Exploring Non-human Ethics in Linda Hogan's *Power* and Timothy Morton's *Ecology without Nature*

Peter I-min Huang
English Department, Tamkang University
151 Ying Chuan Road, Tamsui, Taipei, Taiwan
E-mail: peter@mail.tku.edu.tw

Abstract In *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (2007), Timothy Morton introduces a term that is well known among ecocritics: "dark ecology." He tells us that "dark ecology" is a "melancholy ethics," or the "refusal to digest the object into an ideal form," and an acceptance and even a love of "the thing as thing." In effect, this preserves the artificiality of the other and does not try to naturalize or collapse the other's "otherness." It also assumes there is no exit from what is not us (or what we believe or construct as "not us"). It does not attempt a "sadistic" distance from any object or thing or any human or nonhuman being and it does not in effect understand or regard these entities only in "aesthetic" terms. It is a commitment to recognizing that acceptance and love are as much about loss and separation as about amalgamation and unity, and it is a commitment that Morton brings to bear on his ecocritical arguments in defense of what many of us think of as second to humans: nonhuman beings. I compare Morton's "melancholy ethics" to posthumanism scholar Cary Wolfe's reference to the Derridean notion of vulnerability. The latter is similar to Morton's melancholy ethics insofar as both concern the issue of the shared suffering between human and non-humans. I bring Morton's term and Derrida's notion of vulnerability together in my discussion of the novel *Power* (1998) by the renowned Native American writer, Linda Hogan, a novel that sheds new light on the themes of judgment and sacrifice and proposes a non-human perspective of ethics.
Key words Timothy Morton; Linda Hogan; *Power;* dark ecology; melancholy ethics; environmental racism; vulnerability; Native American literature

In *Ecology without Nature,* Timothy Morton proposes the concept of dark ecology, and at its core a "melancholy ethics." For Morton, dark ecology is based upon a

refusal to "digest the object into an ideal form" (195). His dark ecology cautions against the intoxicating belief that "there is a 'thing' called nature that is 'out there' beyond us," against dwelling in its "bewildering quality of ambience" (183). Morton argues that dark ecology serves as a "halt" signal, to stop us from succumbing to "Romanticisms that follow a Hegelian dialectic," which achieve a reconciliation of the self to the other by turning the other into the self in disguise (196). In other words, dark ecology aims to *not* "turn the other into the self," but instead, leave things the way they are (196). The ecological ethics promoted by dark ecology, according to Morton, urges us to "love the replicant *as* replicant, and not as potential full subject" (196). On one hand, the melancholy ethics of dark ecology challenges us to appreciate "what in us is most objectified, the 'thousand thousand slimy things'" (196), and on the other hand it asks us to "[l]ove the thing *as* thing" (196).

Morton argues there are two premises of this ethical choice: 1) we choose to "preserve the artificiality of the other and do not try to naturalize or collapse otherness"; 2) we accept that there is no exit from "the other" and all of its toxic aspects. "The other" includes the earth itself. Since there is no exit from the earth, including the polluted worlds of this earth, we should not strive for "a sadistic/aesthetic distance" from it (196). We should stay in "the mud" instead of trying to pull ourselves out of it (196). We should not try to escape into a pure and pristine unpolluted world that does not exist.

Further, Morton argues that if we wish to care for the earth and all of its creatures, we need to acknowledge "the monstrosity at the heart of the idea of nature" (195). Dark ecology's melancholy ethics urges us to embrace this aspect of nature, "to love" what we think of as "disgusting, inert, and meaningless" (195). As he also argues, "[w]e ourselves are 'tackily' made of bits and pieces of stuff" (195) and the "most ethical act we can commit is to love 'the other' precisely in [its] artificiality, rather than seeking to prove [its] naturalness and authenticity" (195). What is worthy of our notice here is that Morton is implicitly critiquing an environmental thinking that associates with the movement of deep ecology. As he argues, this kind of thinking does not respect the natural world as it really is; rather, it sees reality as "standing in for *an idea* of the natural" (195; emphasis mine). For Morton, nature must be accepted with all of "its stitches…showing" (194). Morton's "dark ecology" is inspired by Freud's psychoanalysis of melancholy as well as by the movement of deep ecology. For Freud, melancholy is as "an irreducible component of subjectivity," or "a refusal to digest the object, a sticking in the throat, an introjection" (186). In this sense, dark ecology is based upon "negative desire rather than positive fulfillment" (186); it calls attention to aporia, the refusal to digest the idea of the other. Here, the other, including "nature," is "*not* a mirror of our mind" (186; emphasis original); and "[t]o truly love

nature [is] to love what is nonidentical with us" (185). For Morton, then, dark ecology also corresponds to Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject. It urges us to address the issues of "pollution, miasma, slime; things that glisten, schlup, and decay" (159) and it insists upon the need to "acknowledge irreducible otherness" (151).

I turn now to a novel, *Power* (1988), by the Native American writer Linda Hogan. Morton's dark ecology and melancholy ethics can serve to help readers to ecocritically understand this novel, about the hunting of an endangered animal species — the Florida panther. Hogan grapples with difficult decisions being faced by animal rights activists who respect the wish of indigenous peoples to preserve their traditional hunting practices. She is interested in both mainstream animal rights arguments calling for the abolition of the hunting of this animal and Native American arguments calling for the right to continue the hunting of it. She does not provide answers to the questions she raises but the questions that she does raise tie to Morton's concepts of dark ecology and melancholy ethics and these offer insights into the ethical dilemma at the heart of her novel.

Readers may be struck by the irreducible otherness of the Florida panther when they read *Power*. Hogan describes this animal as a being of tremendous mystery and enchantment. In the Native American Taiga language, the Florida panther is called Sisa. *Power's* narrator, a 16-year-old girl named Omishto (meaning "the Watcher") describes the panther as a sacred, mysterious animal. For many years she has never seen it. However, she has heard its cry, which is so loud she believes it can "bring down the world" (15). She also knows that her friend, Ama Eaton, has hunted and killed the Sisa. Omishto calls Ama by the nickname "aunt who loves the panther" (16) because although Ama has hunted the Sisa, she worships this animal and believes that it is "our [the Sisa's] one ally in this life" (16). She tells Omishto that when she was "born, an animal was born alongside of her to give her strength" throughout her life (16). This animal is the Sisa. She also tells Omishto that the Sisa is now endangered and sick because of humans' damage to its environment. In the evenings, searching for the Sisa, she "look[s] out in the darkness" (16). When she sees the Sisa, she and the other animal "exchange glances," and "see into each other's eyes" (16).

One day, Ama tells Omishto that she had a dream about the Sisa. It appeared to her in the form of a human, standing on two feet, and it beckoned her to follow it. As she did so, she saw that it was terribly emaciated and suffering from an illness. She tells Omishto that her heart is broken to pieces by this vision (24). As Omishto listens to Ama narrate the dream, "a patch of sharp sunlight cuts through the clouds and lays itself down on the road and the plants all around [the two women] start rattling in the light" (24). Also a "strange-smelling wind…begins to blow in" (24). It is "as if the world is also listening to Ama's words" (24). For the indigenous people, the wind is a

living force. It "enters a person at birth, stays with a person all through his or her life, and connects him or her to every other creature" (28). Taiga people call the wind "Oni," meaning God. For Taiga people, Oni is a force like God, "everywhere, unseen" (41). "It is a power every bit as strong as gravity, as strong as a sun you can't look at but know is there," Hogan writes, "a breathing, ceaseless God, a power known and watched over by the panther people" (178). This scene brings to mind what Morton refers to as the otherness that cannot be collapsed or digested, or a non-identical otherness. We are confronted by a terrible condition, caused to "the other" of animals by ourselves. We are also connected to this "other" according to what Morton calls "dark ecology" and what in Native American culture is inseparable from us.

According to another Taiga legend, Oni is the name of the owner of wind, and it is the word that the Sisa speaks to help "breathe" life into humans. It "cries out [this word] in the terrifying and beautiful dead of night where all the small animals break twigs, scurry, and hide" (182). Thus, the Sisa is considered sacred as "the one who first spoke it" (178) and the Taiga consider it an animal god and humans its little brothers and sisters. The Sisa keeps her eye on them to "keep them safe" (192). As the same time, the Taiga do not underestimate or euphemize the radical otherness of the Sisa: "The cat believes God has eyes that shine in the night. God has scales and fur, claws and sharp teeth, a long tail. God's shadow lies down on the ground like dust" (191).

In the world that Hogan constructs, animals actually have souls and power and can help humans. They also have power to kill and destroy humans. Omishto tells Ama another story, a story that had been told to her by her mother, about how a "red wolf came and took her home" (29). Her mother recounts how she had a fight with Herm, her husband, and he drove her to the woods and threw her out of the car during a violent storm. She was close to despair at finding her way out of the woods when a red wolf appeared and led her home. This same story is verified by two other Taiga women, Janie Soto and Annie Hide, who also tell Ama that animals teach humans about the woods, and songs to "renew the broken world" (29).

After Ama dreams of the sick and emaciated Sisa, she tells Omishto to follow her to hunt and kill the Sisa. Omishto is puzzled by Ama's decision. Ama tells her that she cannot endure such a beautiful and powerful animal to "die by poison or be hit by a car like the others" (62). She also knows that the Sisa is suffering greatly. She tells Omishto that they have to kill the Sisa because "Letting it die the way it is dying is worse" (62). Hogan here raises the question of an animal killing that is "both grace and doom, right and wrong" (62) and she does not provide an answer except to strongly suggest that the humans who are ultimately responsible for the death of the Sisa are not Ama or her people.

In another scene in the novel, there is a vivid description of Ama tracking and killing the panther. Under the cover of trees, she and Omishto see the cat first standing and then crouching at a river bank to drink water. Omishto can see the panther as clear "as the moon that shines out between clouds" (63). Omishto observes, "It is vulnerable and beautiful and bare. I hold still and watch it with fascination" (63). At this critical moment, Omishto reflects that "[i]t is an easy shot, but Ama, too, only watches. She could shoot it but she doesn't take it now when she can, when it's so easy" (63). Ama hesitates at this moment because of her strong love and caring for the animal. Also, she wants to make sure that the panther knows her love and trust. Omishto "breathe[s] and stand[s] and watch[es] it" (63), bewitched and awed by the animal's dignity and beauty. Describing it through Omishto's eyes, Hogan writes, "So beautiful, as it raises its head and seems to look right at me, its eyes turning to light, round and glinting, its body all animal and lean muscle, its face so thin" (63).

Hogan portrays the killing as an attempt by Ama to remember and respect her people's sacred hunting of the Sisa even as she knows that this tradition has been all but destroyed. The panther seems to know they are following it and it seems as if there is a mutual trust between them. The panther does not run away nor hide itself, but walks slowly as if to make sure that Ama and Omishto follow it. When it plunges into the water and swims across to the other side, Ama also "dips and submerges her whole body like she's being baptized, holding the rifle out of the water" (63). For the narrator, the panther seems to be "calling us forward" (64). He "looks back at us from time to time" and "is calm" (64). At times, it vanishes, but "its eye gives off a light," which is "its only outcry," "its testimony, its voice, its words" (64).

Ama's remark, "These cats are like ghosts" (64), acknowledges the otherness of the panther. The raw animality and cruelty of the panther are also evoked in a scene where Ama and Omishto watch the Sisa stalk and kill a deer. A lone deer bursts out from under a tree and then vanishes. Trying to breathe without making any sound, Omishto hears a cry in the darkness. Before long, there is silence. When two women next see the panther, it has taken shelter under the trees. It is breathing and looking toward them and it is also "guarding the dead deer…claiming it" (65).

Not long after the above mentioned events, Ama hunts for the panther again, "like a person with a calling," and finds it (67). It is "[a]s if the panther is a place and it holds her, as if they've always known and lived inside one another" (67). After she kills the Sisa, Omishto approaches Ama. She tells her: "You have killed yourself, Ama" (67). Ama "kneels down and holds the Sisa like a child in her arms, lifts it up as if it weighs nothing, so the sky can see it, like an offering" (69). Stricken with grief, she sees herself in the dead panther, "diminished and endangered," and "a poor woman in a cut-up land," she cries (69) The once beautiful, large, and powerful

animal was reduced to skin and bones in the last months of its life.

In the chapter titled "Judgment," Hogan contrasts judgment and sacrifice. She criticizes Christianity for putting too much emphasis upon judgment. She writes, "theirs is a spare God, short on love, thin on compassion, strong on judgment" (102). Ama and Omishto are held completely accountable for the killing of the protected species of Florida panther. At school, where the Florida panther is the school mascot, Omishto's white classmates call her a "Cat Killer" and scrawl "Killer" on her locker (105). As Hogan writes about many non-Native Americans, "The idea of the panther is loved while the animal itself is hated, unwanted" (105). She points to the irony that many people love the idea of the Florida panther but in destroying its natural habitats, in poisoning its hunting grounds, in building roads through its woods, in actuality they don't care about the real animal. Morton insists that the ecological-ethical act is to "let go of the idea of Nature, the one thing that maintains an aesthetic distance between us and them, us and it, us and 'over there'" (Morton 204).

The people who judge Ama harshly as a killer are people who embrace the idea of animals but do not take responsibility for endangering and threatening them. They maintain an aesthetic distance from the real animal. Unlike Ama, they like the other of "the animal" as an abstract idea, but not as a real animal that Ama cares for and loves. At the trial of Ama, Omishto testifies to the court that Ama knew the Sisa for many years and had often tried to protect it including when some boys tried to kill it. She tells the court that Ama's killing of the Sisa was an act of compassion not senselessness. As she also testifies, the killing of the Sisa would be even more than an act of compassion in previous times. In Taiga belief, a panther once asked Panther Woman to kill it in order to restore the dying world. It called for its sacrifice not so that another world would replace it but so that the present world would continue.

In *What Is Posthumanism,* Cary Wolfe cites Cora Diamond's article "Injustice and Animals" to argue that "the fundamental question of *justice* issues from an essentially different conceptual realm from the question of 'right'" (73; emphasis original). According to Wolfe, Diamond's argument is that when issues of justice and injustice are framed in terms of rights, they are "distorted and trivialized" (73). For Diamond, the language of rights still "bears the imprint of the context in which it was shaped: Roman law and its codification of *property* rights — not least, of course, property rights over slaves" (qtd. in Wolfe 73; emphasis original). As Wolfe paraphrases this part of her argument, the "question of justice cannot be reduced to the question of the fairness or unfairness of a share" (73). As Wolfe reads Diamond's arguments further, she criticizes the separation of justice from compassion, love and pity in contemporary moral theory (75). What the rights tradition misses is that the "capacity to respond to injustice as injustice" depends not on working out the abstract

"good," but on "a recognition of *our own* vulnerability," a recognition usually avoided by rights-oriented thinking (74). The "loving attention to another being, a possible victim of injustice, is essential to any understanding of the evil of injustice" (Diamond qtd. in Wolfe 75).

Elaborating further on Diamond's ideas, Wolfe refers to Derrida's concept of vulnerability as a fundamental ethical bond between human and non-human animals. Wolfe points out that in his work on ethics and nonhuman others, Derrida repeatedly returned to Jeremy Bentham's question about nonhuman animals: "Can they suffer?" (81). Whereas most philosophers pose the question of the animal in terms of either the capacity for thought or language, Bentham reframed of the problem in terms of suffering, or of non-being-able, a condition that Derrida characterizes in turn as "vulnerability" or "finitude" (qtd. in Wolfe 81). Derrida asks, "What of the vulnerability felt on the basis of this inability?" (qtd. in Wolfe 81). He continues, "What is this non-power at the heart of power?" (qtd. in Wolfe 81) As Wolfe argues, mortality or "finitude we share with animals is the most radical means of thinking that involves the experience of compassion" (81).

Both Wolfe and Diamond argue that vulnerability, mortality and compassion "lie at the core of the question of ethics: not just mere kindness but *justice*" (Wolfe 81; emphasis original). As Wolfe points out, Derrida also had argued for the necessity of experiencing compassion to open "the immense question of pathos" and "of suffering, pity and compassion" (Wolfe 81). Compassion reflects on the sharing of suffering among the living, which for Derrida is the basis of ethics. Thus for Wolfe and Diamond, animal rights movements "awaken us to our responsibilities and our obligations with respect to the living in general, and precisely to this fundamental compassion" (82).

Morton's melancholy ethics is similar to what Wolfe draws from Derrida's concept of vulnerability. It points to the shared suffering and pain of all living things and the need for compassion for the suffering. In *Power,* after Ama kills the panther, Omishto says that the police will ask her to provide information, not because "they care but because it's law, because you can't kill one of them" (72). In the trial the judge asks a biologist if the wild cat that Ama killed is the species of Florida panther and not another wild cat species. If it is not, Ama is "innocent." What the state and its representatives are concerned about is an abstract idea of an endangered species, not the evil or injustice committed to another being or animal. Hogan suggests that Ama's motive for killing the sickly panther is obviously love and compassion when she writes that "Ama cries just to look at it" (69). Her crying can be interpreted through Derrida's ethics of vulnerability, which stresses the shared nature of pain and suffering between humans and animals. Hogan writes: "Now it is just like her, like the woman

who wears boy's old shoes because she's poor and they are cheaper" (69). Once the panthers "were beautiful and large and powerful," but now this sickly panther is thin, very thin, with moss and leaves on its back. It grieves Ama so terribly to see it as a pitiful thing that she kills it — out of her strong love, worship and compassion, making it a ritual of sacrifice.The ecocritic Greg Garrard points out that the history of the colonization of the North American continent must be seen from ecological as well as postcolonialist perspective. He does so by citing the work of another ecocritic, Alfred Crosby. As he notes, Crosby calls European colonialism a form of "ecological imperialism" (qtd. in Garrard 123). The Anglo-European colonization of North America beginning in the fifteenth century "amounted to an 'ecocidal' campaign to exhaust and refashion whole habitats" (Garrard 123). Today, that campaign is still taking its course. "60 percent of African Americans and Latinos and more than 50 percent of Asian/Pacific Islanders and Native Americans" live in places contaminated by at least one uncontrolled toxic waste site (Garrard 128). As Garrard also notes, this history is also studied under the area of ecocriticism as "environmental racism." In *Power,* Hogan identifies Anglo-European colonizers of North America as violators of the land as well as its people. She asks: "Would they let me tell that sugarcane and cattle and white houses with red roofs had killed the land and the panther people?" (114) For her, the cattle and houses are the "beginning of this crime and… their makers remain unjudged and untried" (114). The courthouse is a divided world, "separated by scars and legal theft," where "the kudzu plants from the old world cover this beautiful ground with foreign, choking vines" (118).

Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin analogize the ties between racism and speciesism in an important study entitled *Postcolonial Ecocriticism*. At the time of the publication of this study, they noted that "its virtual absence" about the connections between racism and speciesism (148), including the connections between racism and speciesism in the specific context of Europeans obsession with cannibalism and depiction of indigenous peoples as cannibalistic. The "ultimate crime," it was one of the most potent epithets within a discourse of othering and constituted "irrefutable evidence of an unregenerate animal savagery" (170). In *Power,* Ama's prosecutor asks her if she adheres to the traditional belief that Taiga people are closely related to the panthers. When she answers, "Yes. We are," the prosecutor attempts to entrap her, accusing her of cannibalism by asking, "Would you kill your own kinfolk?" Ama replies, "No sir." (134). Huggan and Tiffin here point to the hypocrisy of the white people who condemn the killing of a wild animal but are completely insensitive to the lives of the millions of animals that are killed in industrial animal farming, animals whose flesh they consume daily.

Power critiques animal killing in the context of a Native American who kills

an endangered animal to end its suffering and thus is scapegoated by non-Native Americans when Hogan writes that "Ama is a scapegoat"(167). Before their law, United States federal law, she is rejected as an animal: "the jurors study her, a woman so unlike them as to exist in another world, another time. She is their animal" (136). As Hogan makes clear, for Ama, there is no moral hierarchical difference between the human and the animal as there is no moral hierarchical difference between non-Native American and Native American peoples. When it comes to suffering and vulnerability, there are no boundaries between humans and non-humans. Ama both loves and worships the panther she kills. As Wolfe might argue, Derrida's concept of vulnerability would support the argument that when we recognize the vulnerability and the finitude that we share with the other of "the animal," we will no longer see it as "the other." On the other hand, as Morton argues, it is important to recognize the radical difference of "the other" because not to do so destroys it. *Power* does not end with much hope with regard to this issue. Omishto remarks: "we are no longer close to the big lake because it's been drained and stolen" (234). Yet, there is some hope. Omishto still feels the wind. It "stirs in the trees" and "someone sings the song that says the world will go on living" (234-5).

Works Cited

Garrard, Greg. *Ecocriticism.* London: Routledge, 2004.

Hogan, Linda. *Power.* New York: Norton, 1998.

Huggan, Graham & Tiffin, Helen. *Postcolonial Ecocriticism.* London: Routledge, 2010.

Morton, Timothy. *Ecology without Nature.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 2007.

Wolfe, Cary. *What Is Posthumanism?* Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2010.

责任编辑：柏　灵