Into the Haunted Forest: Reading Anti-Extractivism in Aammton Alias's *The Last Bastion of Ingei*

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Abstract

This article posits gothic depictions of the haunted forest as important counter-narratives to extractivist representations of nature in public narratives in Brunei, including government policy and advertising for environmental tourism. Critical discussion will focus on a contemporary Bruneian text, Aammton Alias's *The Last Bastion of Ingei* (2016). Using a localized EcoGothic critical framework, I argue that the novel reflects Indigenous ecological beliefs and practices, wherein nature and the supernatural destabilize and undermine anthropocentric ways of knowing and relating to the nonhuman. EcoGothic narratives can thus be seen as crucial representational models of anti-extractivism that reimagine human-nonhuman relations beyond anthropocentric epistemologies. To this end, I examine the ways in which nature and the supernatural are portrayed and how nonhuman agencies disrupt anthropocentric narration and reading. This article also makes a case for the diversification of local literary and cultural production to effectively reorient public narratives of the environment.

Keywords: EcoGothic, extractivism, Bruneian literature, Indigenous ecological knowledge

What are *orang bunian*? This is the question that prompted my exploration into the Bruneian EcoGothic. Searching for a definition revealed multiple, varied responses: at times, these forest-dwelling entities are described as being similar to "fairies and elves" (Yahya 23) and other times they are said to be "extremely beautiful" human-like beings (Yousof "Orang Bunian"). The term *bunian* itself is similar to *bunyi* (sound) as well as *sembunyi* (hide), leading to differing literal translations of *orang bunian* as "whistling" or "hidden" people (Shaari 16). These contesting definitions suggest an agentic refusal to be homogenized and defined in limiting anthropocentric terms. Yet, a common thread that runs through descriptions of *orang bunian* is their integral intermediary role in human-nature relations for Indigenous forest-dependent communities such as the Dusun in Brunei and wider Borneo (Roseberg 63), the Indonesian Minangkabau (Herbowo 65), and the Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia (Lim, Norya and Norshakila 41). Although elusive and intangible, the assumed presence of *orang*

bunian within the forest enforces specific spiritual, religious, and *ecological* practices on humans who wish to enter the forest space (ibid). The spirit-mediated interspecies relations displayed by these Indigenous communities appear to subvert the "monstrous anthropocentric gaze" (David Del Principe 2), which renders the non-human controllable and *extractable* — a resource for humans to use. In other words, the nonhuman beings and entities in these cases exemplify an *anti-extractiveness* that may be central to a reimagining of nature in Bruneian public discourse, especially within media, tourism, and government policy, for a sustainable future.

This article examines the haunted forest and its supernatural inhabitants in Aammton Alias' *The Last Bastion of Ingei* (2016), arguing that their portrayals destabilize anthropocentric perspectives and call for anti-extractive human-nonhuman relations. Drawing on insights from the burgeoning field of EcoGothic studies, I argue that *The Last Bastion* reveals an *ecological* capacity for the unknown nonhuman world within contemporary Bruneian cultural consciousness. This notably differs from the ecophobia identified in many Western EcoGothic narratives, which are, as Sharae Deckard points out, "suffused with loathing, fear, disgust and horror, often attributing a capacity for retribution to a vengeful Nature, personified as malevolent antagonist" (174). Influenced by Indigenous ecological knowledge and practices, *The Last Bastion* shows an anti-extractivist acceptance of the limits of human understanding and ways of knowing that make space for nonhuman and more-than-human agencies and epistemologies. In doing so, the novel provides a useful narrative model for rethinking objectified and extractivist depictions of nature in mainstream and public discourse. To effectively intervene in extractive discourses, this article also makes a case for democratizing and diversifying processes of local literary production.

Such critical work on societal and cultural imaginaries of the environment becomes more urgent especially in light of the latest (at the time of writing this article) Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report, which "recognizes the interdependence of climate, ecosystems and biodiversity, and human societies and [the need to integrate] knowledge more strongly across the natural, ecological, social and economic sciences than earlier IPCC assessments" (IPCC 3). The report echoes the long-held sentiment within the environmental humanities that climate change, biodiversity loss, and environmental degradation are not just techno-scientific issues, but a social sciences and humanities one as well (Heise 5). Within the Bruneian context, sociocultural factors driving anthropogenic climate change have been similarly iterated with one study identifying "the difficulty of changing the people's mindset" as hindering the adoption of climate change mitigation and adaptation measures (Sukri and

Wah 33). Additionally, exacerbating this issue is a lack of rigorous environmental and climate reporting in the local media. This has also been identified as a problem in promoting awareness of environmental issues among the public, especially in connection to climate change (Sharifah, Khairunnisa and Najib 221). This article adds to the growing scholarship on Bruneian environmental and climate perspectives by examining local gothic fiction as an alternative repository and platform for ecological wisdom.

Applying the EcoGothic Lens to the Bruneian Haunted Forest

Stories of haunted forests illustrate a culturally nuanced view of human-nature or human-nonhuman relations in Brunei that go beyond the oft-promoted romanticized images of seemingly tranquil, dense rainforest (*Nature & Wildlife*). With more than 70% of the land covered by mostly pristine forest (The World Bank), it is unsurprising that forests have a strong presence in the national literary and cultural imaginary. Brunei's toponymical history, for instance, reflects the formative and interdependent relations between forests and inhabitants or neighbouring human communities. Many of the existing *kampong* and other place names are taken from names of trees and plants such as Kampong Piasau, Lugu and Tanah Jambu, to name a few. But even more significantly, these forest-proximate places are also associated with various Indigenous legends, folklore, and myths (Rozan 97). Kampong Piasau, for instance, is said to be named by local Kedayans after young coconut trees that were trampled upon by a large number of visitors to the area to court a known beauty called Dang Umai (Maslin 22-23). Any study of local forests, then, must consider the sociocultural contexts that are formative to local perceptions and attitudes towards the environment. To say that "For Brunei Malays the forest has become an empty space, its historicity denied," (Ellen 24) is to misconstrue and/or overlook the place that forests occupy in the local imaginary, much of which is made manifest in gothic stories.

The gothic has always "ensure[d] that what we see is always haunted by something else, by that which has not quite been seen, in history or in text" (Punter 3). Accordingly, within the context of Brunei, gothic narratives have been seen as offering alternative perspectives of the nation that veer away from the Malay, Islamic, and monarchic ideologies encoded within the national philosophy of *Melayu Islam Beraja* (MIB). For instance, in Kathrina Daud's study of *Mode Seram*, a popular Bruneian online platform that posts reader-submitted ghost stories, she states that the stories "can be read as harking back to the pre-Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, animist, polytheistic history of Brunei, a history which disturbs and intrudes and resurfaces and is able to be resisted but never erased completely" ("Ghosts" 608). Similarly, Hannah Ho's reading of

The Bunian Conspiracy: The Last Bastion of Ingei, argues that the appearance of the supernatural "threatens to expose the frailty of social organizations constructed for imperialistic goals," (56) in addition to, I would add, nationalistic ones. But rather than reading these supernatural disruptions as symbolic of other silenced human communities within Brunei, the EcoGothic takes a more literal reading by attempting to relocate the nonhuman within the national discourse of history.

I base my own working definition of the EcoGothic on the co-founders of the *Gothic Nature* journal, Elizabeth Parker and Michelle Poland's shared notion of the EcoGothic as "a *way* of interrogating and interpreting the intriguing darkness in our increasingly troubled relationship to and representations of the more-than-human world" (11). Necessary to the adoption of the EcoGothic lens, I would add, is acknowledgement of the ways in which notions of darkness are shaped by cultural, ethnic, spiritual, and religious particularities. Here, I extend Deckard's call for "socio-ecological" considerations of gothic narratives (175) by also addressing the fluid, rather than self-evidentiary, nature of Indigeneity within Brunei and the wider Southeast Asian region (Chua and Rusaslina 2). This is an important point to note given that current dominant notions of Indigeneity are presented "mainly as a riposte to the violence and injustices of colonialism/colonization; i.e., contexts with a clear rupturous line between marginalized Indigenous people and dominant others" (Chua and Rusaslina 6). While the predominance of the Brunei Malays would presume a marginalization of other Indigenous communities in accordance with Euro-American ideas of Indigeneity (2),[1] this presumption would ignore the interconnected histories and origins between all the Indigenous ethnic groups (King 28).[2] In Southeast Asia, including Brunei, where "potentially everyone is 'Indigenous'" (Chua and Rusaslina 7), the postcolonial thrust of the term gives way to a recognition of its fluidity in a region marked by "continual waves of migration, ethnic fluidity and intermarriage […] and where political dominance and oppression are not solely the legacies of European colonialism" (2). The dynamic interactions of histories and cultures of the various Indigenous communities, including the Brunei Malays, within Bruneian society helps to explain the ongoing influence of Indigenous ecological wisdom in post-independent Brunei, where the officiation of MIB as the national philosophy in 1984 posed a risk to the preservation and circulation of Indigenous narratives.

By paying attention to the cultural specificities of EcoGothic narratives, different questions emerge that broaden the scope of EcoGothic studies, which have previously tended towards uncovering repressed nonhuman and more-than-human agencies (Deckard 174; Ancuta 211). In a region where not every supernatural entity "must necessarily speak of

repression or past trauma" (Ancuta 211), it is perhaps more productive to shift the EcoGothic question from what is being made unconscious to how do we treat that which refuses to be made conscious? In other words, how do we come to terms with, and bring to the fore, the idea that "Nature is not a backdrop for human action but a mode where the anthropocentric gaze is defeated"? (Byrne 966). This article hopes to address this question by examining contemporary Bruneian EcoGothic narratives that portray alternative and ecologically just forms of interspecies relations guided by Indigenous ecological knowledge where the human is decentered.

Extractive Practices and Extractivist Discourses

According to Justin Parks, if extraction refers to "large-scale, profit-driven operations for the removal and processing of natural resources such as hydrocarbons, minerals, lumber, and other materials," then extractivism "refers more generally to a mindset in which resources serve a means-ends function, becoming commodities to be extrapolated and turned to profit" (353). An extractive discourse is thus one in which "nature is always-already construed as 'natural resource'" and where "humans understand nature primarily as something other than themselves, disposed for their use, and subject to their control" (Szeman and Wenzel 509). Speaking of extractivism broadens critical discussions beyond the processes of resource extraction to include the ideologies and discourses that engender extractive practices in the first place and that lead to multiple global crises and global inequalities (Hagolani-Albov et al.). Studies of EcoGothic narratives that demonstrate anti-extractivist qualities thus become helpful in imagining other, more sustainable ways of perceiving and portraying the environment.

Such extractivist discourse appears in the 2021 annual Mid-Year Conference and Exhibition in Brunei, where one of the conferences focused on "Forests and Biodiversity: Unveiling Its Economic Potential", which was organized by the Bruneian Government's Ministry of Industry and Primary Resources through the Forestry Department in collaboration with the Brunei Climate Change Secretariat. The theme alone already reveals the objectification of the forest as resource to be extracted for economic gain, even as it highlights the forest as an important area for biodiversity, which should presumably be protected from extractive activities. Extractivism is also on display in the Forestry Department's General Policy Statement:

> In pursuance of national development objectives and consistent with global strategies on biogeoecology in which the forests play a vital role, the Government of Brunei Darussalam commits itself to conserve, develop and manage its forests resources for the preservation and upliftment of the

> quality of life; the promotion of social, political and economic well-being of the people, and technological progress of the country; and for bringing about environmental amenity and ecological equilibrium over a time continuum. (Forestry Department, Ministry of Industry and Primary Resources)

In their contradictory aims "to conserve, develop and manage," the forest is seen as a somewhat magical and impossibly infinite resource, with a crucial role to play in almost all aspects of human and planetary wellbeing. The fantastically well-rounded policy aim, covering social, political, economic, technological, and ecological domains, is both cognizant of and voids the forest's anti-extractiveness as its acknowledged entangled relations with human lives are downgraded to mere functional roles. This is demonstrative of what Adrian Ivakhiv calls the "ecological 'unconscionisation' – the rendering unconscious of ecological destruction" by systems and institutions of power such as national governments, military forces, and multinational corporations (108). In unquestioningly highlighting the forest's potential as a resource for "ecological equilibrium" *as well as* "economic well-being", the policy, with the authoritative backing of two government bodies, further obscures the ecological detriment necessary for economic progress. Such harmful and misleading renderings of nature in official national narratives feeds into extractive discourses that engender further ecological imbalance. Another prominent example of ecological unconscionisation is Brunei's dominant oil-and-gas industry that makes up nearly half of the national GDP and 90% of exports ("Overview"). Although the extraction, production, and consumption of oil results in the loss of biodiversity and exhaustion of ecologies when land and seabed are drilled (Johnston, Lim and Roh 187), such ecological devastation is overlooked as Brunei's oil wealth has resulted in a high standard of living for Bruneian citizens, who benefit from free education, healthcare, no income tax, and most importantly fuel subsidies, which itself leads to wasteful energy use, resulting in a higher ecological footprint and environmental devastation per individual (Solarin "Introduction"). Given the pervasiveness of extractivism and increasing calls for decarbonization worldwide, searching for local anti-extractive narratives becomes more urgent as a way to shift mainstream narratives of the environment.

Anti-Extractivism in *The Last Bastion of Ingei*

The anti-extractive forest space becomes manifest in Alias's *The Last Bastion of Ingei*, the first instalment in the ongoing *The Bunian Conspiracy* series, which draws on Bruneian and Bornean Indigenous-based human-*orang bunian* relations to create an imagined world wherein

the human realm is intertwined with the spiritual dimension of the *orang bunian*. In the novel, peace between the two realms is maintained through controlled and limited interaction as outlined in the *Amanah* treaty (Malay for "responsibility"), not unlike the forest rituals observed by many Indigenous communities in Borneo. The events of the series are prompted by collision of the two realms through the breaking of the peace treaty by the Hilagaans, an *orang bunian* race that conquers the territories of another *orang bunian* race, the Azzahans, seeking to take control of the Sungai Ingei jungle in the human realm. Notably, Sungai Ingei takes its name from the forest of the same name in Ulu Belait (interior part of the Belait district) in Brunei.[3] Known as home to a diverse group of flora, fauna, Bruneians and non-Bruneians, the Sungai Ingei jungle presents the ideal space in which to explore various forms of multispecies interactions, while simultaneously underscoring the forest's centrality to the livelihoods of both its human and nonhuman inhabitants.

However, to describe the series of events, i.e. the beginning of the interdimensional war, as being driven by the Hilagaans' conquest is arguably misleading and an example of extractivism and anthropocentric bias in narrating and interpreting. As Lord Jahat, the leader of the Hilagaans, points out midway in *The Last Bastion*, it is the humans' violent extractive practices that provoked the Hilagaans to fight back: "Man takes and destroys – he even kills our sacred defenseless pangolins – the creature that holds the key to stabilizing our home world and our beautiful city of Hilaga" (61). Given modern Brunei's reliance on oil, it is not difficult to read the human killing of the pangolins in this instance as being representative of the nation's ongoing extraction of fossil fuels and the disregard for the consequential ecological devastation. This revelation places into question the initial extractive framing of the story that valorizes the human characters by *using* the nonhuman as antagonist: the "prequel" shows a human military team being sent to the forest on a missing-persons rescue mission and suddenly coming under attack by nonhuman forces (16-28). This unquestioned role of "savior" and "victim" accorded to the humans becomes overturned with the Hilagaans' version of historical events. Readers are then reminded to reserve judgment and to critically assess their own anthropocentric positionality: who can justly, in an anti-extractive way, narrate these multispecies stories and how do we make space for nonhuman agencies within them?

The Last Bastion appears to respond to this question in its expansive and fractured narrative framework. The novel is narrated by 14 human and nonhuman characters located across various dimensions, the story staccato-ed into 65 sections with each section lasting no more than 10 pages. This effects a disorienting reading experience – it was reviewed as "too long, too confusing" in a local news outlet (Kathrina, "Dr. Kat Reviews") – that arguably refuses to cater

to the readers' comfort or comprehension. Readers are forced to return multiple times to re-read certain subplots that end abruptly to make way for other stories taking place in other dimensions. Even within a section first-person-narrated by a human character, the perspective can suddenly shift to third person and focus on a lurking *orang bunian* presence (Alias, *Last Bastion* 92). But this seems to be the kind of discomforting critical work that needs to be done in order to shed human-centered perspectives and to allow nonhuman agencies to emerge and intervene in this age of the Anthropocene. This narrative framework resists extractivist perspectives wherein nonhuman agency is suppressed and packaged neatly as a resource for human consumption – in this case as characters that behave according to human expectations in narrative frameworks that valorize the human. Such fractures in narration, nonlinear reading, and multi-spatial settings force readers to consider what multispecies coexistence might look like inclusive of nonhuman experiences of subjectivity, time, and space.

Significantly, this discomforting reading experience mirrors the gothic unease that marks the human characters' interactions with the supernatural. But it is particularly the Indigenous characters that more readily accept this discomforting experience as part and parcel of a multispecies coexistence: to live with the agentic unknown *is* a gothic experience and should be seen as part of the everyday. For instance, Adib, an environmental activist with Kedayan ancestry, has been visited by "presence[s]" his whole life, so he has grown "familiar" with the feeling of "being watched" (40). Manis, an Iban woman who loses her family to a Hilaga attack in Sungai Ingei, has no hesitation in explaining to her younger Muslim cousin about the "evil spirits" that lurk in the jungle (128) even as she herself "freeze[s] with fear" when encountering them (169). This nod to Indigenous culture and traditions is important given the significance accorded to the supernatural in their beliefs and customs, as exemplified earlier by the place of the *orang bunian* in many Indigenous communities. This thus presents a key element of anti-extractive interspecies relations, which is the capacity to accommodate the unknown world into one's belief system. Manis points to this capacity as she explains to her cousin the Iban reliance on the *bugang* bird as messenger between the human and spiritual realm of safe entry into the forest (128), a belief that also bears resemblance to the Dusun belief in omen birds (Bantong 108).[4] Notably, it is her belief in the power of the nonhuman that saves her as she meets and "absurd[ly]" (231) follows a pangolin out of the dangers of Sungai Ingei.

The supernatural guiding power of the haunted forest space here speaks particularly to its radical place in contemporary Bruneian culture. Fascinating studies on traditional healing practices in Brunei found that Indigenous medicinal practices, which rely heavily on forest plants and spiritual rituals, are still prevalent even among the Muslim Malays despite the

conflicting belief in the monotheistic worship of Allah (Roseberg 5; Walker 24). This pertinently points to the existing ecological capacity within Bruneian contemporary culture for the nonhuman world – a capacity likely shaped by Brunei's rich history and the presence of Indigenous communities and traditions that continue to influence contemporary society and culture. Haunted forest narratives are therefore not only important critiques of limiting and extractive portrayals of nature but are also valuable repositories of Indigenous ecological wisdom with the potential to intervene in extractive narratives, especially those propagated by the government and disseminated widely throughout the nation and beyond.

In this regard, the series aptly demonstrates how social media platforms also exacerbate extractivism as they simplify and package the forest space and its inhabitants to appeal to and entice viewers, thus expanding digital and material extraction and consumption. In a country where the number of social media users is equivalent to 116% of the total population (Kemp "Digital 2022"), the role of social media in propagating extractivist ideologies is significant. In *The Last Bastion*, the "prequel" section notably opens with Boi, a poacher illegally fishing for highly-coveted Arowana fish. His poaching ambitions are said to be driven by "recent Facebook posts of other poachers who had caught an unclassified 'Super Golden Blue-Red Arowana' fish" (Alias, *Last Bastion* 11). Boi adds that he wishes he had company to film his efforts to post on YouTube, thinking, "I'll be famous and teach people how to fish" (13). This opening passage underscores the pervasiveness of extractive discourses in the age of social media, which is amplified by Boi's growing list of material items that he envisions buying with the profit he expects from selling the Arowana: "the Nissan GT-R," "a new iPhone 7 Plus," "a MacBook and an iPad, as well" (12-13). Furthermore, the mention of these well-known luxury items calls into question modern consumerism and the unsustainable extractive practices that it relies on: such products undoubtedly require some form of energy to function, which are mainly produced through extraction of finite natural resources. That Boi envisions buying these products through catching and selling the rare Arowana fish is symptomatic of this problematic extractive process.

Challenging the extractive discourse of modern consumerism is the Arowana, which is described as "rare," "beautiful," "loving its prey: small fishes, insects and even spiders. It can jump out of the water to gobble up insects in mid-air" (Alias, *Last Bastion* 11-12). Its description as a predator here shifts its initial role as prey to Boi's poaching attempts and effectively broadens the narrative scope beyond that of Boi's, shaped by social media, towards that of the forest's ecosystem, into which Boi himself is integrated. Here, the extractivist narrative expounded by social media is overturned as the forest demands that the ecosystem be

balanced to ensure everyone's survival. Counteracting Boi's extraction of the Arowana, the river suddenly produces "small bubbles [that] rapidly effervesce" and spread to the rest of the river as it "dries up mysteriously" (13). Nature here becomes un-natural – even readers are left to assume that this must be the work of the *orang bunian* – defeating the anthropocentric gaze as it undermines human expectations of how it should be. This defeat is further signified by Boi's literal demise when an *orang bunian* "presence" emerges and "projects his hand into Boi's chest, bypassing layers of fat, muscle and tissue, as if none are there in the first place. With a powerful squeeze, the heart ceases to beat" (14). Opening *The Bunian Conspiracy* series with this passage forces readers to consider the various anthropocentric and extractive frameworks that guide their perceptions of the environment. The "prequel" section effectively questions the modes of communication that have been built to center the human to the suppression of the agencies of the nonhuman.

Issues in Publication and Circulation of EcoGothic Fiction in Brunei

The gothic form, insofar as it facilitates representations of liminal spaces, unease and uncertainty, is well-suited for enabling articulations of spirit-mediated human-nonhuman relationships marked by ambiguity and a sense of the unknown. But this can present a problem in Brunei where literary production is largely shaped and regulated by the *Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka* (DBP), which is the national language and literature bureau. With a mission to promote Malay culture (Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 'Visi dan Misi'), it marginalizes English-language literature and the significant number of nationalistic novels that they produce indicates the preferred type of literary works. As noted in a comparative study on English and Malay literary production in Brunei, Malay authors in particular still tend to adopt a "didactic style befitting the perceived moral role of literature in the national culture" (Kathrina, Chin and Maslin 4). What, then, of gothic tales whose moral, ethnic, religious and cultural, i.e. MIB-aligned, positionings are decidedly ambiguous? Where are they published and how are they regarded within the literary and cultural scenes in Brunei?

It is telling that a significant number of gothic stories are self-published, as is *The Bunian Conspiracy* series, or published in non-traditional ways and platforms such as the ghost stories in the *Mode Seram* Facebook group and many more in several threads on the popular online forum Reddit. On the one hand, it suggests that gothic stories are seen as having inadequate literary, cultural, and national merit for the likes of the DBP, leading to the marginalization of gothic stories and their relegation to platforms that are designated more for entertainment rather than serious literary critique and appreciation. This appears to be a regional trend as gothic

texts in neighbouring Asian countries, too, "are seldom treated as 'serious' literature [and] their position within the literary scene is seen as marginal" (Ancuta 210). Dissemination of such stories and the ecological wisdom contained within them are thus limited. Moreover, considering that these stories explore religiously ambiguous stances such as beliefs in the healing and harming powers of the supernatural, they can be interpreted as going against the national MIB ideology and therefore unsuitable for publication by state-sanctioned platforms.

On the other hand, these less-regulated platforms, "unaffiliated with sanctioned literary production in the country," (Kathrina, "Ghosts" 248) allow greater flexibility in terms of form, style, length, language, not to mention content, which befits the ambiguity of gothic narratives. Accordingly, there seems to be hopeful growth and diversification of literature produced by these nontraditional and (semi-) independent platforms and publishers. One publishing company, Blueprint Publishing Services, for instance, held two "Ghost Writing Competitions" in an attempt to produce and preserve stories that they see as integral to "our heritage and cultural stories which are uniquely Bruneian" (Blueprint Publishing Services, Foreword). There is implicit acknowledgement of the need to go beyond Malay-, Islam- and monarchy-centered narratives to reflect the multi- and interethnic diversity in Bruneian experiences.

Like Alias's *The Last Bastion of Ingei*, the collection that resulted from the competition, *Legendary: Horror and Mystique*, showcases a strong association between the forest space and the gothic, which is indicative of the enduring Indigenous-inflected presence of forests in the contemporary cultural imaginary (Hafizzul 1; NurSyakirah 81; Ak Md Khairuddin 82). The portrayals of the elusive and liminal nonhuman world in these stories retain an anti-extractive quality that is in line with the Bruneian and Southeast Asian sense of familiarity with and acceptance of the supernatural. In all these stories, there is minimal attempt to "get to the bottom" of the mysterious incidents and barely any desire to conquer and vanquish the nonhuman. There is an almost immediate recognition of trespassing some unspecified boundary into the realm of spiritual jurisdiction. In "*Kerusi Malas*" ("Lazy/Rocking Chair"), for instance, after encountering a *pontianak* (female vampire) in his house, the narrator merely "[creeps] back into my bed slowly. I made sure it did not notice me and hid under my bed sheets" (Hafizzul 15). The *pontianak* is only gotten rid of by having an *imam* (religious Islamic leader) throw away the rocking chair that it is bound to, but not destroying nor vanquishing it from existence. Similarly, the characters lost in the forest in "The Other Side" run away from the ghostly entity that they come across and even after they are rescued, they merely "[decide] to be even more careful when talking or choosing trails if they ever wanted to go hiking again"

(NurSyakirah 81). Notably, they are not deterred from hiking, but are instead more aware and cautious of disrupting supernatural entities that reside within the forest.

That these stories in *Legendary* reflect similar anti-extractive traits to *The Last Bastion* indicate the value of and need for more inclusive and democratic processes of literary publishing and circulation. An integral part of cultural and ecological posterity, these stories need to be kept from becoming marginalized and extinct. With rising global calls for decarbonization and the end to unfettered resource extraction, these stories also become key models for rethinking the ways in which nature is portrayed, discussed, and perceived. If, as Elizabeth Parker points out, "we have largely lost the ability [to see forests] as truly strange, monstrous, and enchanting," then EcoGothic tales "serve some role in reconnecting us to the myth and majesty of our natural spaces" (5). More importantly, as this article argues, they can do so by gesturing towards the anti-extractive quality of the environment and signpost models of anti-extractive thinking that can resonate with local communities. In line with Michelle Burnham's argument that ghosts in Indigenous gothic tales can "deliver psychological wholeness and healing" in contrast with Eurocentric versions (234), the spirits in Bruneian Indigenous-inspired EcoGothic tales might also bring forth ecological wholeness and healing by foregrounding the anti-extractiveness of the natural environment that is so often suppressed in public discourse and violated in extractive practices. As this occurs even in supposedly environmentalist narratives, as exemplified by the Forestry Department's policy statement, it becomes even more important for anti-extractive narratives of nature to be foregrounded in critical and public discourse.

Notes

[1] Officially, there are seven Indigenous groups in Brunei. This includes the Brunei Malay, who make up the 66.3% majority, the Kedayan, Murut, Tutong, Belait, Dusun, and Bisaya, all of whom are also referred to as *puak jati*, meaning Indigenous ethnic group, who make up 3.4% of the total population ("Brunei Population 2022").

[2] This is a key point in a recent ethnographic review of Brunei, where it was observed that the origins of ethnic Bruneis can be traced back to aboriginal populations of the Brunei Bay region, resulting in interconnected histories and origins between all the Indigenous ethnic groups (King 28). Today, such interconnections continue with inter-ethnic marriages, conversion to Islam, and the subsequent reclassification as Malay (known locally as *masuk melayu*), and the progressive breakdown of ethnic division of labour resulting in incorporation of non-Malays and non-Bruneis into the socioeconomic system (King 28-29; Lian et al. 14). The fluidity and mobility of ethnic identification is also

demonstrated in studies that map the linguistic history of Brunei, where a diverse range of ethnic minority languages are, albeit with dwindling strength, still being spoken today (NoorAzam and Siti Ajeerah 21; Deterding 172).

[3] Now designated as a conservation forest, Sungai Ingei has been found to have the largest mammal species diversity in the region (World Wildlife Foundation). Ulu Belait is also home to several Indigenous communities, some of whom are not politically identified as Indigenous to Brunei such as the Iban and the Penan.

[4] The Dusun belief in omen birds is one such practice where birds are seen as "messengers of the [forest] spirits [that] enjoy a species of diplomatic immunity [and so] must never be harmed or harassed, and so horrid a thought as killing and eating one would be abhorrent" (Bantong 108).

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