

## **‘Why Raise Them to Die so Young?’: The Aesthetics of Fatalism in *The Tall Man***

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In the mode of book-length literary journalism, Chloe Hooper’s *The Tall Man* (2008) covers the circumstances surrounding the death in custody of Palm Island man Moordinyi, a death which eventually led to the criminal trial of the police officer, Senior Sergeant Chris Hurley. As a rich, contextual exploration of a protracted case, the book received wide acclaim and was awarded or shortlisted for fifteen literary and other prizes, which included various Premiers’ literary awards, true crime writing and writing on public policy and politics. Hooper’s treatment of events has been praised for its sustained engagement with the Aboriginal perspective in which she immersed herself when writing the book, for giving important context to the violent events surrounding the death of Moordinyi, and for breaking free of more typical patterns of reporting such as Aboriginal-as-social-deviant, or threat-to-social-order frames (Little 48). It has also been praised for its elegant style, its ‘literary’ quality. This is all undoubtedly sound recognition for a book which attempted to draw the attention of a broader reading public to the injustices surrounding an horrific death. One of the objectives of literary journalism is to engage ‘Other subjectivities’ ordinarily alienated by the typical news cycle (Hartsock 7) and given the media dominance achieved by the police union in Queensland at the time, extended consideration of the Aboriginal experience brings a needed dimension to the public discourse. The question that arises however, and which guides this analysis, is how is that Aboriginal experience discursively constructed? How is the engagement of those subjectivities achieved? Given the work’s celebrated status (and what might be regarded as the credentialising apparatus of literary awards), it is important to determine how these ‘Other subjectivities’ are constituted, for the text is a culturally endorsed representation. News-framing studies of representations of Aboriginal Australians have long provided a list of identifiable frames used in Indigenous affairs reporting, and what emerges when applied here is evidence of a rhetorical mode which in fact has more in common with typical patterns of reporting than has previously been suggested. Specifically, *The Tall Man* narrativises events through the discourse of fatalism, a strongly recurring frame used in Indigenous affairs reporting that emphasises futility, hopelessness and Aboriginal as ill-destined. Further, those frames, when reproduced in *The Tall Man*, are given aesthetic qualities within a literary register, and through the literary, a cultural authority. As advocacy journalism, the book clearly identifies the ongoing legacy of our violent colonial history. Certainly the insistence of an ‘ill-fated victim’ frame can be a powerful form of protest and challenge, and there are evocative instances of this in the text, but the ethics of the representation are worth considering, especially when the frame tends to reproduce or mirror the unequal social relations Hooper sets out to challenge.

*The Tall Man* documents the death in 2004 of Moordinyi (referred to primarily as Cameron Doomadgee in the book, and (incorrectly) as Mulrunji throughout the court proceedings), a 36-year-old Aboriginal man and resident of Palm Island. While Moordinyi, intoxicated, is walking home he comes across the local police officer, Senior Sergeant Chris Hurley, and the Aboriginal

police liaison officer, Lloyd Bengaroo, arresting a man on the street. After Moordinyi challenges Bengaroo's complicity in the arrest of a fellow Aboriginal, Hurley arrests Moordinyi for public nuisance. He is taken back to the station and an hour later he is dead. His liver and portal vein are ruptured. He has four broken ribs, a black eye and other bruising. The police say there was a fall over the steps into the watch-house. The book details the death, the riot that followed the release of the first autopsy report, as well as the subsequent inquests and later, the criminal trial. (When the Coroner finds that Hurley is responsible for the death, he is charged with manslaughter, though later acquitted.)

Media attention is initially drawn to the case not because of a particularly violent death in custody, but because of the riot that came after. From the outset the community is framed as the instigators of violence, and a threat to the social order. Janine Little has recently argued that Hooper's work is a noteworthy addition to the conversation on the Palm Island riot and death in custody precisely because she did not use the 'historically predictable . . . colonialist construction of Aboriginal people' as violent social deviants, a typical news frame in Indigenous reporting (Little 48). This construction is reinforced by the daily news cycle's inadequate treatment of causal factors: the community appears irrationally violent and in need of control. One of the great contributions that *The Tall Man* makes to the public's understanding of these events is the positioning of the riot within the context of Moordinyi's untimely death and the compromised police investigation that followed it. This is the purpose of journalism in the long form. Sustained consideration of events supplies the context and explores the subjectivities that are unexamined in the short, hard news format.

The enriched context is further developed in the genre of literary journalism (also known by terms such as creative non-fiction or narrative journalism) which often uses techniques such as plot and character development that engage the reader at a different level.<sup>1</sup> It has been suggested that the 'integrity and power' of literary journalism lies in its ability to engage subjectivities (Hartsock 6). Typically identified by writing which includes substantial recognition of the writer's own subject position, it is reporting which is freed from the stated allegiance to 'objectivity' that dominates straight news reporting. For Hartsock, it is the 'arsenal of language as an aesthetic practice [which] engage[s] the subjectivities of reader and subject by means of the journalist's subjectivity' (6). This aesthetic practice enables a kind of 'cultural revelation' to take place. '[O]ne gains a better understanding or insight . . . into those once alienated subjectivities so often consigned to the cultural Other' (5). Sarah Keenan and Janine Little have both argued that Hooper's work, while always consciously constructed through her own white subject position, creates this space where Indigenous ways of interpreting the world are given due prominence. Stories of the Dreaming are evocatively reproduced as ways of knowing the world and certainly challenge the legitimacy of an imported legal system. Keenan suggests that this creates a 'space of Australian postcoloniality far more effectively than any of the legal proceedings surrounding the death did' (Keenan 173). This is highly suggestive of the 'inherent rivalry of the literary field with other fields, which may possess greater material power' (Rooney 153). As Rooney suggests, the literary can generate a moral capacity to challenge other authoritative systems, such as the law, via the authorising processes of the artist. In this way, Hooper's text successfully challenges the processes of a system which still produces disadvantageous outcomes for Aboriginal people.

In this genre, these so-called cultural revelations are attributable to the cultivation of source relationships and on-the-ground research, but they find their power through the exercise of the

literary imagination. A definition of the ‘literary’ in literary journalism must go further than indicating the presence of stylistic devices (the evocative description, the fine turn of phrase) and this is where the theorisation of literary journalism tends to fall short. As Eagleton has argued, the great variety of language types which are afforded the term literary suggest that it is not an inherent feature of a linguistic event itself that gives literature its literariness but the context in which it occurs. Literature is writing which finds itself highly valued (Eagleton 2–10). This value has an authorising quality. So, in the integrity rubric above, the revelation of the cultural Other occurs by encoding the Other within a literary context. It is via the literary gaze that the Other is revealed and authorised. This gives the aesthetics of that revelation a political value.

*The Tall Man* develops its literary credentials by drawing on canonical works such as *Heart of Darkness*, *Everyman*, and the Bible (as well as classic Australian history and anthropology). Daly has argued that the process of referencing other literary works is a process of self-authorisation as the writer demonstrates familiarity with particular types of texts and in so doing locates his or her own writing within a particular literary context (Daly 35). As well as the extensive source relationships with Moordinyi’s family (the realm of journalism practice) Hooper evidences a literary formation of ideas (literary practice). There is nothing inherently wrong in all of this; this is merely meant to demonstrate that the ‘literary’ is not limited to creative techniques but is linked to processes of cultural authorisation. The problems begin to emerge, as Hazlitt suggests, when the ‘language of the imagination’ risks ‘falling in with the language of power’ (in Daly 34). The imagination can make ‘what is politically undesirable aesthetically pleasing’ (34). For example, events and characters surrounding Moordinyi are recast within certain literary tropes which transform the local into great ‘universal’ themes: the redemptive quest, an epic sacrifice, Original Sin. Aestheticising the local *reveals* the universal. This tends to essentialise Indigeneity, as Moordinyi becomes emblematic of Australia’s dark and troubled past.

This idea of ‘cultural revelation’ is perhaps misleading for writing does not so much ‘reveal’ as ‘constitute.’ As Due and Riggs have argued: ‘there is an important relationship between discourse and subjectivity in that it is through discourse that subject positions are constituted’ (11). The constitution of subject positions is a key concern of news frame analysis that looks at the representations of Indigenous Australians. This field of research decodes the frames used in mainstream news reporting with the goal of making explicit the ongoing and unequal power relations harboured in our language systems. Discourse analysis of news demonstrates the ways particular language patterns or codes can be perpetuated and become habitual ways of conceiving the news (Due and Riggs 9). Importantly, the presence of the discourse itself is not necessarily reflective of the reporter’s point of view or ‘stable attitudes,’ but that the writer ‘is simply drawing on the dominant discourses available to them about a particular issue’ (Due and Riggs 8–9). In other words, a writer might easily reproduce the codes of the discourse without realising it. Linguistic patterns have a constitutive power; they are tasked with bringing the world into discursive being. These ‘interpretive repertoires’ (10)—reproduced both in news frames and the literary imagination—become codes that can implicitly order our thinking. As Eagleton suggests: ‘Interests are *constitutive* of our knowledge, not merely prejudices which imperil it’ (Eagleton 14). It should be acknowledged that the history of Indigenous/non-Indigenous relations in Australia makes the non-Indigenous reporting of Indigenous stories inherently difficult (Little 48). The purpose of investigating the fatalism frame in this text is to consider the negative implications of a narrative that portrays violence against Aboriginal people as inevitable and which undermines people’s claims for hope. This may well be a narrative strategy designed to

provoke, but Hooper's honest accounts where she felt 'the whole thing was hopeless' (94) can encourage the reader to agree.

In the section that follows I will describe the discourse of fatalism as a framing concept and provide brief examples of how it works in *The Tall Man*. The final section closely tracks the code in the literary workings of the text.

### **The Fatalism Frame**

All communicators engage in framing. A frame is merely 'a central organizing idea for making sense of relevant events and suggesting what is at issue' (Kuypers 300). It is the goal of discourse analysis to identify those organising ideas and reveal 'the taken-for-granted forms' in which social power is maintained (Brough 90). 'Aborigines as failures' and 'the victims of whites' are two themes initially identified in the seminal Jakubowicz study of relevance here (see Due and Riggs 3). These themes, brought together in the context of a history of dispossession, provide the framework for fatalism. Stereotypic representations of Aboriginal people, such as drunkenness, poor health and family violence (Hollinsworth 17), when filtered through the fatalism frame, link such behaviours to policy or personal failure or crisis. Within the nuances of the frame, the root cause might be a failure of personal responsibility, or an inevitable effect of colonisation. Aboriginality itself becomes the problem. Hooper's portrayal of the Palm Island community in general emphasises these stereotypes, despite the fact that Moordinyi's death is a result of other causes entirely.

While fatalism often emanates from a position of sympathy, the frame itself is 'stigmatising and disempowering' (Brough 90). It is negative because it 'constructs a picture of inevitability that provides no conceptual space for a language of change' (Brough 93). In *The Tall Man*, Aboriginal people (past and present) are seemingly at the mercy of every condition: the mischievous, random spirits (the mythical tall men), the sea of blue uniformed tall men (the police), the missionaries, the welfare office, the legal system. Within this historical context, Hooper mythologises Palm Island as perpetual 'frontier' and its violent history of Wild Time becomes an inescapable fact of the present. History is set to repeat itself.

Mickler makes the point that to continually explain extraordinary life events for Aboriginals in the context of Aboriginality and the history of dispossession, is to 'buy into' the systems of representation that limit the authentic conceptualisation of Aboriginal citizenship. He writes that 'habits of verbal associations . . . can chain indigenous people to limited forms of personhood, that can make them stand for certain objects whether or not they are intended or would wish to' (Mickler 285). In other words, the positioning of Aboriginal people as ill-fated victims of colonisation undermines the conception that an Aboriginal person can be a fully authentic citizen with ordinary citizen claims. Aboriginality is therefore equated with 'a culturally compromised citizenship' (Mickler 283). Hooper very clearly seeks to make sense of this death in the context of colonisation and dispossession and Moordinyi's story is told 'as if it were the bigger, untold story of white Australia . . . the depiction of Aboriginal dispossession . . . runs like a scar' throughout. (Little 49) Moordinyi's death is made to stand for other stories, and the structure of the text plots the death as inevitable (as the next section will show).

The sense of inevitable tragedy is illustrative of the discourse of fatalism. This frame tends to emphasise ongoing crisis, cultural and policy failures and hopelessness (Brough 92–93), all of which feature heavily in this text. While context can provide important illuminating detail and produce clarification (as discussed earlier), a context painted too broadly can obscure a clear reading of events, and instead seems to encourage the accumulation of despair. At one point, Hooper mentions a case of infant rape, part of *The Little Children are Sacred* report, the release of which was contemporaneous with Hurley's trial. The incident has no bearing on Moordinyi's case and occurred in the Northern Territory. However, Hooper makes the tenuous causal connection that the perpetrator and the baby's mother came from Palm Island. She suggests: 'There are reasons for complete social breakdown, and one of them must be people being forcibly taken from their parents, who had in turn been taken from their parents, who'd been taken from theirs' (244). This may well be true, but the problem here is that Moordinyi's death in custody is not a result of particular problems in the Northern Territory. It is not at all clear why Moordinyi's death needs to be contextualised within social breakdown rhetoric as if social breakdown is somehow responsible, when the Coroner found Moordinyi's arrest to be 'completely unjustified' (186). As such, the responsibility for his death lies elsewhere. This is an example of what Mickler has described as a discursive chain of association which ties events such as a black death in custody to the continuous representations of 'Aboriginal dysfunction.' Causation is thus linked primarily to Aboriginality (Mickler 285). When Moordinyi's death is explained in context of the history of dispossession, his death is cast as inevitable and a consequence of his Aboriginality. Whereas, in fact, a fatal injury sustained in a police watch-house is a matter in which all citizens have a direct stake. While Hooper outlines the compromised nature of the police investigation, the overwhelming sense of inevitability created by the framing of Moordinyi's Indigeneity perpetuates a fatalist myth.

Brough draws a connection between fatalistic discourse and the 'doomed race theory' and while there is no suggestion here that Hooper's efforts are sympathetic to that worldview, it is useful to see where the language signals appear historically, to better critique a modern fatalist frame. As Brough explains: 'the mechanics of . . . extinction were commonly understood to be related to an inability of the "weaker race" to adapt to [the stronger]' He argues that alcohol is an integral part of this clash. Brough quotes the 1891 writings of anthropologist Alfred Howitt, who writes: 'in all parts of Australia the native race is doomed to destruction sooner or later; contact with the white race is fatal; the aborigines lose the original savage virtue, and acquire instead our vices which destroy them' (97).

We can hear a similar refrain here, where Hooper imagines Moordinyi in his 'natural state':

Sitting with Cameron's family on their ancestral land, I felt closer to imagining what made him happy. Post-European Aboriginal male culture has kept the element of hunting and fishing that Cameron loved, but adds drinking. Fishing is a balm, a respite. Cameron had set out to borrow a boat the morning he died, but in the last hour of his life all his worlds folded in. With Hurley he was back suddenly in Wild Time. (125)

Hooper suggests a pre-contact natural state—the hunter—and the corruptible nature of white contact, ending with inevitable, inescapable violence. This is a conventional reading of contact history indeed. It should be acknowledged that Keenan makes a compelling argument that the

legal geography of Palm Island will continue to reproduce colonial relations, showing how particular laws and policies continue to create specific places of violence and tension (178–80). It may be that Hooper's writing is trapped in a similar way. Hooper characterises history as a disabling force. She writes that Palm Island: 'is a place where history is so close to the surface, so omnipresent, it seems to run parallel with daily life' (10). The history that is 'omnipresent' (70) is the history of Wild Time (56). This is our dark colonial history. Hooper suggests that history is inescapable but this can shift focus away from key cause and effect in this case, and draws a larger and overwhelming context to makes sense of the tragedy. In Hooper's imagining, Palm Islanders are trapped in an historical construct that can only be fatal. When Hooper wonders: 'Why raise them to die so young?' (238) it is fatalism's melancholic refrain. Given that unequal power relations are reproduced here by the fatalistic frame itself, it is uncertain if the text ultimately creates a different kind of space.

### Aestheticising the Discourse

The late nineteenth century literary tradition of writing on tropical North Queensland tends to situate the tropics within a Garden of Eden/Hell dichotomy, and also as a place where the white man is tested (Zeller 199). *The Tall Man* fits within this tradition. Hooper's Palm Island is paradise after the Fall and *The Tall Man* operates within biblical and apocalyptic literary tropes ranging from Genesis to the Book of Revelation, which when subverted as they are here, serve to demonstrate that colonial contact is invariably corrupting and endlessly fatal.

The book is set primarily on Palm Island, but metaphorically it is set beyond the reaches of civilisation, in the *heart of darkness* (81). Hurley is both the 'archetypal sheriff' (19) and Mr Kurtz (81) on the 'edges of so-called civilisation' (20). The very streets have 'an edge of menace' and the island shimmers with a 'kind of fever . . . like some brilliant hallucination' (20). The island has an inescapable nightmarish quality.

Grafted onto island life are the features of a mediaeval morality play. 'Sometimes Hurley can seem like Everyman walking through a landscape where the characters are Death, Drunkenness, Violence & Despair' (167). Hurley as white Everyman is capable of salvation; indeed, Hooper suggests that the Townsville jury 'forgives him' rather than acquits him. Further, this construction posits him as agent, able to move through the static tableaux of Indigenous archetypal correlates: Death and Drunkenness, Violence and Despair. This is one of the inherent 'risks of narrative' in creative approaches to non-fiction. Eggins has argued: 'the risk of using fictional strategies is that one will interpret real life in the simplifying archetypes of fiction' (Eggins 130). The designation of archetypes here reflects—and elevates, via the literary mode—a particular political position. Everyman is white. The characters like Drunkenness are black, and therefore always characterised as *other* to the universal norm. The white man has agency and it is his character which is tested; the black man stumbles between violence and despair.

Palm Island becomes the fatal frontier where contact is inherently the great corrupter. Several times Hooper considers the potential 'contagion' of such a menacing place: 'Can you step into this dysfunction and desperation and not be corrupted in some way?' (81). The concept of corruption is calculated, for she also draws biblical parallels with the Fall, stating that Moordinyi's death 'took the nation back to its original sin' (243). Hooper writes: 'What if sin is contagious? What if . . . fighting a war against savagery, you become savage yourself?' (119).

While the Original Sin is constructed as the murderous violence of colonisation, the contagion is largely contained to the colonised, except at flashpoints on the frontline. The original corrupting contact sets off an irrecoverable descent. Despite the disturbing language of contagious corruption, it is here that Hooper becomes self-reflexive about the almost seductive nature of available codes and tropes, as she establishes awareness of how her own understanding is discursively constructed. In trying to understand the policeman's point of view, she writes, quoting Conrad: 'Could anyone not be overcome by the "growing regrets, the longing to escape, the powerless disgust, the surrender, the hate"? Or had I read *Heart of Darkness* too many times?' (82). While this reflection perhaps creates a space to challenge the construct, the literary reference nevertheless extends the aesthetic range of her speaking position. When she later tells of the 'horror' (below) it is difficult not to hear *the horror, the horror*.

From the outset, Hooper constructs a discourse of doom. The opening pages give account of the mischievous spirits who 'move unseen in the night and do evil. By day they slide back into the country's sandstone cliffs, living in the cracks' (1). She also describes depictions of police in local cave paintings and the failure of Indigenous sorcery in the face of firearms (2). These two representations taken together present the spiritual and historical context of what is to come. In both examples, Aboriginal people are threatened by forces beyond their control; firstly by the mythical 'tall men' who practice random (but non-deadly) violence (60) and secondly, by the police, the analogous 'tall men' who are armed and more destructive. In a mirror description of the opening, Hurley is mythologised during the trial: 'He was like an evasive spirit, hiding in the legal cracks. The law pretended it could pin him down, cut him down to size' (237).

This is a strategic narrative structure that builds atmosphere to 'foretell' a terrible death. Explicitly, Moordinyi and Hurley run headlong into their shared fate. She compares the two men's lives: 'As Hurley picked his way along the police career path, the other man was like his shadow. The date of their meeting was gaining on him. Hurley had success in his name, Cameron had doom in his' (240). Moordinyi thus becomes the inevitable victim of historical processes. He is doomed whereas Hurley has at least enough agency to strategically *pick his way* through a career path. I say 'at least' because the narrative here suggests that the 'date of their meeting' was also out of Hurley's control. This meeting is pre-ordained for both of them because of their social relations.

The book is as much a retelling of the 'Tall Man' myth as it is a record of Moordinyi's tragic confrontation with a flesh and blood tall man (Keenan 174). The 'Tall Man' is a resonant metaphor which requires analysis. It is problematic to suggest that police brutality belongs in the realm of metaphysical mischief for very little can be done to combat metaphysical mischief, especially since from the outset it is made clear that Indigenous sorcery appears a hopeless failure. 'The *purri purri* had not worked' (3). The final lines of *The Tall Man* suggest the impenetrability and 'untouchable' nature of the Queensland police force. Hooper describes the police march to celebrate Hurley's freedom. He plays with a little girl in the crowd, 'pretending to be a monster . . . there he was, the Tall Man. But when I looked for him [again] in the parade I couldn't find him. It was as if he'd dissolved into a long stream of blue' (266). The implication, linked as it is to Tall Man mythology, is that Hurley is just one of hundreds of tall men whose ability to wreak mischief through random violence will remain unchecked; the fatalist circle is complete. Hooper's critique of the formidability of the police force is well-pointed; police solidarity is an obstacle to achieving substantive justice (as the commissioner of the third inquiry

into Moordinyi's death found) but to cast them as the tall men is to mythologise a power relationship which, while historically fraught, cannot be accepted as eternally assured. To cast the police as tall men is to create a discursive chain that perpetually links Aboriginality to violence and loss; as Mickler argues, these 'discursive chains' undermine the possibility to conceive of Aboriginality as anything but a compromised form of citizenship (283).

The accumulation of despair leads Hooper to suggest that the pursuit of justice for Moordinyi is a red herring, 'a false battleground' (243). Just prior to the verdict being delivered, the *Little Children are Sacred* report is released. This (unrelated) event is the final straw. She writes:

Reading of this horror . . . I wondered what the point of justice for poor dead Cameron Doomadgee was. The war between police and Indigenous Australians is a false battleground. The spotlight on Hurley and Doomadgee locked in a death struggle ignored the great horror taking place offstage. The . . . report described Australia after the Fall. It seemed to me that concentrating on a white man killing a black man took the nation back to its original sin, as if expurgation of this would stem the rivers of grog and the tides of violence drowning life in these communities. If we could absolve ourselves of this first sin we might be able to pretend that the later ones—the ones now killing a generation—happened in a realm beyond our reach and responsibility. (243–44)

The passage is instructive in how verbal chains of association work, and how they can be reified in this genre. Interestingly, however, in a powerful invocation of an authorising trope, the fatalism shifts from Aboriginal to National fatalism. When Hooper refers to the men 'locked in a death struggle' under a 'spotlight' and makes reference to events 'offstage,' she creates another tableau, and the local reveals the universal. Again the archetypal forms emerge as Hooper declares the death a re-enactment of the Original Sin (here the 'Original Sin' conflates with Cain's murder of Abel). The ritualised violence and sacrifice in this passage seems to enact an Australian curse. (When Cain murders Abel and does not repent, he is cursed by God.) By denoting this colonial violence as the nation's Original Sin, the violence *will be* endlessly repeated until there is adequate repentance and redemption. This is also an example of how the 'engagement of subjectivities' can be constructed. White Australians, 'we,' from 'our' safe distances, are all implicated in this challenge.

The problem is the essentialising discourse of the 'Aboriginal Problem.' Hooper suggests that if the two issues are not morally linked, they should be, (she says that absolution of one does not constitute absolution of the other). This is an example of where verbal chains of association are too strong. What happens if the two are disconnected? The focus on a 'white man killing a black man' is only one way of analysing this case. This frame places emphasis only on the brutalities of the colonial context, that inescapable history of 'Wild Time,' the overwhelming nature of which leads Hooper to ponder sadly what the point is. What if we shifted emphasis onto a different construction: a police officer killing an ordinary citizen after a false arrest? Surely all citizens have an investment in the point of pursuing justice under these terms? Here, ordinary claims under the rule of law are undermined due to Moordinyi's status as Aboriginal. These discursive chains essentialise Indigeneity by conflating the issues confronting different communities, and in so doing, makes Moordinyi's death represent much more than it should.

The discursive chain can be broken if focus shifts away from the inevitability of violence onto an examination of proper police conduct *per se*, which is an ordinary citizen claim. In this way proper emphasis is placed on scrutinising the apparatus of state power, which should be a shared concern, rather than seeing Aboriginality as the primary causal factor in this tragedy and, as suggested, the tragedies that inevitably must follow. Mickler states:

We can stop maintaining the chains of this culture game by working to uphold the non-exceptional status of Aboriginality at sites where the shared, universal and mundane interests and concerns of citizens, rather than the particularities of cultural populations, can be realised. This starting point of a practical ethics of representation is eminently strategic—strategic to the *discursive democratisation of Aboriginal status* that is essential if indigenous Australians are to achieve socioeconomic and cultural equality. (286)

These discursive chains of association lead Hooper to her defeatist proposition: that justice for Moordinyi and his family is not worth it given what else is going on in ‘these communities.’ Moordinyi’s claims are therefore undervalued and he is not treated as an equal.

The dilemma which arises from this emblematic death struggle when it is embedded within this discourse is that the nation may never be redeemed. Hooper’s hope is certainly fragile. This is made explicit when she attends a church service, where the preacher is discussing the Second Coming:

‘The returning Lord will come at an unexpected time, but a time with specific observable signs. There are signs all around us. There are murders, there are rapes, there are all kinds of things going on.’ I assumed she was talking about Palm Island, but she continued: ‘We are fortunate in this community because nothing has happened to us yet.’ Are you *serious*? I thought . . . This place was a black hole into which people had fallen. Rocks may as well rain down. (78–79)

The preacher here is referring to the apocalyptic writing in Revelation. As an important aside, this revelation is not meant to be prophecy about a destructive Armageddon. The apocalyptic genre first emerged when Israel had lost its political independence and apocalyptic writing was meant to demonstrate to the people that earthly political power relations can, and do, change, that evil will be overcome, and that God’s will ultimately prevails (van Daalen 8). Apocalyptic writing is designed to bring comfort to the distressed, and to distress the comfortable (8). The Palm Island preacher is attempting to deliver a message of hope to her congregation, yet Hooper dismantles it. For Hooper this is a Doomsday manifest; as she says, this is a black hole, for people—at one point she says ‘zombies’ (95)—to fall into. Despite her apparent sympathies, Hooper takes on a superior speaking position; her commentary inserts itself (‘Are you *serious*?’) and undermines the expression of the Preacher’s faith in salvation.

*The Tall Man* is undoubtedly an important contribution to understanding this case. Hooper amply demonstrates the systemic barriers existing for Aboriginal people who come in contact with the justice system and these reflections are made more compelling by the engaging narrative options available in this genre. But there are risks too in aestheticising events: this can ultimately blur proper causal connections, and the deployment of archetypes means that people and events stand

for more than they should. This book is important in the body of work that has been generated around Moordinyi's death, in many ways more so than the academic literature since *The Tall Man* enjoyed a large, general audience. This mode is a powerful vehicle to raise political consciousness of an issue, and certainly victim stories can be moving and challenging stories, but we must be mindful of frames that mirror unequal social relations and reinforce a sense of hopelessness or inevitable violence.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For an introduction to the form of literary journalism, see Norman Sims' introduction (pp 3–25) in Sims, N. ed. *The Literary Journalists*. New York: Ballantine, 1984. Useful (and reasonably rare) theoretical explorations of the form appear in Keeble, Richard and Sharon Wheeler eds. *The Journalistic Imagination: Literary Journalists from Defoe to Capote and Carter*. Routledge: London, 2007. For a brief summary on the multiplicity of terms in use to denote the genre, see Ricketson, M. 'The Vibrant State of Book-Length Journalism in Australia'. *Australian Journalism Review* 32.1 (2010): 67–79. Also, Egginis, S. 'Real Stories: Ethics and Narrative in Helen Garner's *Joe Cinque's Consolation*'. *Southerly* 65.1 (2005): 122–32.

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