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Extinction Discourse in *Wanting* and *Doctor*

Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World.

Rohan Wilson

Thou white man,

With thy ever growing store

Of learning, mak'st a home in every land;

For thee all countries forth their treasures pour,

And nature waits, the servant of thine hand.

Not so with us; linked with our native earth

Are all pleasures, and is all our care:

The state our fathers lived in at our birth,

Is but the lot that we are born to bear.

Let us return to our loved land again!

Ah! White man, wherefore dost thou keep us here?

Thou dost not know the exil'd bosom's pain,

Nor wear'st away the life with many a tear.

Our race is fast decaying; -- far and wide

Extend thy riches, and increase thine heirs;

Oh! Let us die where our forefathers died,

That we may mix our wretched dust with theirs.

- "The Tasmanian Aborigine's Lament And Remonstrance When In Sight Of His Native Land From Flinders Island", Auster, 1847.

This poem, written by a poet known only as Auster, is a lucid example of the way in which the Aboriginal population was imagined by some nineteenth-century observers to be in a state of irreversible decline. We are "fast decaying" (Auster 4), the Aboriginal narrator tells us, displaced and dispossessed by colonisation. The connection between Aboriginal extinction and British colonisation is made explicit when the narrator observes that white men "mak'st a home in every land" and that "far and wide" the number of white "heirs" increases (Auster 4). Crucially, the potential for extinction occurs because of the arrival of white settlers. It is, for the narrator, a simple matter of one race replacing another. It should be noted, however, that the poem is not condemning this process, as a modern reader might expect. The narrator is not pleading for social justice or land rights but is pleading merely to be allowed to die where his "forefathers died" (Auster 4). The extinction of the Aboriginal people seems to be a lamentable, but nevertheless unavoidable, outcome of the same natural processes which keep

the white races dominant. What this poem demonstrates most strongly is the correspondance the discourse of Aboriginal extinction has with both the colonising process in Tasmania and the representation of Aboriginality in Tasmanian literature.

Patrick Brantlinger examined the origins of extinction discourse in his book *Dark Vanishings: Discourse on the Extinction of Primitive Races, 1800-1930*. He described extinction discourse as a “branch of the dual ideologies of imperialism and racism” which existed “wherever and whenever Europeans and white Americans encountered Indigenous peoples” (1). This set of ideas is anchored on one apparently self-evident truth; that “savagery” would not survive when confronted with European civilisation. Starting from this basic assumption, genocide and extinction were conceived of as natural processes or as the unavoidable outcomes of settlement. Brantlinger argues that in colonised countries during the nineteenth century the “work of cultural and national mourning occurs not because the aboriginals are already extinct but because they will sooner or later become extinct” (4).

In Tasmania in the nineteenth century, the concept of an Aboriginal extinction found expression in all areas of imaginative production. As early as 1827, a journalist for *The Colonial Times* noted that if settlers wished to spare the lives of the “sable race” then they must remove them from the island, “or it is quite evident, as we have frequently before observed, they will be all exterminated in a few years” (“For Some Time” 3). By 1866, it was common for sympathetic observers to draw a causal link between colonisation and the impending extinction of the Aboriginal Tasmanians, as an extract from the *Magazine of Anthropology* demonstrates. “[M]odern experience”, it states, has taught us that “native tribes begin to disappear almost simultaneously” with the arrival of settlers and that in Australia the evidence suggests that “to colonise and to extirpate are synonomous terms” (“Wilful Extinction” 4). These ideas gained further credence with the deaths of William Lanne and Trukanini, the prominent “last man” and “last woman” of the Aboriginal tribes, in 1869 and

1876 respectively. The idea that their deaths represented a final extinction continues to prove seductive in the twenty-first century.

Brantlinger, in exploring these connections, identifies one interpretive device that is useful for charting out the impact of extinction discourse on literature: the doomed-race or proleptic elegy. As the name suggests, the proleptic elegy was prominent as a form or device in literature even before the Aboriginal Tasmanians were supposedly lost. Along with Auster's "The Tasmanian Aborigine's Lament", evidence for this can be seen in poems such as the 1834 "Song of the Aborigines" by the – presumably white – poet Frances, where the Aboriginal speaker mourns that while "our flow'rs are brightly smiling, / They but bloom awhile, and die" (Melville 324), or in Richard Howitt's 1845 *Impressions of Australia Felix*, when he notes of Tasmania that "Naboth had been killed, and here was his vineyard. There is no pleasant land on the face of the earth [...] that we are not ready to take possession of – and to kill Naboth" (72-3). Howitt remarks that the "few remaining aboriginal (sic) Tasmanians" have been confined to Flinder's Island where "they drop, one by one, childless there, into the grave" (73). For Brantlinger, it was the supposed inevitability of the Aboriginal extinction that allowed the proleptic elegy to flourish,

sentimentally or mournfully expressing, even in its most humane versions, the confidence of self-fulfilling prophecy, according to which new, white colonies and nations arise as savagery and wilderness recede (4).

While the disturbing racist superiority expressed by white writers in the nineteenth century and the pessimism with which they viewed the future of the Aboriginal peoples might be reasonably attributed to the discourse of colonialism that was necessary for legitimising settlement in Tasmania, it is however more difficult to understand why readers and writers of all kinds have continued to attribute a certain authority to extinction discourse in the twenty-

first century. The language and assumptions of extinctionism appear throughout twentieth and twenty-first century Tasmanian literature as writers revisit the Aboriginal genocide. *Manganinnie* by Beth Roberts displays all the hallmarks of the proleptic elegy; the pathos, the mourning, the “confidence of self-fulfilling prophecy” (Brantlinger 4). The book has a propulsive inevitability that drives the narrative along to its only possible conclusion – the death of Manganinnie as the last of her tribe. A similar narrative trajectory can be found in Richard Flanagan’s *Wanting* as the melancholic figure of Mathinna re-enacts the extinctionist version of Aboriginal history, likewise ending with her predictable, untimely death. So, too, with Robert Drewe in *The Savage Crows*, where we find the use of doomed-race theory generating the sense of outrage that is so central to the book’s vision of race relations in modern Australia. But the reliance on colonial notions of the doomed race is at work perhaps most starkly in Mudrooroo’s *Doctor Wooreddy’s Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World*, a novel that has long been thought of as subverting the dominant white history in Tasmania, rather than rehashing it.

Before I continue, it would be prudent to outline the form I hope this critique will take. It is what Marcia Langton might refer to as an “anti-colonial” approach and will have as its focus the way in which the “colonising imperative in Australian art” finds its loudest expression in extinctionism, or the political, moral, and aesthetic statements about Aboriginal Tasmanians that wittingly or unwittingly propagate that particular colonial mode of representation (Langton 7). As Langton observed, artistic freedom can only thrive if there is a strong anti-colonialist framework supporting the production of representations of Aboriginality (8). Of course, it is not the authors of those statements or their desire to narrate the Aboriginal Other that I am criticising but rather the statements that perpetuate extinction as a legitimate way of describing the plight of the Aboriginal Tasmanians. Andrew McCann attempted something similar in his article “The Literature of Extinction”, but whereas he

focused on the desire of settler-poets to fashion a uniquely Australian literature arising out of the newly emptied landscape, I intend to concentrate on the way in which novelists maintain a discursive continuity with colonial representations of Aboriginality. It is the desire of writers to treat extinction as a theme for commentary that has the effect of creating continuities, effectively reviving a discourse which played a primary role in the colonisation of Tasmania, rather than treating it as “a monument to be described in its character-disposition” (McHoul and Grace 49). The critical distinction between reviving a discourse through commentary or confronting it as the monument to a crueller time is one that I hope this paper will make clear.

Let me turn again to *Doctor Wooreddy*. In an article for *Antipodes*, Justin MacGregor described the novel as journeying through the “space between cultures” (113) by representing history from an Aboriginal perspective and, in doing so, rendering the white colonisers as the Other. Adam Shoemaker makes similar arguments in *Mudrooroo: A Critical Study* and *Black Words, White Page*. He believes that the novel challenges expectations by pursuing a series of inversions that alter our perception of contact history and reveal the white characters as “irredeemably primitive” (*Mudrooroo: A Critical Study* 48). He also concerns himself with how the “Aboriginal past and present coexist” (*Black Words, White Page* 147) in the novel, even where no oral sources are present for Mudrooroo to draw on, a feat which he believes is a testament to Mudrooroo’s skill in incorporating “a poetic legacy of the black oral tradition into his work” (*Black Words, White Page* 153). The analyses presented by Shoemaker and MacGregor both seek to emphasise the importance of irony and inversion in unmasking the hypocrisies of colonial history – key features of the post-colonial novel – and they highlight the fundamental success *Doctor Wooreddy* has in giving an Aboriginal perspective to events heretofore known only through white historiography. But any reading of *Doctor Wooreddy* as genuinely subversive is somewhat muddled when the influence of extinction discourse on its

representation of Aboriginality is added into the equation. I would contend that, despite the arguments of Shoemaker and MacGregor and numerous other critics about *Doctor Wooreddy*'s post-colonial credentials, the novel also resurrects many aspects of the colonial-era consensus of thought around the Aboriginal Tasmanians that imagined them and their culture as doomed.

One of the most prominent extinctionist features of *Doctor Wooreddy* is its reliance on an elegiac mode of expression, the mode identified by Brantlinger as a key feature of extinctionism. As a boy, Wooreddy foresees the destruction of his people in the first chapter and this moment of enlightenment, which comes as he observes the first British ships arriving along the Derwent, deserves a closer examination:

Nothing from this time on could ever be the same – and why? Because the world was ending! [...] One day, sooner rather than later, the land would begin to fragment into smaller and smaller pieces. Clouds of fog would rise from the sea to hide what was taking place from the Great Ancestor. Then the pieces holding the last survivors of the human race would be towed out to sea where they would either drown or starve (Mudrooroo 4).

This passage summarises the version of Aboriginal Tasmanian history that has dominated public discussion since the 1800s. The idea that “the last survivors of the human race” would “either drown or starve” (Mudrooroo 4) on an island at sea is a direct reference to the internment of Aboriginal Tasmanians on Flinders Island where they suffered and died in great numbers. Wooreddy's vision provides him with both knowledge of, as well as a deep fear of, the imminent extinction of his people. But more tellingly it allows the novel to operate as an elegy for the loss of the “authentic” Tasmanian Aboriginal people, their way of life, and their language. From this point onwards, the novel goes on to fulfil Wooreddy's

vision as the tribes are slowly destroyed and “the last survivors of the human race” (Mudrooroo 4) are removed to Flinders Island. It captures the essence of the nineteenth century lament – the elegiac tone, the sense of inevitability – without ever establishing any distance from it. Rather than working simply as an expression of sadness at the needless loss of life and cultural erasure that followed settlement, it becomes implicated in the imperialist, racist discourses which helped to justify the settlement in the first place.

Doctor Wooreddy has also received attention from the critic Anne Maxwell for some of the reasons I have described. She has sought to explain where the novel’s sense of fatalism originates and what its view of Aboriginality might entail for Indigenous communities that have survived the genocide. She quantifies Wooreddy’s, and subsequently the novel’s, fatalism as an expression of melancholy (72). Maxwell’s argument is based on the theories of melancholy expounded by Freud and Kristeva:

The subject, unable to endure the loss of the love-object, in this case, the life Wooreddy had known before the arrival of Europeans, refuses to accept the loss and find a surrogate love, preferring instead to cling to the memory of the love object (72).

Wooreddy’s refusal to relinquish his attachment to the pre-European way of life leads to a detachment from reality, which then morphs into a sense of profound hopelessness in the later chapters of the novel. Maxwell argues that Wooreddy gives up on life because he found “aspects of white culture... so morally and spiritually repugnant that [he] would rather die than adopt” them (76). Her general thesis of melancholy as a psychological justification for Wooreddy’s death is, in part at least, a justification of the elegiac function of the language employed in the novel, and this is perfectly reasonable and quite persuasive. Yet, it underscores my main contention about *Doctor Wooreddy*; that it participates in the depiction of Aboriginality as doomed. If we accept that characters in the book would “rather die than

adopt” (Maxwell 76) the new European culture, then we must also accept that the book is offering a version of Aboriginal self-extinguishment. As we shall see, the notion of Aboriginal self-extinguishment has a long history in Tasmania and a long association with extinction.

What Maxwell does not take into account is the way in which settlers sought to rationalise the genocide. The notion that “savagery” acted as a self-extinguishing force was, in fact, a vital underpinning of nineteenth-century racial theory (Brantlinger 2). Often thought to be “the main or even sole factor” in extinction, it was explained by reference to the mechanism of “savage customs” like nomadism, warfare, infanticide, and cannibalism (Brantlinger 2). For others, however, it was a more mysterious force stemming from flaws in savage psychology (Brantlinger 2). Some settlers believed that the main cause behind Indigenous deaths was not violence or disease but rather the simple notion that many “had given up, had lost the will to live” (Curthoys 234). Governor Arthur presented it as a dichotomy, commenting that if the Aborigines on Flinders Island “should pine away... it is better that they should meet with their death in that way while every act of kindness is manifested towards them, than that they should fall a sacrifice to the inevitable consequences of their continued acts of outrage upon the white inhabitants” (Boyce 312). It also finds expression in Auster’s “The Tasmanian Aborigine’s Lament” as the dispossessed Aborigines “wear’st away the life with many a tear” and ask only that they be allowed to “die where (their) forefathers died” (4). What we need to recognise is that the idea of self-extinguishment through “melancholy” was used as a convenient fallacy to reduce collective responsibility for the catastrophe that accompanied colonisation. It functioned simultaneously as a means of assuaging white guilt about Aboriginal deaths and as a way to define the hierarchy of moral relations between barbaric, infanticidal blacks and civilised, god-fearing whites. It is hard to see how utilizing this same rationale in the novel constitutes a powerful statement about

Indigenous resistance to colonisation, be it historical resistance in the nineteenth century or a metafictional resistance to the colonial tendencies of Australian literature.

This leads us towards two key points which I believe need to be separated. First and foremost, genocide in the narrative of *Doctor Wooreddy* follows inarguably as a result of colonisation. As we saw earlier, even in the nineteenth century the decline in Aboriginal population numbers was generally attributed to the arrival of the British. Secondly, while *Doctor Wooreddy* places the responsibility for the genocide on the colonists, there are nonetheless some moments in the text organised around the idea of auto-genocide. Wooreddy says; “We have chosen to go away and we are going. Soon everything will end and they will have only ashes” (Mudrooroo 204). The choice he is referring to seems to be the choice of self-extinguishment, through the kind of melancholic decay argued for by Maxwell. Likewise, Wooreddy wonders why the guerrilla leader Walyer had “given up so easily and died so easily” on Flinders Island (Mudrooroo 203). The warrior Ummarrah resigns himself to death at the hands of the whites, saying to Robinson this “world is yours and you can have the ruins. I will walk with Wooreddy and forget all this” (Mudrooroo 203). The extinction that Wooreddy has foreseen is slowly coming to pass. Melancholy eventually swamps Wooreddy, Ummarrah, and Walyer and in the end they simply choose “to go away”, as Wooreddy tells us (Mudrooroo 204). Given the overtly extinctionist structure of *Doctor Wooreddy*, it is the only outcome the narrative can sustain. What we find in *Doctor Wooreddy* is a representation that mimics one of the actual modes of colonial dominance; the construction of Aboriginality as doomed.

This construction also serves another less obvious purpose. Brantlinger highlights the role played by extinction discourse in the establishment of a national identity;

If, from a psychoanalytic perspective, the identities of both individuals and nation states are founded on lacks, then the nation-founding discourse of the proleptic elegy is founded on the lack of a lack or, in other words, on a wished for lack that is instead an all-too-real obstacle to identification. Rather than absences, the primitive races such as the Australian “blackfellows” were and remain presences disturbing the process of national unification and identification (4).

Andrew McCann took up this argument and developed it further. Beginning with Brantlinger’s observation about the “wished for lack” (Brantlinger 4), McCann theorised that the desire of the settler-artist to mourn for and to eulogise the Aborigines represented a “condition on which writers could begin to fashion an intensely affective, Romantic mode of writing fixated upon landscape” (McCann 51). In his view, a lot of Australian literature is obsessed with depicting Romantic connections to the land and that this, in turn, creates a “very conventional sense of nationality” based on that connection (52). The continued presence of the Aborigines therefore becomes an impediment to the establishment of an authentically Australian, or in this case Tasmanian, identity. Until the landscape is empty, it is not authentically Tasmanian.

In recent work the desire for an empty landscape remains symptomatic of the reliance on extinction discourse as a source of authority on Aboriginality. Richard Flanagan’s *Wanting* is, on the surface, a story about “the abuse and manipulation of Aboriginal people” by the British after settlement (Lehman 32), but it also represents the ongoing engagement in fiction with the idea of an Aboriginal extinction. An appendix in the form of an author’s note follows the final page of the novel and here Flanagan takes the opportunity to clarify his position on extinction. He says:

“Although the catastrophe of colonisation led many at the time, both black and white, to believe the Tasmanian Aborigines would die out – a terrible anguish which I have tried to mirror in my novel – they did not. Today, around 16,000 Tasmanians identify as Aborigines” (256).

This is a strong statement outlining his rejection of the extinctionist position and, given this, it would be shortsighted to suggest that *Wanting* offers a knowingly colonialist account of history. Indeed, other commentators have made a similar point. Kalinda Ashton believes that his “cool exposition of the colonial imaginary” is clearly “brimming with indignation” at the “unquantifiable cost of the desolation, neglect, paternalism, and slaughter enacted on Indigenous Australians” (95). David Free argues that Flanagan’s “big problem” is that he is unable to “write about Australian history without laying on thick dollops of sarcasm from the high moral ground of the present day”, a problem that suggests Flanagan has rejected the colonialist account of Aboriginal history (“What’s Wrong”). Ashton and Free are in broad agreement that the *Wanting* is firmly anti-colonial.

Yet, the “terrible anguish” that Flanagan has “tried to mirror” in his text comes through in unexpected and uncontrollable ways, appearing throughout the structure and the imagery of the novel and colouring its conclusions. Foremost of these uncontrollable reappearances is the manner in which the historical arc of the Tasmanian extinction is used as the narrative basis for the story of Mathinna, in effect portraying her as a kind of last woman. As the central Aboriginal character in *Wanting*, Mathinna goes through a slow transformation from a “beautiful child” into something “queer, lost, belonging and not belonging”, and then on to her inevitable tragic death (Flanagan 251). We first see her as a seven year old girl for who the “earth was still new and extraordinary in its delights”, running through tall grass and feeling the “earth beneath her bare feet” (Flanagan 9). After moving out of this stage of childhood innocence (a stage resembling the imagined innocence of the pre-contact

Aborigines) Mathinna then enters a period of suffering (again, resembling the suffering of post-contact Aborigines), firstly at the hands of Sir John Franklin and then in St John's Orphanage and at Wybalenna. She is killed (the symbolic extinction in the novel) when her friend, Walter Talba Bruney, drowns her after an argument over alcohol. The parallels with the extinctionist account of Aboriginality in Tasmania are apparent. She is reduced from a state of proud and noble innocence to a corpse "crawling with so many lice it more resembled an insect nest than a human being" (Flanagan 250). The ox cart driver who finds her body offers the comment "That's how it goes" (Flanagan 251), repeating it as if to highlight the inevitability of her death, as all Aboriginal deaths are imagined to be under the terms of extinction discourse. Mathinna's story is organised around this structure, moving through these three distinct periods, and it directly mirrors the histories which for so long have provided the framework for Aboriginal Tasmanian representation in literature.

Furthermore, in keeping with McCann's argument, her death provides the empty landscape necessary for the birth of an authentically Tasmanian identity. Mathinna's body is found lying beside the road where water beaded on the "white glistening trunks that stood like pillars of salt, rising, falling, crumbling" (Flanagan 250). This imagery invites a generalisation away from the specifics of Mathinna's death and outwards into the broader picture of extinction. The symbolism of the pillar of salt and the movement of "rising, falling, crumbling" (Flanagan 250) suggests that an entire way of life is being annihilated, as is implied in God's destruction of Sodom and the punishment of Lot's disobedient wife. Similarly, the ox cart driver remembers holding Mathinna when she "had been beautiful", but even as he tries to remember her all around him "the world was darkening, the long night was only beginning" (Flanagan 251). The last image we have of Mathinna is of her "light-coloured soles disappearing into the longest night" (Flanagan 252). The notion that the "world was darkening" combined with the image of the "longest night" harkens back to the

sense of apocalypse so neatly captured in the triptych “rising, falling, crumbling” and it seems to carry through on the implications which that movement portends. It is, I would argue, deeply suggestive of the finality which extinction brings. Only when Mathinna is dead and the landscape is left empty, quiet, and “darkening” (Flanagan 252) can the novel find a satisfactory resolution.

In the author’s note to *Wanting*, Flanagan explains that the “catastrophe of colonisation” did not lead to an extinction and that Aborigines were not “absent from the subsequent unfolding of Tasmanian history” (256). He seems to be pre-empting the kinds of criticism I have identified by acknowledging the continuation of a distinct Aboriginal racial identity in Tasmania, and I think this point needs to be underscored. Flanagan has not blindly adopted the colonial rhetoric of a native-free Tasmania, nor has he attempted to write Aboriginal Tasmanians out of history. Indeed, this undeniably important book is focused on highlighting the abuse Aboriginal Tasmanians suffered at the hands of the settlers. What is more, these points are equally true of *Doctor Wooreddy* and its author, Mudrooroo. Both books probe the still-raw wounds of our foundation, or what Tony Barta has called “the basic fact of Australian history” – that is, “the appropriation of the continent by an invading people, and the dispossession with ruthless destructiveness, of another” (Curthoys 243).

I feel it is also important to point out that the other works by these authors do not display the same unquestioning approach to Tasmanian Aboriginal history. Mudrooroo’s *Master of Ghost Dreaming* series avoids many of the pitfalls by drawing aspects of Noongar religion and culture into his retelling of the Wybalenna story, and thus making something altogether new. By reducing his reliance on dogmatic versions of Tasmanian Aboriginal history in the *Master of Ghost Dreaming* books, he also reduces his reliance on its organising patterns. Likewise for Flanagan in *Gould’s Book of Fish*. While the character of Tracker Marks follows a similar trajectory to Mathinna, moving from a noble vitality through to

suffering and finally death, his story is balanced against Twopenny Sal who manages to maintain cultural independence in the face of white exploitation and violence. They circle each other in dialogue, each embodying a larger narrative.

Death of a River Guide, however, shows some tendencies towards what Marc Delrez has identified as a tendency to subvert “the settler-native dichotomy [...] in a way which is relevant to the very specific context of Tasmania where there are no longer any indigenous people of solely Aboriginal genetic inheritance” (127). This seems to accord with the views Flangan puts forward in a 2002 article for *The Guardian*:

Could it be that in the merge of Aborigine and convict cultures that occurred in Tasmania something else came into being, neither European nor Aborigine, but something different in its own terms? And is it possible that the indigenous people of Tasmania are unique in ways not accurately described by the word Aborigine, that are mocked by the word black? (“The Lost Tribe”).

Again, while Flangan broadly rejects an extinctionist position in both the *Guardian* article and *Death of a River Guide*, he nonetheless seems to want to suggest that Aboriginality has been subsumed in the wider mix of Tasmanian society.

Regardless of how we read other works by these authors – and clearly there are different possible interpretations for them – it remains the case that *Wanting* and *Doctor Wooreddy* provide pertinent examples of the power extinction discourse continues to exert over our representations of Aboriginality. In trying to mirror the “catastrophe of colonisation” (Flanagan 256), these novels make no distinction between confronting the discourse as a monument to the crueller times which created it or reviving it by enacting some of its fundamental structures. It is a problem which occupies the very centre of postcolonial studies, as researchers like Edward Said, Frantz Fanon, and Homi Bhabha have demonstrated over the

decades. It speaks to the need for an ongoing engagement with the sources of the “colonising imperative” that Langton has outlined, working from the playbooks of Fanon, Said and others, and the importance of a strong anti-colonial foundation for our national literature.

Indeed, if we take this anti-colonial approach to its logical limit, we also find some problems with the formation of Brantlinger’s account of extinctionism in Tasmania. Antionette Burton contends that “local counter discourses” are mostly overlooked in Brantlinger’s analysis of the ways extinctionism was mobilised in the communities where it found support, and this an insight borne out by the evidence for a counter discourse in Tasmania (483). In 1871, five years before the death of Trukanini, the Islander community in Bass Strait was pressing upon the government their claims for exclusive access to the muttonbird rookeries on Chappell and Big Dog islands (Ryan 227). The implication is that the Islander community saw themselves as the rightful possessors of both the land and the resources of the Straits islands and were prepared to argue for their existence as a distinct people. The Islanders did not see themselves as a dying race, but rather saw the need to fight for a secure and independent future. This was best done by stressing their own Aboriginality.

Marcia Langton has written at length about the issue of Aboriginal self-representation of this kind, and the ways at which models of Aboriginality are arrived. For Langton, Aboriginality is best conceived of as a constantly shifting mode of being, remade on the fly through the interactions of authors with Aboriginal culture (81). These “intersubjective exchanges”, as she calls them, provide individuals with a space to “test imagined models of the other, repeatedly adjusting the models as responses are processed to find some satisfactory way of comprehending the other” (83). Aboriginality, under this view, is an intersubjectivity defined by the ongoing processes of representation and interpretation (81). The novels *Doctor Wooreddy* and *Wanting* are deeply engaged in the process of defining Aboriginality in Tasmania and so it should come as some concern that they bear the

hallmarks of the “colonising imperative” which extinction represents (Langton 7). The persistence of extinction as an idea and the investment that writers and readers have placed in it continues to influence the imagined model of Tasmanian Aboriginality. It continues to posit the erroneous notion that contemporary Aboriginal identity is fraudulent.

But it is also the case that other authors are vigorously testing this model, people like Robert Edric in his book *Elysium*. His book inverts the story of the historical last man, William Lanne, by working with the premise that he was not, in fact, the last man. In doing this, Edric creates a number of opportunities in his novel to subvert and distort the postulations of extinction discourse while at the same time presenting his own vision of Aboriginality as a lived and living identity. Similarly, Brian Castro’s *Drift* reveals the genocidal intentions hidden behind the term “hybrid” and the dark history of inter-racial sexual violence that occurred in Tasmania. Throughout this challenging, often esoteric text, Castro examines the ways in which discourses of racial biology sometimes function to preclude access to Indigenous cultural and historical consciousness for the descendants of Aborigines. It is a work intimately involved in the debate about extinctionism, committed to overturning the outmoded conclusion that Aboriginality ended with Trukanini. Books such as these constitute the other side of the conversation about Aboriginality in Tasmanian fiction. They extend and enlarge the parameters of what can be tackled in fiction, and improve on the existing methods fiction writers have available to them to challenge the “colonising imperative in Australian art” (Langton 7).

So the question this paper has been asking is this; what are the meanings being produced about Tasmanian Aboriginality by literature? When we look closely at the meanings produced by the books discussed here, it is possible that in some ways they are serving to either delegitimise contemporary community identity or perpetuate the grand

historical lie of extinction. While the reality of a vibrant Aboriginal community in Tasmania offers a resounding rebuttal to the notion of an extinction, nonetheless the powerful last-of-their-tribe narratives that the deaths of William Lanne and Trukanini have provided form the basis for a discourse that has unduly occupied the pages of literature and poetry since the nineteenth century. This attests to the need to explore more fully the shortcomings, as well as the potential, of fictional narratives as a means of explaining what it means to be Aboriginal. Langton has provided a useful framework for understanding the process which produces these imagined models of Indigenous identity. Writers such as Edric and Castro have criticised the dominant extinctionist model of Tasmanian Aboriginality through their fiction, and this paper continues that process through a more formal critical approach. However, it is not only the models of Indigenous identity which must be critiqued, but also the mechanism for the production of meaning itself – the discourse of extinction – which requires greater scrutiny if we are to arrive at more appropriate representations.

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