

# (Partner) Hunting in Rick Bass' 'Antlers': Biocentrism vs. Anthropocentrism Embedded in Environmentalism

Ida Hagh Møller 

'We continued down the road in silence [...] a fine target for anyone who might not have understood that we weren't wild animals' (Bass, 'Antlers' 75). With these last words of the short story 'Antlers' the author Rick Bass states a point that sums up his whole perspective: humans are not supposed to be the object of a hunt. We are not 'wild animals.' Implicitly these words then suggest that 'wild animals' are supposed to be targeted. Rick Bass is besides being known for his literature commonly known for practicing and defending wildlife hunting. Because the author's attitude towards hunting is commonly known it can when juxtaposed to different themes be used as a means of comparison and it will in this paper be used as a tool for analysing Bass' view on contemporary social behaviour by juxtaposing human social roles to the roles of the hunter and the prey. This paper will argue that Rick Bass through a hunting allegory expresses a critique of absent-mindedness in contemporary society that effects our relations to other humans and creates limits for our spiritual wellbeing. It will argue that Bass juxtaposes nature and love. Additionally, based on an analysis of Bass' understanding of equality it will question the priorities of his ideologies and argue that Bass advocates humanist and speciesist beliefs. The analysis of this paper deliberately assumes that Bass touches upon both feminism and ecologism but disagrees with the notion of ecofeminism as a concept. Bass purposely draws a line in the narrative but by implicit conclusion it does not recognise the connection between non-human animals and female human animals. Initially, in order to lead this paper's argumentation, it is fundamental firstly to establish the usage of the term 'ecofeminism' and secondly to account for Bass' presumed feminism, in order to compare and elucidate his intention. In the following paragraphs, the term will be accounted for in its significance to this paper and therefore for now the main claim of ecofeminism will be

sufficient to establish common ground: Ecofeminism is in short claiming a link between patriarchal society's oppression of respectively women, nature and nonhuman animals.

In 'Antlers' Bass plays with the concept of hunting by creating a circle of interrelations in which the valley's men, including Randy and the narrator, all hunt non-human animals and Suzie metaphorically hunts human animals. This circle functions to depict the purpose of the whole narrative as seemingly intended by Bass. It symbolises the course of nature. In the article 'Why I hunt' Bass himself explains: '[...] it is never the hunter who is in control, but always the hunted, in that the prey directs the predator's movements. The hunted shapes the hunter; the pursuit and evasion of predator and prey are but shadows of the same desire.' (Bass, 'Why I Hunt') In 'Antlers' Suzie 'hunts' the men wherefore the men according to Bass 'shapes' Suzie. However, as later analysis will suggest the genders of the valley are not to be read as males opposite female but rather as humans. In this case it means that only humanity in general has shaped Suzie. It is, however, Suzie who has 'shaped' Randy and metaphorically pursued to emasculate him by making him the only man unworthy of herself. In this hunting allegory Suzie is picking, choosing, playing with and leaving the men. She is not to be seen as the prey. Thus, this analysis shows a clear distinction from ecofeminism.

One of the main beliefs behind the philosophy of ecofeminism is as previously touched upon that male domination and patriarchal society has caused nature correspondingly to women to be oppressed and to suffer from consequences of said oppression. As Jon Littlefield observes:

While a broad range of views exist in the ecofeminist paradigm, they tend to center around an observation that men have historically used their dominion over women and nature to create patriarchal societies, and that such societies foster social structures and behavioral norms that serve to maintain male advantage over females and the natural world. (98)

This paper aims to demonstrate how Bass challenges this claim in 'Antlers' in relation to women and to 'the natural world' but noteworthily excludes nonhuman animals. To illustrate Bass gives nature the force to influence humans and thereby test the idea of it being the other way around:

[...] in this one valley, almost everyone is a hunter. It is not the peer pressure of the local culture that recruits us into hunting, nor even necessarily the economic boon of a few hundred pounds of meat in a cash-poor society. Rather, it is the terrain itself, and one's gradual integration into it, that summons the hunter. [...] This wild and powerful landscape sculpts us like

clay. I don't find such sculpting an affront to the human spirit, but instead, wonderful testimony to our pliability, our ability to adapt to a place. (Bass, 'Why I Hunt')

With several descriptions such as this Bass rhetorically defends hunting by making nature metaphorically put a rifle into the hands of the hunter. This is nonfiction and evidently represents Bass' perspective. The nonfictional valley which Bass and his wife have settled in nevertheless gives strong connotations to the valley in 'Antlers'. This is an observation which supports a logical basis for reading Bass' perspective in 'Antlers' and in his nonfictional texts in parallel and to compare them.

In several passages hunting seems to be an allegory of love in 'Antlers'. At two different occasions Randy and Suzie, respectively, claim a lack of control over themselves: 'I know it's cruel, but I can't help it, I have to do it' and 'I can't stand to be alone [...] I'm just scared, jumpy. I can't help it.' (Bass, 'Antlers' 72, 73) Randy's claims he cannot help but bow-hunt and Suzie cannot stand being alone. This repetition in language creates a coherence that will be subject of analysis in relation to love and hunting in 'Antlers'. Bass uses hunting as an allegory for intimacy:

Randy is so good at what he does it makes us jealous. [...] The others of us look at it as being much fairer than hunting with a rifle, because you have to get so close to the animal to get a good shot [...] Close enough to hear the intakes of breath. Close enough to be fair. But Suzie doesn't see it that way. She will serve Randy his drinks and chat with him [...] but her face is blank, her smiles stiff. (Bass, 'Antlers' 68)

This passage emphasizes closeness, or in another word: intimacy. It also symbolizes a contrast between characters and elucidates the purpose of the allegory. The way Suzie 'hunts' she avoids closeness and escapes every relationship within a couple of months. The way Randy hunts is intense, it embraces closeness and has severe consequences for the animal involved. "What do you think it feels like?" Suzie once asked me [...] "to run around with an arrow in your heart, knowing you're going to die for it?" She was red-faced, self-righteous' (Bass, 'Antlers' 72). Suzie's opposition is literally a dissociation from bowhunting. This dissociation seems to symbolize a broader reluctance and sub-sequential failure to achieve closeness caused by the unwillingness to 'run around with an arrow in your heart'. In all probability however, Bass aims to depict a corresponding failure to achieve closeness to nature. Bass argues occasionally that hunting 'brings him closer to nature' (Bass, 'Why I Hunt'). Bass attributes not

only nature but specifically the 'biota' of the valley, suggesting that he is not neglecting the matter of life. He expresses an interest in said biota:

The biota of the Yaak is the ecological equivalent of a Russian novel. It is a greatness, an ecological heritage, which we still have, barely, in the possession of public ownership. Unlike the Russian novels, however, which are preserved forever in libraries, the last roadless wildlands of the Yaak are not preserved: there is no guarantee of their continued survival; nor of the survival of that wildness, that art, which exists between our imaginations and the landscape. The eagles and lions, bears and wolves, owls and hawks, are not the only hunters in this northern landscape [...] (Bass, 'Landscape and Imagination')

In analyzing a comment such as the above one can wonder about the choice of the word 'biota' which ordinarily includes living creatures such as animals. Bass, however, emphasizes raw nature and the importance of preserving the 'wildlands' rather than not interfering with the conscious-living-beings of said biota. His tendency not to discriminate human interference from natural evolution will be further examined.

Still the question remains whether 'Antlers' is a literary product of a feminist writer. On one hand it seems that Bass implicitly states that the valley is not a patriarchal society. Firstly by stating that there is not major difference between the genders: 'She understands that everyone hunts here, men and the women alike, she knows we love the animals, but that for one or two months out of the year we also love to hunt them' (Bass, 'Antlers' 68) and secondly with the words 'if there was one thing Suzie hated, it was that man-woman stuff' (Bass, 'Antlers' 71). This wording frames the issue of gender discrimination as ridiculous, undermining the theme of discrimination either to deny its existence or with a feminist agenda: to emphasize the ridiculousness of inequality. Alternatively, an analysis of the characters and their agency demonstrates that Suzie embodies a matriarch in the sense of being able to socially dominate a society and a narrative which is dominated in numbers by male characters. Her matriarchal agency reaches not a political point, she does not affect the hunting tradition, but in a society where Bass according to this analysis pursues 'insignificance' between genders in general the political authority is not a theme. Analyzing Suzie as a matriarch is only implausible had Suzie not had the agency she possesses in the story: being the predator in the hunting allegory. Nevertheless, in said analysis Suzie might as well be male if it was not statistically unrealistic that the whole population of the valley were homosexuals. Thus, it is neither patriarchy nor matriarchy but rather subjecthood that

most clearly elucidates Bass' point. In 'Antlers' every human hunts, hence, every human is equally given subjecthood. That Bass gives every human character this agency suggests that Bass believes that humans need to see themselves as subject to feel substantial in the world, which clarifies the anthropocentrism behind his perspective on hunting. Subsequently, the analysis of sexism sheds light upon a different spectrum of (perhaps intersectional) discrimination: speciesism.

Marti Kheel offers 'An Ecofeminist Critique of Hunting' (30) that touches upon and opposes exactly the framing Bass provides hunting with in his perspective as a speciesist environmentalist. Kheel suggests several frames of her own aimed at depicting hunting as nothing but 'an act of violence' (Kheel 30). Initially she questions and compares the idea of hunting as relatively a sport and a play. Her argumentation is based on the following issue: 'A growing number of hunters eschew the word "sport hunting," claiming that they hunt for "ecological" or "spiritual" reasons, not merely for "sport"' (30). She pursues 'to demonstrate that these differences are not as pronounced as many hunters would have us believe'. (30) More specifically in relation to Bass and 'Antlers' Kheel introduces the categories 'the happy hunter' who is generally anthropocentric (33) and hunts for his own enjoyment and the 'holist hunters' whom she explains hunt for what they call ecological needs:

For holist hunters, it is not the hunter who is the agent of death, but rather nature or ecology. The hunter is merely carrying out nature's inexorable directives, a participant in a 'drama' not of his own making. The violence that hunting inflicts merely expresses the reality of violence in the natural world and thus is beyond ethical reproach. (35)

Her theory behind the categories corresponds to some explanation from Bass on his own reasons for hunting, e.g. the previously mentioned claim: "This wild and powerful landscape sculpts us like clay" as a response to why nearly every citizen of the valley hunts (Bass, 'Why I Hunt'). Likewise, in 'Antlers' Bass frames hunting as a primal instinct: "I know it's cruel, but I can't help it, I have to do it" (Bass, 'Antlers' 72) Bass frames hunting as a primal instinct, something we cannot avoid. As a response Suzie expresses a double-standard opinion on eating meat while being against hunting: 'Suzie doesn't approve of hunting in any form "That's what cattle are for" she said one day' (Bass, 'Antlers' 68). Through Suzie Bass aims to emphasise the naivety in closing our eyes to the industrial meat market while criticising wildlife hunting. The moral nevertheless is obviously not to sympathize with Suzie but to sympathize with the wildlife hunter.

Moreover, Kheel argues that ‘Holist hunters, however, overlook the vast differences between human predation and natural predation’ (36), a claim which Bass’ own words again support in talking about his own reasons for hunting. This supports a previous claim on Bass denying a difference between human interference and the course of nature:

[...] it is never the hunter who is in control, but always the hunted, in that the prey directs the predator's movements. The hunted shapes the hunter; the pursuit and evasion of predator and prey are but shadows of the same desire. The thrush wants to remain a thrush. The goshawk wants to consume the thrush and in doing so, partly become the thrush-to take its flesh into its flesh.  
(Bass, ‘Why I Hunt’)

The purpose of these claims regarding Bass’ attitude is to argue that one cannot in this analysis avoid reading speciesism into ‘Antlers’ and into Bass’ own nonfictional character. This raises a major question concerning priorities in environmentalism vs. humanism that goes beyond the limits of this paper but will direct the course for further examination of ‘Antlers’.

For one thing the sense of speciesism supports the reading of the symbolism of the actual antlers in the story. In the natural habitat of deer antlers are mainly used for two purposes: to attract a mate and to fight off rivals. While the antlers may very well serve the same purpose in the narrative, they seem moreover to have a symbolic function concerning pride, which is ironically taken away from the deer. Also, arrogance or unapproachableness seems to be connected to wearing antlers. Suzie’s behaviour is illustrative of this, when: ‘Suzie had had a lot to drink [...] she held the rope with both hands, her deer antlers slightly askew. She began asking Randy about his hunting – not razzing him [...] but simply questioning him’ (Bass, ‘Antlers’ 75). The antlers being askew suggests that times are changing, as in the nature when a deer’s antlers fall off by the end of mating season. It too suggests a humbleness and that Suzie “opens up”. This point of analysis is referring to the claim that Bass in ‘Antlers’ comments on contemporary humans’ absence-mindedness. The metaphor describes how Suzie’s unwillingness to get close to nature as well as men is removed when she lets her guard down, loses the antlers. This, I argue, is a comment on contemporary social behaviour. The above quoted passage follows Suzie’s realisation of her loneliness where she admits a need to change in order not to be alone: “I’ve got to go somewhere,” she said. “I hate being alone.” [...] “I’m just scared, jumpy.” (Bass, ‘Antlers’ 73) Shortly hereafter in the narrative Suzie approaches Randy open-mindedly.

Once again, a repetition in language indicates a noteworthy symbolism in the text: The matter of being scared. Within the love allegory of the hunting narrative lies a notion of fear which the narrator expresses:

All this time I'd been uncertain about whether it was right or wrong to hunt if you used the meat and said those prayers. And I'm still not entirely convinced one way or the other. But I have a better picture of what it's like to be the elk or deer. And I understand Suzie a little better too. She was frightened. Fright – sometimes plain fright, even more than terror – is every bit as bad as pain, and maybe worse. (Bass, 'Antlers' 73)

Here Bass connects hunting and the love story by comparing the hesitation relating to hunting to the fear and consequential hesitation to pursue intimacy. Bass suggests that the fear of intimacy and its subsequent loneliness is worse than the fear of being left, parallelly claiming that approaching nature by hunting is liberating rather than damaging.

Marti Kheel seeks to explain man's urge to hunt by applying psychoanalytical theory to the issue and refers to Donna Dinnerstein who claims in other words that masculinity is the absence of both femininity and connection to nature and that consequently at some point during their life men have urges to 'return to the original state of oneness that they left behind' (Kheel 39). Whether or not we trust psychoanalytic theory the argumentation agrees with Bass' account on his need to hunt:

I don't think I would be able to sustain myself as a dreamer in this strange landscape if I did not take off three months each year to wander the mountains in search of game; to hunt, stretching and exercising not just my imagination, but my spirit. And to wander the mountains, too, in all the other seasons. And to be nourished by the river of spirit that flows, shifting and winding, between me and the land. (Bass, 'Why I Hunt')

With or without Kheel, Dinnerstein and Freud it is explicitly and firmly established that Bass hunts for pleasure ('All I know is that hunting-beyond being a thing I like to do [...]') (Bass, 'Why I Hunt') Thus, the application of theories and the analysis aims to examine not motives of the hunter but the ambiguity in being both an outspoken environmentalist and a representative for wildlife hunting and how this comes to expression in Bass' literature. As previously touched upon Bass addresses human interrelations, humans' relation to nature and humans' relation to the concept of hunting, while excluding a deeper reflection on humans' relation to nonhuman animals. I argue that Bass does not

sympathize with nonhuman animals exactly because of his opposition to ecofeminism. Bass does not recognize an issue in (hu)man's domination over nonhuman animals. His perspective on using nonhuman animals as humans please seems due to a (from his perspective) natural right to dominate, hence, a sort of speciesism.

Josephine Donovan warns about 'normalizing ideologies embedded in text' (203). It is the author who creates an allegory based on hunting and it is the author who through his characters express an acceptance of wildlife hunting. The story represents the opinion of the author, however complex it may be depicted. Therefore, when Bass does not fail to include the tradition of apologizing and giving thanks to the animal it is noteworthy that it is still based on an anthropocentric ideology and his character concludes: 'if you use the meat, and apologize to the spirit right before you do it and after, if you give thanks, it's all right' (Bass, 'Antlers' 71). Donovan refers to the theory of Georg Lukacs and critically compares his observation on industrial workers to writing and reading animals in literature. She observes:

[his] critical awareness arose as the workers, who were of course subjects, were treated as objects. In assembly-line production, Lukacs noted, the worker 'is turned into a commodity and reduced to a mere quantity.' But beneath the 'quantifying crust,' lies a 'qualitative living core.' (203)

In connection to this Donovan observes that 'Since fiction by definition requires the author to imagine and articulate the point of view of her or his characters, the role of interpreting the animals' point of view in fiction falls to the author' (204). In the case of Bass' nonfictional descriptions of hunting the image of the production workers can be directly transmitted to his view on animals, which deprives them of any individuality. In 'Antlers' however, one individual elk bull is singled out, not to be a subject but rather an object, a target, aesthetically lying dead at the feet of the story's real subjects: 'We found him by the creek a half mile away, down in the shadows, his huge antlers rising into a patch of sun and gleaming. The arrow did not seem large enough to have killed him. The creek made a gentle trickling sound' (Bass, 'Antlers' 72). While recognizing Bass' attempt to truly majestify the image of the elk it is essential to emphasize its allegorical function. For the elk is an object in a broader allegory and its worth as a living creature to Bass is measured by his willingness to kill it. Donovan argues:

In literature, one of the most common devices that exploit animal pain for aesthetic effect is the animal metaphor, or, more specifically, the animal "stand-in" or proxy, where the animal is used as an object upon which to



project or act out human feelings. Using animal death and agony to dramatize, symbolize, or comment upon the emotional state of the human protagonists continues to be a standard fictional device. (206)

In the case of 'Antlers', the bowhunting is the metaphor for the act of 'getting close' and thereby winning the price of 'presence-mindedness' with the added bonus of intimacy. This is an example of exactly what Donovan observes as a tendency in literature.

We are not wild animals, claims Rick Bass, and this paper has argued that this comment serves as a framework for reading his literature, as exemplified through his short story 'Antlers'. Within the narrative of 'Antlers', I have argued that Bass comments on discrimination with the purpose of distinguishing humans from nonhuman animals, directly opposing to the philosophy of ecofeminism. I continuously argue that this purpose is one of two intended themes in 'Antlers', the other being human interrelations. These are written in an allegory for the author to enjoy the artful tools of literature to comment on a tendency in society for humans to be absent-minded and egocentric. Additionally, I have found that Bass distinguishes this egocentrism from anthropocentrism and that his perspective as an environmentalist is highly complex because of its collision with other -isms claimed in this paper. The hierarchy Bass creates for human, animal and nature is complex and his readers' views depends on an opinion on human interference on the natural ecosystem. Concludingly, this paper argues not that Bass fails to be an environmentalist because of being an anthropocentrist but rather that his perspective on being an environmentalist is affected by his view on humans' place in the ecosystem, which opposes biologism and suggests a degree of speciesism.

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