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### Human Masks and Hunting in “Antlers”

The United States conservation movement blossomed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, concerning itself with the sustainable use of natural resources and the preservation of wilderness. Later, more modern environmentalist movements of the 1960s and sustainability movements of the 1980s broadened their scope to the relationship between humans and the environment. Chief among these emerging issues was the question of hunting. Many environmentalists argued that hunting was cruel and destructive to the environment. Some were so dedicated to this belief they took physical action, like a 1990s environmentalist group that interfered with state-supervised bison hunting. Anti-hunting legislation was also passed: for instance, voters in 1996 passed initiatives banning recreational and commercial hunting in Colorado. In 1997, Rick Bass – a hunter and an environmentalist – wrote “Antlers”, a short story, amid this increasing anti-hunting sentiment in the environmentalist movement.

General discussion on “Antlers” by Rick Bass has centered upon the relationship between humans and nature. Claire Cazajous-Augé argues that “Antlers” exposes the agency in animals, thus encouraging humans to value their ways of being. It is the overlapping of human and animal that favors the creation of community, Cazajous-Augé asserts, and hence “Antlers” calls for the renewing of a valuable connection with the nonhuman world. Alternatively, Ida Hagh Møller contends that the “worth ... [of] a living creature to Bass is measured by his willingness to kill

it.” (45) This is part of her larger argument that “Antlers” demonstrates a complex form of anthropocentrism, which is the belief that humankind is the central element of existence. She argues that while Bass distinguishes anthropocentrism from egoism – treating self-interest as the foundation of morality – such that it aligns with environmentalism, nevertheless the story exhibits speciesism, or the belief in human superiority, and does not sympathize with nonhuman animals. I agree with Møller in that “Antlers”, while highly complex, is anthropocentric at a fundamental level – if it must be reduced to that level at all. On the other hand, I concur with Cazajous-Augé in that “Antlers” sympathizes with and recognizes the inherent value of nonhuman animals. However, I further argue that “Antlers” exposes and advocates for the animal in the human, which serves as a philosophical justification for hunting. It demonstrates that those who advocate against hunting fail to realize or embrace their animalism, and instead wear their human masks too tightly.

“Antlers” highlights the animalistic nature lying beneath human nature. A recurring theme in the piece is a fundamental animalism bursting through the attempt to wear a human mask. At the Halloween party – the centerpiece of “Antlers” – all the characters strap horns onto their heads and get drunk; they “clomp and sway in the barn” (110). After being strapped on for so long, the narrator comments, the antlers almost feel natural. Despite the heaviness of such a drunken and wild party, embedded with symbols of animalism, Suzie waltzes instead of ‘clomping’ and seems “light and free” (118). Meanwhile, Randy sits in a corner, isolated; while he smiles a “polite” smile – donning the human mask – he does so while drinking beer, alcohol as a way to escape the weight of human interaction and convention. In this party scene, Suzie is comfortable among people when she dons her human mask, whereas Randy uncomfortably wears his, requiring beer on hand. In the narrator’s memories and observations, the stark contrast

between how tightly Suzie and Randy wear their human mask highlights the vastly different characters of their connection with nature.

Despite her strong opposition to hunting, Suzie is lonely in nature because she does not consider herself a part of it. After the party, Suzie decides to ‘get back with’ the narrator again; amid the stunning scenery of owls, deer, and ducks by the river at sunset, she is “scared, jumpy” (117) and desires the presence of another human. ““I hate being alone”” (117), Suzie comments, indicating that she does not feel emotionally attached to or fulfilled by the wildlife she is surrounded by. In the only other scene Suzie is in nature, she and the narrator, wrapped in one blanket, sit on the porch at sunset and watch deer drink from the river. The scenery is almost identical to the prior scene – wildlife by the river at sunset – but in the presence of another human, her loneliness is largely alleviated. Further, in this scene she is on the porch, a human appropriation of what it is to ‘be outside’, suggesting that her connection to nature is one tainted by her need to maintain the human mask.

On the other hand, Randy, a hunter, does not wear his human mask unless necessitated by a human social situation. Whereas Suzie’s relationship with nature is contingent on the presence of humanness, Randy’s is contingent on the absence of humanness. Randy avoids interaction with humans and human hierarchies and structures, instead seeking to be a part of – not an external figure to – nature. He lives by himself and does odd jobs for people in the valley, usually fixing cabins, but values his work for human structures secondarily to the less stable and more dynamic schedule of nature. When hunting season arrives, he stops his work entirely to immerse himself in nature and to hunt. The description of his actions is like that of an animal – “roam[ing] the valley for days, exploring the wildest places” (112), Randy feels natural in this landscape unpenetrated by humanness. In one scene, when Randy shoots an elk, it turns around

in surprise before galloping off, emanating a dark “fury” (116). However, after enough time, the weakened elk is found lying “down in the shadows, his huge antlers rising into a patch of sun and gleaming” (116), alive but sedated, in a sense, by the arrow – the human weapon. Towards the end of “Antlers”, as Suzie, Randy, and the narrator are travelling back home after the party, Suzie questions Randy directly about his hunting – her metaphorical arrow, forcing Randy into contact with humanness. The narrator describes the look on Randy’s face as loaded with a “fury I could feel as well as see” (119). Soon after, though, the “polite mask came back down over him” (119), the antlers on his head “bobbing and weaving” (119) in the night. Both Randy and the elk evoke “fury” when struck by humanness; under the all-encompassing force of these human institutions, though, Randy wears his human mask like the elk helplessly carries the arrow in its ribs.

The contrast between these two characters leads naturally to the question of hunting. Møller points to the concluding sentence of “Antlers”: “We continued down the road in silence, the antlers on our heads bobbing and weaving, a fine target for anyone who might not have understood that we weren’t wild animals” (119). Here, Møller asserts, Bass sums up his perspective in hunting: wild animals, not humans, are the object of a hunt. A closer look, however, reveals that while Bass does justify hunting, he does so in a much more nuanced way – with a justification far from being predicated upon human superiority to animals. In the scene Møller highlights, Randy has just been metaphorically shot by Suzie’s arrow; under the forced influence of humanness, he, along with Suzie and the narrator – who has also previously expressed loneliness in nature and comfort in human contact – is not the wild, active animal he usually embodies. Hence, the concluding sentence can be read as an irony – the narrator asserts that the group is not one of wild animals, despite the prominent antlers on their heads.

The relationship between the previous discussion on characters and hunting is well manifested in one of Suzie's declarations: "That's [hunting] is what cattle are for... Cattle are like city people. Cattle expect, even deserve, what they've got coming. But wild animals are different. Wild animals enjoy life. They live in the woods on purpose. It's cruel to go in after them and kill them" (112). Ironically, Suzie – the fervent activist against hunting – embodies her own description of cattle, whereas Randy embodies her description of wild animals. Suzie might as well be like "city people", given her continual drive to be around people and inability to connect with nature through nonhuman lens. The narrator reliably predicts when Suzie will, in a surge of loneliness, break up with her current partner in search of another; her miserable fate seems as destined as that of cattle. This passage also expresses a critique of those that champion against hunting wild animals while they consume the products of the systematic slaughter of cattle and other domesticated animals. Suzie grips her human mask so tightly that she is oblivious to the death of animals in slaughterhouses, as such actions are hidden behind the veil of human institutions. On the other hand, Randy spends much of his time in the wilderness and only feels truly free in these more natural spaces, such that – in both literal and psychological terms – he "lives in the woods" (119). This contradiction in Suzie's declaration sheds light on the final words of "Antlers" referenced by Møller, "we weren't wild animals" (119): it suggests that the group is, in that moment, like cattle. Here, Bass' lament is revealed: must humans be like cattle, immersed and sedated in the human institutions that separate them from the nature within them?

More broadly, "Antlers" makes that argument that hunting brings humans closer, not farther, to animals. The characters in "Antlers" avoid hunting moose and bear because they are not as common; when animals are killed, their meat is shared, not sold. This suggests that "Antlers" advocates hunting not to be a capitalistic endeavor – one tainted by human institutions

and structures – but instead a respectful recognition and participation in the dynamics of nature. The narrator comments that in the valley, hunting is specifically done with a bow, not a rifle, because it is fairer - “you have to get so close to the animal to get a good shot.” (112) This distance not only serves to represent fairness – putting humans on more even footing with animals – but a deeper sense of closeness and belonging, of “hear[ing] the intakes of breath” (113) and being an animal in a larger ecosystem. Cazajous-Augé similarly notes the role of distance in “Antlers”, writing that “Bass relies on the physicality of language to evoke the proximity between the hunter and the animal” (275). Hunting seems to bring Randy closer to understanding and being with animals than Suzie’s passionate outcries against the cruelty of hunting do.

Hence, in “Antlers” Bass offers a complex justification of a certain brand of hunting – one that humbles and attempts to reduce, rather than emphasize, human superiority or difference from nature. By detailing how Randy hunts and how the yields of the hunt are used, “Antlers” implicitly warns against environmentally extinctive and commercial hunting. However, it argues that true hunting is an opportunity to participate as one of many beings in nature, to cast aside the human barriers and masks that separate us from the animalism inside. This idea of embracing humans as part of nature, not an external force casting human ideas and institutions onto nature, is common in pro-hunting groups. Ecological arguments are often made – fair human hunting serves as a natural force in the ecosystem. For instance, hunters have been argued to take on the roles of dwindling wolf and cougar populations to keep deer numbers in check to prevent overgrazing and other problems. Alternatively, hunters serve as a form of natural selection – deer that possess traits that make them more likely to be killed by a hunter will not live to reproduce, just as a deer killed by a bear would not live to reproduce. Nature and wildness are within

humans, despite how tightly they wear their human masks: hence, “Antlers” urges for humans to let go – if just for a little while – of the human mask that stands between us and our animalism.

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