**Empathetic Ecocultural Positionality and the Forest Other in Tasmanian Forestry Conflicts**

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**Abstract:**

Tasmania’s forests have been the site of a decades-long conflict. Popularly, politically, and provocatively termed the “forestry wars,” the question of competing sides – jobs versus the environment – often dominates this dispute. Tasmanians require a new language of conflict – one that takes seriously the transformative nature of human-nonhuman relationships. Drawing on Ezzy’s (2004) response to Emmanuel Levinas’ concept of “the face,” I argue for the recognition of a form of ecocultural identity termed *empathetic positionality*, through which an individual’s position in this environmental conflict is informed by their perception of forestry practices as violent acts committed against the forest other – an other to whom one has an ethical obligation. The chapter offers an alternative view of the conflict, arguing that concerns about forestry in Tasmania are often predicated upon relationally informed perceptions of violent practices rather than political or side-based opposition to the existence of a forestry industry per se. Empathetic positionality is an articulation of identity complexities beyond opposing sides or incompatibilities, and envisages new ways forward that propose a reimagining of Tasmania’s forestry conflicts. The chapter also explores the interaction between power dynamics and emotional responses (such as grief) to forestry practices, advocating for respect of the forest as a participant in discussions of its own fate. Through a recognition of empathetic positionality, I call for a reshaping of dominant conversations underpinning conflicts over extractive industries, not only in Tasmania but also transnationally.

**Keywords:** Tasmania, forest conflict, the other, violence, ethics, emotion

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**Index:** Forests; forestry; forestry conflicts; clearfelling/clearcutting; woodchipping; more-than-human/nonhuman agency; Tasmania/Australia; violence; emotion; embodiment; other; Levinas; ethical response; sustainability; sociology; interviews; ontological security

**Empathetic Positionality and the Forest Other: Perceiving Violence Against Tasmanian Trees**

**Introduction**

I grew up in Hobart, Tasmania, a beautiful city nestled against the forests at the base of *kunanyi* (Mt. Wellington). Tasmania is a significant site of environmental history, including being the home of the world’s first Greens Party, the United Tasmania Group (UTG) (Lester, 2007). The state’s forestry industry routinely employs radically destructive practices such as clearfelling (clearcutting) and, though I use timber products and am surely complicit, these practices that have marked my home state sadden me deeply. Why do I feel this way? I am not an activist, nor do I belong to any environmental groups. I have relatively little experience visiting forest spaces. I proudly align myself with the tree-huggers and lovers of the forest, but these labels do not define me either. I feel that I both do and do not fit my society’s expectations for who I should be – what I should look like, do, or whom I should associate with – while holding these views. My ecocultural identity is too complex to reduce to a label or stereotype.

The sight of clearfelled forests makes it seem clear to me that humans pitch themselves needlessly against the world. Flanagan (2007) describes the “hellish landscape that results from clearfelling [as] akin to a Great War battlefield” (p. 22), and I see what he means. When I think of forestry in Tasmania I feel sorrowful, outraged – feelings not unlike those I experience when hearing of violence inflicted upon a fellow human. How am I (and others) shaped by these feelings of empathy?

The long-term conflicts surrounding Tasmania’s forestry industry have earned a divisive moniker: “the forestry wars.” This conflict is often framed – by politicians, media outlets, and colloquially – through questions of “which side are you on?” with the nuances of the debate dissolved into simplistic arguments about jobs versus trees, or Greens[[1]](#endnote-1) versus loggers. But this dichotomisation is neither accurate nor useful, obscuring as it does the complexities inherent in individuals’ encounters with the nonhuman world.[[2]](#endnote-2)

In this chapter, I draw upon my research to propose an alternate approach to this conflict, or to “Australia’s longest running environmental dispute” (Lester & Cottle, 2015, p. 103). The chapter opens with a description of *empathetic positionality* – a form of ecocultural identity in which, I argue, empathetic response shapes one’s position in an environmental conflict. I then discuss the theoretical literature informing this argument, including Ezzy’s (2004) response to Levinas’ concept of “the face.” A brief history of Tasmania’s forestry conflicts follows and then an introduction to my research methodology and findings. I then discuss how empathetic positionality can reframe understandings of ecocultural experiences and forestry practices, bringing to light poor conceptualisations of conflict as a matter of sides, recognition of emotional response to forests (and insight into the delegitimising of such responses), and acknowledgment of the forest as a participant in forestry conflicts. Through a recognition of empathetic positionality, I call for a reshaping of dominant conversations underpinning conflicts over extractive industries, not only in Tasmania but also transnationally.

**Empathetic Positionality**

Following Levinas, Ezzy (2004) argues for a view of forests as nonhuman others to whom one has ethical obligations. Drawing on this argument, I explore what I term *empathetic positionality*, a form of ecocultural identity in which an individual’s position in an environmental conflict is informed by their response to the ethical demand of that particular environment as other (in this case, Tasmanian forests). I illustrate this process through the experiences of 27 Tasmanians, with whom I spoke about their experiences with/in Tasmanian forests as part of a qualitative research study. Of the participant sample, 19 used violent terminology to describe forestry practices. This perception of violence reflects a process of ethical demand and response, drawing the forest into the conflict as a participant – that is, as an other with the agency to make an ethical demand of humans. Acknowledging empathetic positionality involves recognising forest conflicts as constituted by networks of relations – including those between humans and forests – rather than as a matter of diametrically opposed sides positioned against an object (be it the forest, industry, an organisation, or person). This chapter, therefore, speaks to the relational turn within the social sciences and humanities, a mode of thinking that is “a call to question Western dualisms between … nature and culture” through acknowledgement of relations and interdependency (Dépelteau 2018, p. 11).

The ethical demand from the forest other has implications for the identities of those who respond, with the perception of violence acting as a commonality amongst seemingly disparate individuals. The participants who perceived forestry practices as violence were anti-clearfelling, often concerned about unsustainable practices, and criticised current forestry practices. Emotional response informs empathetic positionality, with experiences of joy and awe (felt while in the forest) contrasted with the sadness and despair felt in the face of the forest’s destruction. Who perceives violence, who perpetrates violence, and what does it mean to oppose such violence? These questions present a more critical and creative starting point than the question, “which side are you on?”

Through empathetic positionality illustrated via this Tasmanian case study, I demonstrate that considerations of ecocultural identity enrich understandings of forestry conflicts. Such an approach could also contribute to understandings of other conflicts centring on extractive industries and nonhuman rights (such as anti-fracking or anti-whaling movements). Dichotomous views of conflict rely on assumptions of economic and political aspects of identity (or stereotypes thereof) – a blue-collar worker who is pro-jobs, for example, or a left-wing voter who demands the cessation of extractive industry. An individual’s position in the forestry wars, however, is not necessarily a causational result of social roles, economic statuses, or political leanings. Relational modes of thinking and talking about forests are not synonymous with anti-industrialism. Understanding perceptions of forestry practices as violent acts complicates this image by taking into consideration the relationships humans form with the nonhuman world. In this chapter, I begin a conversation of new ways forward – in Tasmania, if not globally – that take into account the ethical and emotional aspects of future human-forest engagements without necessarily advocating for an end to forestry industries.

**Background: Tasmania and the Forest Other**

Following Davy’s (2003) argument for an extended Levinasian ethics acknowledging responsibility to the nonhuman, Ezzy (2004) explores forests as an other with whom one experiences an ethical relationship. Here the forest is the “face” that makes an ethical demand, vulnerable to but forbidding violence. This contact with the forest other may encourage the domineering violence of (Western, industrial) forestry, as the other is “two-faced” – it “invites violence, yet forbids it” (Ezzy, 2004, p. 26). If one opposes this violence, the other’s ethical demand may profoundly shape the individual, and prompt an empathetic response. As Cianchi (2015) explains, there is recognition of the power of emotion and empathy in shaping experiences of environmental activism and defence. However, the influence of these processes in environmental conflicts requires further consideration.

Levinas’ conceptualisation of the other differs from othering, in which the other is pushed away on account of difference. In Levinas’ account of the face, interaction is the immediate catalyst for ethical obligation and response. One recognises the other to whom one has an ethical obligation – Levinas’ “face” – as not the self, and as demanding a (potentially empathetic) ethical response. As Benjamin (1988) puts it, “[t]he issue is not how we become free from the other, but how we actively engage and make ourselves known in relationship with the other” (p. 18). The command classically attributed to this process is “you shall not kill” – “the first word of the Other, inscribed in their face” (Ezzy 2004, 23). This other can prompt recognition and empathetic response.

An understanding of nonhuman agency aligns with Levinas’ concept of the face, as the ethical demand of the forest other is a potential expression of forest agency. A vast array of literature discusses nonhuman agency. Following Todd (2016), I acknowledge that Indigenous concepts from across the globe pre-date many of these ideas (as mis/represented in Western literature). Nonetheless, insightful examples include Ezzy’s (2004) and Cianchi’s (2015) discussions of Tasmania and Jones and Cloke’s (2008) model of non-human agency, the work of Bruno Latour (2005) and Val Plumwood (2001), deep ecology (Devall & Sessions, 1985; Naess, 1989), ecofeminism (Radford Ruether, 1995), philosophical bases to more-than-human rights (Benton, 2009), and environmental criminology (White, 2018). Beliefs and practices such as environmental personhood, animism, and personified nature also acknowledge nonhuman agency in diverse religious, spiritual, political, and legal contexts (Drew, 2013; White, 2018). If dominant conversations about forestry conflicts are to shift their focus from economics, politics, and anthropocentric interests, there must be acknowledgement of nonhuman agency in some capacity.

**Tasmania Environmental Politics**

Tasmania’s forests are environmentally, politically, and culturally significant. An understanding of environmental politics in Australia requires a consideration of the opposition to extractive industries in Tasmania. The state has been a significant site of key political movements, campaigns of resistance, and violent dispute (for further reading, see Ajani, 2007; Lester, 2007; Buckman, 2008; Krien, 2012; Beresford, 2015). For a century and a half, starting with British settlement in the early 19th Century, Tasmania’s economy relied upon primary industries such as forestry and mining (Lester, 2007). Today, tensions remain high between competing cultures of forest industry support, environmentalism, and the proliferation of ecocentric tourism branding. Since the 1990s, government-owned Forestry Tasmania – rebranded as Sustainable Timbers Tasmania (STT) in 2017 – has overseen the management of plantations and native forests (non-plantation timber harvest areas), road construction (allowing access to forestry operations), and fire management (including firefighting efforts, and planned burns to reduce fuel loads and assist regeneration of some eucalypt species). These activities contribute to the supply of more than “1.4 million tonnes of forest products each year” for industry (STT, 2018a; STT, 2018b, para. 1).

The sustainability, regulation, and transparency of forestry operations have been sources of major concern and controversy, generating what Flanagan (2007) describes as “a culture of secrecy, shared interest and intimidation” (p. 23; see also Green, Ward, & McConnachie, 2009). Both the Tasmanian Labor Party (an Australian centre-left political party) and the Tasmanian Liberal Party (Australian centre-right) have displayed “enthusiastic complicity” in forestry operations (Green et al., 2009, p. 123). Once Tasmania’s largest company and a major global woodchip exporter, Gunns Ltd. monopolised the industry before the company’s 2013 demise, following political scandals and financial woes (for a detailed account of Gunns, see Beresford 2015). Under the spectre of Gunns, ongoing problems with STT’s economic model have remained hugely contentious. Despite receiving Government subsidies, Forestry Tasmania reported a loss of $67 million – attributed to timber devaluation and “ongoing debt” – the year prior to its restructuring as STT, triggering criticisms of the Liberal Party from the Labor Party and the Greens Party (Burgess, 2016, para. 8). The Liberal Party’s dismantling of the Tasmanian Forest Agreement (TFA) has raised further tensions (Warman, 2014). In 2013, the State Government passed the TFA, described as a “peace deal” as it represented unprecedented compromise between the industry and environmentalist stakeholders who acted as TFA signatories. However, alongside controversial anti-protest laws, which Australia’s High Court later found to be unconstitutional (Morton, 2018), new industry-boosting forestry laws passed in 2014. These laws saw in the abandonment of the peacekeeping potential of the TFA.

The practices through which STT carries out its operations – particularly clearfelling (clearcutting) and woodchipping – also are controversial. Clearfelling, STT’s “preferred method of harvesting in wet eucalypt forests,” involves felling most of the trees in a given area, with a high-intensity burn often following (STT, 2018c, para. 9). Ostensibly, this burn ensures eucalypt regeneration (STT, 2018c), yet the “resultant fire is of such ferocity it produces mushroom clouds visible from considerable distances [demonstrating] that clearfelling means the total destruction” of the harvested area (Flanagan, 2007, p. 20). Woodchipping (the chipping of felled timber deemed unsuitable as saw logs, often following clearfelling) is also problematic as a manifestation of clearfelling’s inherent wastefulness. Buckman (2008) describes woodchipping as Tasmanian conservationists’ “public enemy number one” (p. 79). Tasmanian forestry comprises “highly destructive but generally lawful practices” (Green et al., 2009, p. 116) and, perhaps in response, Tasmania has a strong history and enduring culture of environmentalism. The United Tasmania Group (UTG), co-founded by environmentalist (and eventual Federal politician) Bob Brown, was launched in 1972 in response to the flooding of Lake Pedder as part of the state’s hydro-electric scheme. Head (2016) argues that “the rise of Green politics … can be traced to mourning as a result of” the flooding of Lake Pedder (p. 38); as such, the flooding was a “seminal moment” in Australian environmentalism (Lester 2007, p. 5). Another watershed event was the 1983 protection of the Franklin River in the state’s west from damming proposals, following a momentous groundswell of support across the country. The UTG – whose founding principles underlie Green politics globally – ushered in the Tasmanian Greens. Subsequent campaigns to protect the state’s forests have been enduring, dramatic, even violent (Lester, 2007; Buckman, 2008).

This brief account gives some indication as to the turbulent history that influences contemporary perspectives of Tasmanian political processes, industry, and Tasmanian forests themselves. This history is a narrative of threat – to democracy, trust, and place. This case study is just one example of the global “wicked problem” of forestry conflicts (Head & Alford, 2015), but it is a useful one to better understand the links among identity, ecological engagement, and conflict. In Tasmania, forests are salient, accessible, and rub shoulders with a largely urbanised population; thus, Tasmanians relations with forests provide an ideal case study in which to elucidate ecocultural identities and reconceptualise dichotomised conflicts. Ezzy (2004) argues that Tasmanians live “with a strong awareness of the forces of nature” (p. 20), making Tasmania an exemplary context to invite the forest into the conversation and disrupt unproductive patterns of conflict.

**Methodology**

I have developed the notion of empathetic positionality from my interpretations of semi-structured interviews I conducted with 27 Tasmanians (11 women, 16 men) from across the state. Participants’ occupations and ages varied widely, although about half were past or approaching the age of 60. Participants responded to a call for those with an interest in forests and forest issues. Through a framework of Giddens’ “ontological security” – a sense of trust in the continuity and stability of the world and self – part of my analysis focused on the forest’s role in constituting identity; for example, the role that regular visits to a particular forest play in creating a consistent self-narrative (Giddens, 1991). More than two-thirds of participants’ descriptions of forestry practices invoked violence, and these are the participants whom I believe empathetic positionality best represents. Several further participants also identified the Tasmanian conflict in sided or militaristic terms. I have attributed all quotes to pseudonyms.

Those who perceived violence were heterogeneous; the participants featured here includes students in their 20s, retirees, men, women, people born both in Australia and overseas, and people employed in a range of occupations. Very rarely did this group of participants call for the forestry industry’s dismantlement; participants acknowledged the usefulness of services provided by STT (such as road maintenance), and the rights of specialist producers and forestry workers. One participant, for example, was a passionate environmentalist and sawmiller. Four participants spoke about their involvement with direct action activism; several others discussed occasionally attending environmental rallies. Conventional identity markers such as voting habits or economic position rarely featured as means of expressing environmental views; instead, participants emphasised relationships and experiences with/in forests as factors informing environmental positions. This group was essentially united in their opposition to destructive, unsustainable forestry practices, with similarities to Hay’s (2008) “third cohort” (based in Tasmania’s north) which he describes as articulating:

a clear moral sense of what constitutes socially appropriate economic activity, but to this is added a profound sense of the extent to which this nexus nests within a third relationship, that between the community, its socio-economic norms and practices, and the natural world upon which they draw – and this, too, is an ethically constructed relationship. (p. 229)

Hay (2008) emphasises the role of place in human-forest engagements and identities. Accordingly, it is significant that all but one of the study’s participants drew upon their experiences of bushwalking (hiking) in Tasmania. This supports the notion that embodied experiences with/in landscapes inform emotional connections (Jepson & Sharpley, 2015) and identity (Banham, 2017), shaping human-nonhuman relationships.

**The Forestry Wars**

Understandings of individuals’ attitudes toward environmental policies often lean on assumptions that those individuals will either be pro-environment or pro-economics (Kaplowitz, Lupi, Yeboah, & Thorp, 2011), as if the two positions were mutually exclusive. Likewise, political, media, and popular representations of Tasmania’s forestry conflicts frequently invoke a sense of battle between two incompatible sides – those who are pro-forestry against those who are pro-environment, or what Hay (2008) calls “a simple rural-urban configuration” of those for or against industry (p. 225). This tension carries into everyday conversation. Ben explained that, “I’m 52, and for almost all my adult life it’s been the same divisiveness in forestry and the environment.” Other participants were deeply critical of what they perceived as tactical conflict; that is, using the proliferation of conflict to generate support for political parties. Matthew described the Liberal Party as being “like junkies” for this framing of the conflict, arguing “what they inject into their bloodstream is this conflict between jobs and the environment.” Similarly, Peter said:

The essential problem with the timber industry in Tasmania is that ... political parties have used it as a vile political wedge to divide communities.

Matthew and Peter’s comments reflect what seemed a common sense of disdain or despair amongst participants about the warring state of Tasmanian society. Descriptions adopted militaristic connotations, indicating the perceived seriousness of the situation:

It sort of seems to be heading back to the barricades. (Matthew)

I will bloody fight until my last breath, to maintain what I believe to be right. (Reg)

These views echo metaphors of violence found in environmental activism literature (Cianchi, 2015), as well as oft-repeated Western rationalist views that see the nonhuman not as “something to be respected, as Other … but violently incorporated into the Same” (Ezzy, 2004, p. 29).

The narrative of two sides implies the existence of cohesive groups with clear identities. Some participants’ descriptions of Tasmanian society reflected this assumption:

There was a lot of argument in the community about it … I started talking to people on both sides, and getting enough information to form my own opinion. (Daniel)

I suggest that the concept of sides allows individuals to identify and analyse the conflicts by providing a useful shorthand to labelling others. However, participants’ approaches to forestry and forests indicated a much more ambiguous way of being. Labelling individuals as pro-this or anti-that does not capture the complex reality of environmental conflict. An acknowledgement of ecocultural identity, such as empathetic positionality, encourages a more nuanced understanding of, and approach to, conflict.

**Violence Against Trees**

The participants who described forestry practices as acts of violence did so in two key ways. Firstly, there was a perception of forestry practices as violent in their results. Secondly, there was a perception of forestry practices as inflicting violence against the embodied forest. Seven participants (of the 19 who invoked violence) engaged in both discourses, while other participants referred to either view. The first view of violence employs language that describes forestry practices – particularly clearfelling and woodchipping – as indiscriminate expansion and extraction, resulting in destruction:

[Logging old-growth] destroys the undergrowth of the forest. (Helen)

I just don’t understand why people have to go and destroy everything. (Zoe)

[Woodchipping is] destroying and degrading an asset which we have for little, little benefit. (George)

Other terms used to invoke these ideas of excessive violence included the forest being “trashed,” “wrecked,” and “ruined:”

When they log an area of wet forest ... that gets trashed and burnt. (James)

I just hate to see how wrecked it looks … let’s not just ruin this whole valley. (Claire)

Additionally, many participants perceived Forestry Tasmania’s regime as excessive. Peter’s objection to the “rapacious nature and the volume of [the destruction]” echoes Reg’s view that:

because of [Tasmania’s] obsession with logging the shit out of old-growth forests, huge amounts of myrtle, of sassafras, of celery-top, was just trashed, burnt on the floor of the forest over the past 40 years.

The language employed by these participants is striking. Concepts such as degradation move descriptions of forestry practices far past neutrality, instead implying a forest other to whom one has the obligation not to “trash.” As Ben put it, these are “forests that deserve better.” The emotional effects of this destruction are evident in the recounting of memories:

I’ve watched [pauses] watched the destruction of some really beautiful places … [if I] go and stand in a logging coupe after it’s been trashed, that’s a pretty sorrowful thing.(Hugh)

… we were watching forests being destroyed … [it felt] sickening. You went through periods of just feeling helpless … you’d go back to the river and all the work was still happening. There’s still destruction occurring, and you’d feel, feel sick, feel sickened by it. (Matthew)

It is clear in these recollections that the reaction to destruction is one of empathy for the forest other. It is not insignificant here that Tasmania is a settler colonialist state. The violence of forestry practices connects conceptually to the violence of colonisation; or as Reg put it, “we white Western[ers] just trash it.” While this statement echoes a long and problematic history of the perception of diverse Indigenous populations as “closer to nature,” of interest here is the association of violence with colonial and industrialised modes of being. Participants located violence globally. Reflecting on her time in the Philippines, Catherine described “swathes of forests … just being logged and smashed,” while Gordon lamented that “we like buying cheap Chinese goods, in the knowledge that they are trashing their environment to produce them.” It is notable that participants connected forestry practices in Tasmania to transnational (and characteristically colonial) patterns of exploitation, consumerism, and industrialised deforestation. I suggest that violence against the forest other has an intimate connection with violence against the human other. Reacting to the forest other with alienation perpetuates colonial structures that have advanced and aggravated the degradation of Indigenous cultural heritage and erasure of place connections. As such, understandings of any forestry conflict require an acknowledgement of that conflict’s position within transnational networks and history.

Some participants perceived forestry practices as acts of bodily violence. This was often intimated through the concept of murder, as in Priscilla’s statement that “Forestry [Tasmania] have killed the environment,” or Peter’s assertion that forestry practices have “massacred” some areas. Catherine’s recollection demonstrates the emotional impact of confronting this killing:

I don’t know if you’ve ever gone to a clearfell, but it’s like… it’s murderous, it’s horrible, they’re shocking … I’ve had to go into clearfells for certain reasons, and they make me physically sick … [they have] killed a part of our planet for no good reason, and left all this around and they’re gonna burn it. You know, what, what… it doesn’t make sense. (Catherine)

“Abuse,” “rape,” and “molestation” were similar terms used to portray embodied suffering:

I find some traits of [some] Tasmanians a bit hard to take, because they sort of abuse the environment. (Henry)

[In] forestry plantations … it’s a very different landscape and one which I kind of feel like it’s been a little bit … raped? (Claire)

You can see where the old foresters have been, but they didn’t clearfell … they haven’t raped it. They haven’t destroyed it. (Diane)

[I also had] a major concern for forest types which were threatened or becoming rare or had been heavily, um, heavily molested by [the] logging industry. (Matthew)

The powerful language of these participants implies the forest has a body against which these acts are committed. This is not an anthropomorphising of the forest, with the forest seen as if it were human. Rather, participants encountered the forest as an embodied (but nonhuman) other against whom humans commit violence, triggering an empathetic response. This perception of violence relies upon the metaphor of the forest’s body (echoed in descriptions of forests as “the lungs of the Earth”). This metaphor informs Diane’s analogy of an environment sickened by forestry, the same way chemotherapy sickens a human body:

I had a niece who had cancer and when she had chemotherapy you lose all your eyebrows and your eyelashes. Just didn’t look like her … and she was sick, and she looked sick … and so it’s the same with clearfelling … it’s just so clearly defined by getting rid of everything. And then you see those burning heaps, and you think that’s sick.

Diane’s account is strongly relational, with the forest reacted to empathetically as a sick, embodied other. As described above, Levinas’ archetypal relational response is to not kill the other, but to react relationally. This is clear in Jane’s decision to:

... build a garden that has no lawn, but every single plant has a role in terms of insects or plants or birds … People say ‘don’t feed them!’ and you say, ‘well actually, you know, we’ve just killed their environment’ … It’s like moving into a housing block and just killing all the people in the housing block because you wanted to convert it into luxury flats, you know?

Jane’s wording implies a common sense interpretation of the ethical imperative not to kill the forest other. This suggests that for some people – those whose ecocultural identity reflects empathetic positionality – understandings of forestry are as much to do with empathetic response to the other, as they are about economics, politics, or any number of other (more usually emphasised) cultural factors.

The language of violence exposes a process of ethical demand and response, blurring the political, economic, and cultural lines of environmental conflict. Conversations about forestry in Tasmania should not simply be conversations of economic or political interests. Participants’ recognition of violence against the forest other indicates that Tasmania’s conflicts involve much more complex processes of relationality and ethical response (as in Jane’s argument above). The recognition of empathetic positionality, therefore, challenges the Western assumptions of rationality, instrumentality, and human dominance that underpin Tasmania’s forestry industry and conflicts.

**Re-evaluating Sided Conflicts**

To recap, empathetic positionality is a form of ecocultural identity, in which one’s position in an environmental conflict stems from that individual’s recognition of the involved nonhuman as the other to whom one has ethical obligations. Various participants’ responses also reflect that notions of sided, sustained, militaristic conflict continue to dominate perceptions of Tasmania’s forestry conflicts, concealing the existence of empathetic responses to Tasmanian forests. The words of those participants who perceived forestry practices as violence against the other, however, undermine this sided narrative. These individuals related to Tasmania’s forestry conflicts not through conventional identification with a side, but through processes of relationality and ethical response.

Reductionist labelling works to perpetuate the perception of sides in Tasmania. An illustrative example of this process is Tasmanian Liberal senator Richard Colbeck’s 2016 news article “Fire hysteria the anti-industry green agenda,” which links the Tasmanian Greens with “hysteria,” attacking industry, “unscientific, ideologically driven rhetoric,” wilderness areas, and environmental protest (para. 5). As Colbeck’s statements show, describing someone as being pro-environment or pro-forestry invokes any of a number of associated labels and assumptions based on a rhetoric of sides that relies heavily on the proliferation of (largely unacknowledged) assumptions about group membership, values, and interests, and the reproduction of problematic human-nonhuman binaries. Table 1 presents a compilation of the discourses I have observed in my experiences as a Tasmanian, alongside a dedicated reading of political, news media, and scholarly sources, and the empirical research detailed in this chapter. This table illustrates the sociocultural context in which participants’ experiences of ethical obligation have taken place: where they are assumed to be of a side, yet are engaging in relational, ethical, and experiential processes.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Area | Pro-environment | Pro-industry |
| Practices (endorsement) | Conservation | Forestry |
|  | Protest; activism | Employment |
|  | (Eco-)tourism | (Eco-)tourism |
|  | Bushwalking (hiking) | 4WD (four wheel drive) access |
| Values (priorities) | Wilderness; untouched nature | Money; economics |
|  | Anti-progress | Development; growth; “Securing the future” |
|  | Ecocentric; tree-huggers | Anthropocentric; protecting the rights of workers |
|  | Left-wing | Right-wing |
|  | Emotion; experience | Tradition; inter-generational |
| Groups (membership) | The Tasmanian Greens | The Liberal Party; The Labor Party |
|  | Urban areas | Rural areas |
|  | Indigenous Tasmanians/Australians | Western/industrial society |
|  | Environmental groups (e.g. The Wilderness Society) | Forestry Tasmania/STT; workers’ unions |
|  | Middle-class | Working class; blue-collar |
| Labels (normative) | “Loony lefties” | Rednecks |
|  | Irrational | Outdated |
|  | Hippies; ferals | Corrupt |
|  | Trouble-makers | “Honest, hard workers” |
| Table 1. Labels and assumptions associated with the sides of Tasmanian forestry conflict, as observed by the author | | |

These associations do not require accuracy to gain traction; many are absurdly moralistic and rely on fallacious assumptions of unified cultures within segments of the community (see Hay, 2008). Conventional identity markers such as class, economics, politics, and ethnic identity underpin these assumptions, and this labelling process exposes sensitivities enmeshed in Tasmania’s structural inequalities and hegemonic values – with dichotomous constructions of conflict likely exacerbating these very structural divisions. I do not suggest that such social roles are irrelevant to Tasmanian identities. Rather, I find it problematic that sided views of conflict leave little room to acknowledge the intimate connection between (some) human identities and relationships with the nonhuman. Reducing such intricacies to a dichotomy encourages division, and obscures the processes of identity experienced by those individuals grappling with ways to articulate how they feel about forests:

It’s actually a hard thing to actually explain. Um… but I’m sure other people feel it. (Catherine)

I think I always feel when I’m in the forest some kind of link. It may be a bit of a mixed-up thing in my head, but I know that we’re all part of that. (Ben)

As relational approaches to social sciences emphasise, identity is not simply a bundle of discrete and stable qualities; rather, processes, situations, and relations help construct identity (Emirbayer, 1997). Difficulties in expressing these connections, as seen in Ben and Catherine’s comments above, suggest that a fixation on identifiable sides obscures ecocultural elements of Tasmanian identities. Further, this fixation contributes to an erasure of the forest (as) itself, or to the selective invocation of the forest only to delegitimise emotional responses – particularly in contrast to the supposedly rational pursuit of economic growth (as I will explore below). I argue that participants’ perceptions of forestry practices as violence constitute the concerns they have about those practices, rather than being a reflection of a stereotyped anti-industry identity that begets opposition to the forestry industry itself.

**Emotional Responses to Forests**

In moving beyond incompatible or opposing sides, empathetic positionality implicates the respect of the forest as a participant in discussions of its own fate. In legitimising the emotional dimensions of human-nonhuman engagements, empathetic positionality advocates regenerative ecological futures, sustainable practices, and respect for the forest other. The practicalities of how this emotional dimension might influence praxis and policy are beyond the scope of this chapter (although see Singh 2013); acknowledging emotion and empathy, however, is the first step in questioning existing practices.

Emotion is inherent in many of the recollections detailed above. Krien (2012) depicts how these empathetic reactions to forestry might look from the perspective of those doing the logging, through a tree-faller’s bewilderment when faced with a protester’s grief:

There was this one time we’d started logging a coupe in the Styx, 10F, and this woman she came out of nowhere and was going crazy at us. She was sobbing, a thirty-something-year-old woman, sobbing over a few trees. (p. 80)

Acknowledging emotional response exposes power dynamics of whose (and which) reactions are seen as legitimate. This reflects Western privileging of rationality over emotion and empathy (Ahmed, 2004); associating the nonhuman with irrationality – as in assessments of those with conservationist sympathies as emotional, untrustworthy, or anti-progress (see Table 1) – implicitly privileges instrumental and/or anthropocentric relationships with the nonhuman as reasonable responses. These power dynamics extend to structures of decision-making and loss-bearing, such as who is in a position to approve acts of forestry, who subsequently experiences grief, and the extent to which this grief is acknowledged or dismissed. Those in powerful positions (government or corporate) have greater means by which to make decisions, the effects of which they are also equipped to withstand, ignore, or dismiss (Vail 1999). Further, as Ben explained to me, frustration arises:

… because we have democracy everyone has a say, and it’s sad that a lot of things are lost because of decisions made by people who either don’t care or will never know it … I think losing things [because of] people who haven’t seen it [and] haven’t experienced it is pretty sad. (Ben)

Emotional connections with the nonhuman deserve recognition as a shaping force in environmental conflicts. Wider acknowledgment of the forest’s emotional impact may also reshape the (often vitriolic) human-to-human relationships, reintroducing the forest to the conversation. Where there is currently a view of Tasmania’s forestry wars as an unsolvable battle, empathetic positionality suggests a reframing of conflict as opposition to violent practices rather than opposition to (or even hatred of) individuals. This is a new language through which Tasmanians may engage with these conflicts – one which takes seriously the transformative nature of human-nonhuman relationships.

**Conclusion: Toward Relationality**

Empathetic positionality presents an ambivalent relationship with the agency of the forest other. The perception of forestry as destructive violence focuses on human agency; these observations imply that humans are the dominant, agential actors of the exchange. This is not necessarily referring to dominance in the sense that it is ethical or natural for humans to treat forests as they have done (and continue to do), but rather, dominance as human agency that imposes on forest wellbeing and agency. The perception of the forest as embodied, however, recognises a body that precedes the choice to commit forestry acts, with the forest’s ethical demand thus taking precedence. Regardless, the forest (embodied or not) makes an ethical and ontological demand that shapes human identity – an expression of the forest’s voice, transforming relationships between humans (those who perceive, perpetrate, and oppose violence), and between humans and forests. In recognising emotional and ecological aspects of identity, those involved in environmental conflicts may turn away from dichotomised rhetoric and instead accept more nuanced and empathetic responses to the nonhuman. These responses do not necessarily exist in mutual exclusion with extractive industries but do emphasise the need for respectful and regenerative treatment of the forest other, and other nonhuman others globally.

Jones and Cloke (2002) state that the “fate of trees is often emblematic of the wider environment” (p. 2). Forests are place-specific but implicate a broad range of issues in their protection, from climate disruption and resource security to urbanisation and globalisation (Ambrose-Oji, 2010). I have focused on Tasmanian forests (a more specific label for the ecocultural identity detailed here could perhaps be Tasmanian empathetic positionality), and the experiences recounted in this chapter have been about this place. However, the island’s story is “universal – and what goes on in Tasmania goes on in the mainland, goes on in the Pacific islands, in other continents, until it comes straight back to Tasmania again” (Krien, 2012, p. 296). Or, as Hugh told me:

… all the natural systems are under threat and degrading, and that includes Tasmania’s forests, but that’s by no means the only example, it’s just – it’s an example.

Identity, meaning, and emotion are central to my own experiences of perceiving violence against trees – after all, Tasmania is my home. Milstein (2012) notes that some researchers “choose research sites and approaches that ensure they are not merely observers but also advocates in their case studies” (p. 166). In attempting to better understand my own despair at the violence committed against Tasmanian trees, I hope to have legitimised the role of ethical engagement with the forest other not only in this conflict, but forestry conflicts, and perhaps other extractive environmental conflicts, globally. The silencing of the forest’s ethical demand by global structures of rationality, colonialism, and instrumental interests obscures something vital. Singh (2013) explains that “[o]pportunities for [care and loving] engagement need to be fostered instead of clamped shut by policies that assume that human being [sic] are disembodied rational economic actors driven solely by ‘self-interest’” (p. 197). This encouraging of ethical engagement is what I wish for Tasmania, as well as humans and forests across the globe. Empathetic positionality is a means of acknowledging the possibility for a gentler, more sustainable way forward for humans and the forest other – a means of allowing the forest to speak, in a world that too often demands its silence.

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1. By Greens, I refer to The Greens Party members/voters. Many Tasmanians will assume that anyone who expresses environmental concerns must be a Greens Party voter. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. While the phrase “more-than-human” is increasingly common throughout the social sciences, “nonhuman” is my preferred terminology. Using nonhuman highlights participants’ reactions to the forest as something that is distinctly not human, yet begets a response similar to that of the suffering of humans. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)