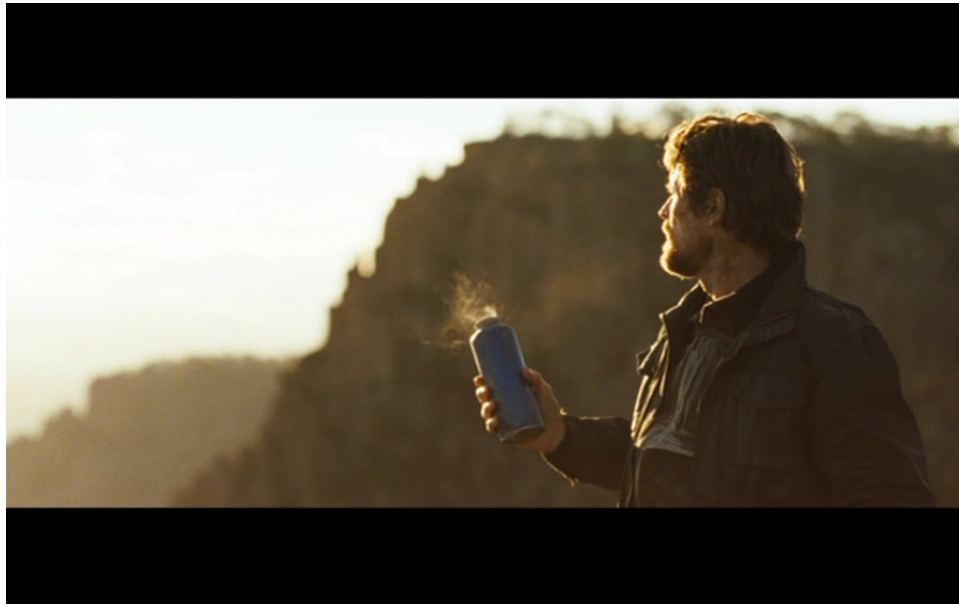


Fig. 9: *The Hunter* (Daniel Nettheim, Magnolia Pictures, 2011): Graphic match of ash and exhaled breath.

Pollock (2013) describes the Matrixial Gaze as it is conceived by Ettinger to be a way of seeing that is not masterful or voyeuristic but tentatively connective. In Pollock words, we desire this gaze to enable “a *connectivity* and [a] co-affectation that moves at shared borderlines without suspending them completely, that works across shared borderspaces without violating difference, that transits

and fosters trans-subjective moments of mutual yet differently registered co-eventing amongst partialized elements of several subjectivities momentarily encountering each other at the aesthetically evoked threshold" (107). This Gaze, active prior to the emergence of Self and Other, provides a glimpse of a non-oppositional relating between the psychic figures of becoming-mother and becoming-baby and a means thereby to conceptualize a more ethical way of attesting to the thylacine, of speaking towards it. The aesthetic encounters between mother and baby are not bound by the hierarchizing that always accompanies oppositional logics. Difference as it manifests in the Matrixial through variably pulsing intensities, changeable affects, feminine sexual difference as Ettinger (2006a) refers to it, is "*beyond* the binary difference between the sexes" (56). There is something akin to the trace as Derrida conceived it in operation here, manifesting by way of these intensities that impress mother and infant, that are exchanged between them, there is a kind of binary *avant la lettre*, but there is, as yet, no cut of the difference of the kind necessary for the linguistic sign. There is no oppositional difference in terms of male and female, human and non-human animal. The terms required for opposition to occur are not yet in force, enforced. There are simply variations in encountered intensity.

Oppositional logics underpin many kinds of violence, from the quotidian to the genocidal. In the novel *The Hunter*, M suggests predator-prey dynamics, an expression of oppositional logic, of phallic logic, operate everywhere, permeating all kinds of social interactions (Leigh 1999, 31; 87). Drawing on Tony Barta's insights, Jesse Shipway (2017) also describes how genocides emerge from out of relations, involving "subjects and objects, the weak and the strong, technology and ideology, victims and perpetrators [and] planners and executioners" (43). Several of these relational pairings can be conceived of as oppositional. To them might be added predator and prey or hunter and prey given that this rhetoric was used to frame the conflict between settlers and Tasmania's Aboriginal population and between settlers and tigers. Seemingly then, a way to prevent violence would be to sever relationality. Relations are, nevertheless, integral to subjectivity and the basis for ethical encounter. There are, however, different ways of relating.

Martin, first observed in *The Hunter* at the non-place that is an airport, is initially portrayed as eschewing all relationships. Marc Augé (1995) describes non-places (such as airports) as spaces which "cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity" (77-78). The absence of relationality associated with airports is in keeping with Martin's character. He is shown as rootless, a wanderer, travelling on a Canadian passport but with his nationality unclear, his birthplace unknown, even his accent occasionally unsettled. In the novel, M, reflecting to himself, thinks of himself as "he who is anchored by neither wife nor home, nor by a lover nor even a single friend, his mind takes flight wanders" (Leigh 1999, 15). Here wandering is seemingly allied to non-

relationality. Relations give direction, restrict. The relations that form in film and novel, however, relations between M/Martin and the tiger, between him and Lucy, him and Lucy's children, are the result of wandering not an impediment to it. These relations differ from hierarchical, oppositional ones in that they are ultimately not imposed but emerge in improvisational fashion from out of encounter. The human characters open themselves to receiving others. M/Martin opens himself to the non-human animal, the tiger. When he finally finds and kills the thylacine, an oppositional predator-prey dynamic is no longer operational. M/Martin must improvise as he has abandoned a detached perspective towards what he would have previously conceived of as prey, he wanders in a kind of togetherness with the non-human animal, a severality as Ettinger (2006a) calls it, "a compassionate joining-in-difference" (143). This severality as a theme in the novel is emphasised through M linking the thylacine with his mother, confusing one for the other after an accident (Leigh 1999, 96-97). Kylie Crane (2012) suggests that in this passage "the tiger assumes nurturing characteristics and this symbolizes, even epitomizes, femininity" (152). I would suggest that on another level, the tiger here additionally figures the feminine as Ettinger conceives of it, implying a psychic position, the feminine as part of the imaginary schema of sexual difference (Pollock 2013, 6).

Hunting has always been fertile ground for extemporizing. Tim Ingold (2000) writes of the Cree hunter that he annually has "to work out his tactics as he goes along" (29).⁵⁹ This working out can be interpreted as a kind of improvising. It is, perhaps, because of this improvisational aspect to the activity that Ettinger embraces it as a metaphor for her art practice, referring to the role of the trapper within it. Her trapper, like M/Martin when finally in a face to face encounter with the thylacine, redistributes relations, provides innovation. The trapper, for Ettinger, is not a point of origin but a part of a continuous process. The trapper is not discrete, not bound by difference to prey. There is therefore an element of similarity with Aboriginal Country which also involves what could be called a joining-in-difference. Country, however, as it is embodied in the petroglyphs at Murujuga, in the thylacine linked with its prey and the Aboriginal image-makers who affirm these linkages through carving the blocks, is of a different culture. The Matrixial as it resonates in the Symbolic, as it emerges through copoiesis, is socially and historically marked. It affords glimpses of alternative ways of relating, of an improvised hospitality that is compassionate. This compassion might one day lead kinship of a comparable kind to that manifested in Country but it cannot be equated with it.

⁵⁹ Despite Ingold's gendering of the hunter as masculine, in Cree culture hunting as an activity is held to involve both men and women (see Carlson 2008, 52).

The Matrixial is different to yet bound up with the Symbolic and the Symbolic as a culturally inflected register of psychic reality is generative of a “traumatic-phallic-colonialist attitude to life” (Gur-Ze’ev 2010b, 344). This attitude induced and induces violence against others. In the case of the invasion of Australia by settler-colonials, it brought about genocidal acts against Aborigines and non-human animals, against those defined as other. To moderate the logic informing such violence, it is necessary to look beyond a logic of self and other, of binary difference. Gur-Ze’ev draws attention to how improvisation as a practice borne from copoiesis can transcend binaries (343). It is through this transcendence that aesthetic practices which allude to the Matrixial differ from deconstruction. Such practices do not work from within binaries but from without them. In the film *The Hunter*, this kind of aesthetic, one permitting an encounter with the Matrixial, is generated through sub-narrative aspects, visual and acoustic effects, which permit the affective to resonate. In this way, the film becomes hospitable to the unforeseen, the unseen, alluding to a beyond to the phallic paradigm, enabling the thylacine to register not as sign but as intensity, as a mournful affect that persists after the fact.

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