

Long Way, Long Time: Learning and Living Aboriginal Culture in Tasmania

by

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## **Dedication**

To Carolyn and Zoey, Mom and Dad, and Madeleine

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## **Chapter One**

### **Rupture and Cultural Production in Anthropology**

*I've spent my entire life defending who I am.*

*-Rodney Dillon, former ATSIC representative for Tasmania, advocate for Amnesty International (personal Communication)*

#### ***Introduction***

On a sunny afternoon in April 2010 I sat in Salamanca Place, reading the newspaper and enjoying a cup of coffee and a bite to eat. A young man who noticed that my shirt read “Go Blue”<sup>1</sup> came over and told me that he was from Ohio. He then asked what brought me to Hobart. I told him I was there to do fieldwork on Tasmanian Aboriginal people and how they were revitalizing their culture. He was noticeably crestfallen when I said this. With a hint of sadness he said he didn’t think he would see any Aborigines in Tasmania. I suggested that he probably had already seen a few, but that they wouldn’t be wearing signs that said “Aboriginal.” “I suppose so,” he responded, “but I would prefer to see them in their native habitat.”

A few days later I attended the opening of *Littoral*, an exhibition inspired by the work of Charles-Alexandre Lesueur, one of the artists on the Baudin expedition to Australia in 1800-1804. One of the participants was a Tasmanian Aboriginal artist and curator, a friend of mine, whose work is often focused on race relations and nineteenth century colonial encounters in Tasmania. Over drinks and dinner afterwards we had one of our extended chats about my project and our overlapping interests. These talks were a constant source of inspiration and camaraderie during

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<sup>1</sup> An indicator of insider knowledge based on what, and where, it is in reference to.

my fieldwork. We were often working through similar issues. I told her that, because I worked with Tasmanian Aboriginals, I felt that I needed to justify my research project more explicitly than other anthropologists did. I mentioned that, upon reading my application for research funds, a reviewer at a major granting agency had expressed surprise at my project, remarking that s/he “had always been told [Tasmanian Aboriginals] was an extinct people.” My friend’s eyes lit up. “So you understand how we feel!” she said.



Figure 1.1. Maps of Australia and Tasmania.

Anecdotes like these are important analytical and contextual nodes around which contemporary Tasmanian Aboriginality takes shape. The past is often burdensome, and this is certainly true for the Tasmanian Aboriginal people. The myth of their extinction, while laid to rest locally as a result of formal commonwealth recognition, remains strong outside Australia, where it has attained iconic status. My initial encounters with Tasmania, during my senior year at Union College, were revealing in this regard. I attended an anthropological field school that emphasized living in the community (as opposed to dorm housing) and I was expected to conduct my own research. As an anthropology major, I found this truly exciting. Our professors

had assigned books like David Quammen's *The Song of the Dodo* (1997) and Tim Flannery's *The Future Eaters* (2002[1994]).<sup>2</sup> We assumed, having read this material, that Tasmanian Aboriginal people were an historical footnote, with no contemporary existence. My professors told me that the Tasmanians were extinct. They shared memories of watching the 1978 documentary *The Last Tasmanian* in graduate school. Upon arriving in Hobart in January 2004, I quickly discovered that my expectations of Aboriginal nonexistence did not match the reality on the ground. The celebration of the Tasmanian Bicentenary was in full swing, and the presence of the Tasmanian Aboriginal people was palpable. I interviewed several community members during this initial visit. My historical research showed that successful Aboriginal recognition campaigns began in the early 1970s. Despite the local and national success of this movement, my initial assumptions about an extinct indigenous population are evidence of what Tasmania is still known for internationally: namely, that no Aboriginal people live there. This belief is compounded by the physical appearances of the Tasmanian Aboriginal people themselves, who tend to have light skin and sometimes even blonde hair and blue eyes. After many years of research, I still find myself in situations where I do not know someone is Aboriginal until they tell me so, or someone else does. These moments began during my original research on the island, when I asked members of the public to fill out a survey to gauge their general knowledge of Tasmanian Aboriginal history and culture. On the street outside the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery I asked two women, who I had seen in museum offices, if they would take the survey. They asked me what it was about. When I said it was about Tasmanian Aboriginality, one of the women assured me that they were the right people to ask, since they were themselves Aboriginal. This surprised me. Judging solely on appearance, I had classified them as non-

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<sup>2</sup> We also were assigned Bruce Chatwin's *Songlines* (1987), a classic in the "para-ethnography" genre (Michaels 1994a).

Aboriginal. This moment showed me that stereotypical racial phenotypes would not help me understand Tasmanian Aboriginality. These two women, it turned out, were heavily involved in projects of cultural revitalization, and they eventually became crucial interlocutors, friends, and resources in my research. They also scored perfectly on my survey, which was a very rare accomplishment.

### ***Rupture and Loss in Anthropology***

Noted anthropologist Bernard Cohn posits historians and anthropologists share a “common subject matter, ‘otherness:’ one field constructs ‘otherness’ in space, the other in time” (Cohn 1980: 198). While these comments are instructive, they nonetheless create a binary based on a notable simplification. While I agree History, with its focus on concrete time, is distinct from anthropology, Cohn appears to underreport the interrelationship of space and time that has long served as the bedrock for anthropology, and perhaps even preceded it. A strong argument can be made that anthropology “inherited a field of significance that preceded its formalization” (Trouillot 2003a: 9). This field of significance was organized around conceptualizations of a primitive other, a point of contrast in which the Western observers can see either the past or the utopian future. This is the crux of Trouillot’s “savage slot,” a conceptual space that preceded the discipline but nevertheless became the “raison d’ etre of anthropology. Anthropology came to fill the savage slot in the trilogy order-utopia-savagery, a trilogy that preceded anthropology’s institutionalization and gave it continuing coherence in spite of intradisciplinary shifts” (Trouillot 2003a: 28).

By the end of the nineteenth century seemingly a-historical and unchanging primitive others became the specialty of anthropology. The field “became a kind of non-history, since it dealt with societies which were unchanging, or at best slowly moving—societies which could

have no history because they had no chronology” (Cohn 1981: 229). With its emphasis on difference based on separation in time and space, anthropology tacitly interpellated native peoples as pre-historic, such that contact with the West marked the arrival of “history” (and, in Cohn’s words, chronology). This practice was part and parcel of modern historicity, which “hinges upon both a fundamental rupture between past, present, and future—as distinct temporal planes—and their relinking along a singular line that allows for continuity... this regime of historicity in turn implies a heterology, a necessary reading of alterity” (Trouillot 2003b: 44). In detailing their cultural status and social organization, anthropologists treated the “people without history” as living embodiments of an earlier period of European society. Unlike the concrete time of History, anthropological time was more abstract but no less foundational.

Historically anthropology was obsessed with time and purity and, despite its many advances, rupture remains a prevalent epistemological tool and central motif.<sup>3</sup> Images of break, rupture, and disjuncture have commonly been paired with irrevocable loss (of life and/ or cultural distinctiveness) in the context of European colonialism. Social Darwinists like Herbert Spencer believed in the “survival of the fittest,”<sup>4</sup> namely that contact results in a natural competition in which the more advanced group is destined to prevail. In an oft-cited passage of *The Descent of Man* Charles Darwin asserts that when “civilised nations come into contact with barbarians the struggle is short, except when a deadly climate gives its aid to the native race” (Darwin 2004[1879]: 212). While such loss (of life/ cultural distinction) was understood to be a

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<sup>3</sup> In an insightful article, Gupta and Ferguson draw attention to how representations “of space in the social sciences are remarkably dependent on images of break, rupture, and disjunction. The distinctiveness of societies, nations, and cultures are predicated on a seemingly unproblematic division of space, on the fact that they occupy ‘naturally’ discontinuous spaces. The premise of discontinuity forms the starting point from which to theorize contact, conflict, and contradiction between cultures and societies” (Gupta and Ferguson 1997b: 33-34).

<sup>4</sup> That this statement is frequently attributed to Charles Darwin is instructive.

natural outcome of progress and necessary for the common good,<sup>5</sup> it was nonetheless a source of regret. Such views inform what Renato Rosaldo calls imperialist nostalgia, namely a “particular form of nostalgia, often found under imperialism, where people mourn the passing of what they themselves have transformed” (Rosaldo 1989: 108). According to Rosaldo, imperialist nostalgia occurs “alongside a peculiar sense of mission, the white man’s burden, where civilized nations stand duty-bound to uplift so-called savage ones. In this ideologically constructed world of ongoing progressive change, putatively static savage societies become a stable reference point for defining (the felicitous progress of) civilized identity” (Rosaldo 1989: 108). Such nostalgia is based on a tacit understanding of how idealizations of separation, purity, and stasis work in concert to enact the savage other. While progress is inevitable, that which is lost is to be valued and lamented (perhaps as a requiem). It logically follows that, after contact, pre-contact authenticity is both dwindling and of greater value than the cultural forms that follows it.<sup>6</sup> This belief motivated salvage ethnography, the very practice of which effectively hastened its ephemerality.<sup>7</sup> Practicing anthropologists utilized the ethnographic present as a way to re-create

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<sup>5</sup> See Foucault’s *Society Must be Defended* for an in-depth discussion of the emergence of modern racism within nationalist sentiments. According to Foucault, one of the functions of racism, following the naturalization of both racial types and their comparative valuations, is to establish a positive correlation between the death of lesser races and the overall fitness of the species. Racism allows for the possibility of a relationship between life and death based on pure biology. The fact that the “Other dies does not mean simply that I live in the sense that his death guarantees my safety; the death of the other... of the bad race, of the inferior race (or the degenerate, or the abnormal) is something that will make life in general... healthier and purer” (Foucault 2003: 255). See also Stoler 1995 for an invaluable discussion of Foucault and race, especially Chapter Three.

<sup>6</sup> One thinks of Edward Curtis, famed photographer of Native North Americans, who worked tirelessly to sanitize his portraits of any markers of modernity.

<sup>7</sup> Perhaps the most famous example of salvage ethnography was the work of Franz Boas’ students on Native American tribal groups. On a psychological level, when “the so-called civilizing process destabilizes forms of life, the agents of change experience transformations of other cultures as if they were personal losses” (Rosaldo 1989: 108).

the purported stasis (through a-temporality) and authentic culture that existed prior to outside contamination.<sup>8</sup>

Over the past few decades, however, anthropologists have devised new ways to theorize indigenous and Aboriginal groups. One example emerged from the “historical turn in anthropology.”<sup>9</sup> Such anthropologists showed how the “people without history” were not unchanging prior to outside contact. These attempts were not perfect, with Cohn arguing many of the anthropologists who “turned to history” saw it as a “means of escaping the assumptions of an unchanging, timeless native culture, and have thereby uncovered events which led to the reformulation of structures. *Yet by situating their histories within tribes and archaic kingdoms, anthropologists find that their narratives always end with the coming of the destructive others—the Europeans*” (Cohn 1981: 252)(emphasis added). Such works potentially undermined their own enterprise by implicitly emphasizing contact as an endpoint (an inversion of its previous status as a starting point). Alternatively, approaches focusing on the “global world” (with its interconnections and reduction of borders) likewise remain reliant on tropes of breaks. One anthropologist associated with such discussions is Arjun Appadurai, whose *Modernity at Large* has been influential. In an oft-cited passage Appadurai argues:

As groups migrate, regroup in new locations, reconstruct their histories, and reconfigure their ethnic projects, the *ethno* in ethnography takes on a slippery, nonlocalized quality, to which the descriptive practices of anthropology will have to respond. The landscapes of group identity... around the world are no longer familiar anthropological objects, insofar as groups are no longer tightly territorialized, spatially bounded, historically unselfconscious, or culturally homogeneous (Appadurai 1996: 48).

In debating the utility of traditional anthropological objects, his points of differentiation appear to smuggle in many idealizations of otherness (namely that groups were ever culturally

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<sup>8</sup> As the narrative goes, the anthropologist “follows in the wake of the impacts caused by Western agents of change, and then tries to recover what might have been” (Cohn 1980: 199).

<sup>9</sup> Dirks 1996 provides an excellent summary of this scholarship.

homogeneous etc.).<sup>10</sup> Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson also argue for recognition of interconnection, but not one marked by a disjuncture from a past of disconnection and separation. Gupta and Ferguson present connection as the starting point for the study of contact and change, reflecting:

The inherently fragmented space assumed in the definition of anthropology as the study of cultures (in the plural) may have been one of the reasons behind the long-standing failure to write anthropology's history as the biography of imperialism. For if one begins with the premise that spaces have *always* been hierarchically interconnected, instead of naturally disconnected, then cultural or social change becomes not a matter of cultural contact and articulation but one of rethinking difference *through* connection (Gupta and Ferguson 1997b: 35).

Put concretely, “instead of assuming the autonomy of the primeval community, we need to examine how it was formed *as a community* out of the interconnected space that always already existed. Colonialism then represents the displacement of one form of interconnection by another” (Gupta and Ferguson 1997b: 36).

Despite such insights, scholarship on colonialism tends to remain focused on its destructive impact on the colonized. Such “fatal impacts,” however, have been “detected in European historiography far more frequently than [they] actually occurred, and this is no doubt linked with the appeal of a romantic narrative that nostalgically regrets the destruction of idealized precolonial communities” (Thomas 1994: 15). The belief in a fatal impact, despite its fraught ideological foundations, fueled anthropology's quest to reconstruct the purity that was

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<sup>10</sup> “One of the most problematic legacies of grand Western social science... is that it has steadily reinforced the sense of some single moment—call it the modern moment—that by its appearance creates a dramatic and unprecedented break between past and present. Reincarnated as the break between tradition and modernity and typologized as the difference between ostensibly traditional and modern societies, this view has been shown repeatedly to distort the meanings of change and the politics of pastness” (Appadurai 1996: 2-3). Despite such disclaimers, there is reason to fault Appadurai for taking culturally homogeneous and spatially bounded groups as his point of departure.



assumed to be lost. I do not refute the destructive force colonialism was and continues to be,<sup>11</sup> nor do I deny that many cultures and societies have been lost as a result of such encounters.<sup>12</sup> What I seek to do is draw attention to the *productivity of contact*, namely how colonial encounters frequently serve as the source of cultural production and self-recognition for minority and indigenous groups.<sup>13</sup> Fatal impact narratives fail to acknowledge this fact. Additionally, this is what contemporary Tasmanian Aboriginality is all about.

While more “than a few ‘extinct’ peoples have returned to haunt the Western imagination” (Clifford 1988b: 16), such “returns” are routinely met with cries of inauthenticity and accusations of cold-calculation (Kuper 2003). Tasmania is no exception. The Tasmanian Aboriginal people are arguably the “fatal impact” case *par excellence*<sup>14</sup> and their cultural resurgence has been met with skepticism. With these sentiments in mind, I challenge the centrality, not the existence, of (a presumably destructive) break or rupture in the anthropological project. It would be questionable and revisionist to deny the devastating impact British

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<sup>11</sup> See Chakrabarty 2007 and Stoler 2008 for discussions of the lingering “wounds” of colonialism and imperialism.

<sup>12</sup> “By now most anthropologists probably find such notions as the ‘vanishing primitive’ or ‘mourning the passing of traditional society’ more conventional than insightful. Like most clichés, they were once good metaphors, and they have enjoyed a venerable history in the discipline... Once should probably add that the vision of the vanishing primitive has proven sometimes false and sometimes true” (Rosaldo 1989: 115-116).

<sup>13</sup> Thomas writes: “Though generally sympathetic to the plight of the colonized, such perceptions frequently exaggerate colonial power, diminishing the extent to which colonial histories were shaped by indigenous resistance” (Thomas 1994: 15). James Clifford has expressed similar sentiments, noting how “Throughout the world indigenous populations have had to reckon with the forces of ‘progress’ and ‘national’ unification. The results have been both destructive and inventive. Many traditions, languages, cosmologies, and values are lost, some literally murdered; but much has simultaneously been invented and revived in complex, oppositional contexts. If the victims of progress and empire are weak, they are seldom passive. It used to be assumed, for example, that conversion to Christianity in Africa, Melanesia, Latin America, or even colonial Massachusetts would lead to the extinction of indigenous cultures rather than to their transformation” (Clifford 1988b: 16). A classic example is Terence Turner’s account of Kayapo self-imagining over a number of decades (Turner 1991).

<sup>14</sup> In a footnote Clifford notes their status as the “most notorious of all” instances of genocidal extinction (1988b: 16 ff5).

settlement<sup>15</sup> had on Tasmanian Aboriginal communities. It is another thing, however, to reject discontinuity as a starting point or teleological endpoint in cultural analysis. A more fruitful approach emphasizes the complicated dialectic between past and present and the delicate interaction between traditions that is at the heart of Tasmanian Aboriginality today. Klaus Neumann points in this direction. He acknowledges descendants of the “original inhabitants and rightful custodians of Tasmania *have* survived, and so has a distinct culture and history, and against all odds—even though its distinctiveness may lie in the way in which elements of non-Aboriginal culture are appropriated” (Neumann 1992: 291-2). He is partly right. Pushing his analysis further, Tasmanian distinctiveness not only lies in the ways they have adopted aspects of “non-Aboriginal culture” but in *how they have made* such elements critical features of Aboriginal identity. In other words, their distinctiveness emerges from the relationship between such “appropriations” and revitalized cultural practices.

### ***In the Australian Periphery***

*Even by Australian standards, Tasmania feels strange and remote. Lost at the continent’s southeastern tip—quite literally, down under—the island is a hauntingly beautiful expanse of gnarled forests and rugged mountains, where exotic flora and fauna have thrived in windswept isolation. Its colonial history verges on the gothic. As if the Australian penal colonies weren’t harsh enough, the British settled Tasmania in 1803 as a holding pen for its worst criminals—a gulag within the Antipodean gulag, whose convict work camps were renowned for their cruelty. By the 1820s, settlers were embarking on a brutal frontier war with the Tasmanian Aborigines, whose last members were rounded up and removed to a smaller island, Flinders, where they died of disease and despair in one of the most shameful chapters in British history. Since then, Tasmania has stubbornly remained the least developed and least populated state in Australia, enduring unkind jokes among mainlanders, who often regard it as a refuge of hillbillies and yokels on a par with the stereotyped Appalachian here (Perrottet 2012: 38).*

Tasmania is commonly imagined as a sleepy backwater, parochial and provincial. As one travel guide states, “It is easy for visitors to Australia to overlook Tasmania. After all, mainland Australians do it all the time” (Robinson 1994: 126). Reflecting upon his first glimpse of Hobart from aboard the *Beagle* in 1836, Charles Darwin noted

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<sup>15</sup> Australian Aboriginal communities refer to it as an invasion.

The first aspect of the place was very inferior to that of Sydney; the latter might be called a city, this is only a town. It stands at the base of Mount Wellington, a mountain 3100 feet high, but of little picturesque beauty; this this source, however, it receives a good supply of water. Round the cove there are some fine warehouses, and on one side a small fort... Comparing the town with Sydney, I was chiefly struck with the comparative fewness of the large houses, either built or building (Darwin 2001[1839]: 398-399).

For its roughly 500,000 residents,<sup>16</sup> the 240 kilometers separating Tasmania from the “big island” often feels much larger, and this understood to be a good thing. The small island-state is and has been frequently left “off the map” of the larger nation-continent, a practice that is most telling. In *The Lucky Country*, Donald Horne recounts how “Hobart started life on the frontier and then went to sleep. It was one of the earliest convict colonies and a roistering whaling port. Then it stood easy... Existence is said to be somewhere between small-town serenity and small-town vindictiveness. Mainlanders think little about Tasmania and foreigners want to know who owns it” (Horne 2008[1964]: 48). After conducting research in Tasmania for many years I can attest to the presence of these sentiments.<sup>17</sup>

Nevertheless, the idea of Tasmania as an afterthought on the periphery of mainland Australia is a relatively recent one.<sup>18</sup> Van Diemen’s Land, as Dutch explorer Abel Tasman named it in 1642, was a prominent locale of British imperialism in the first half of the nineteenth century. First colonized in 1803, Van Diemen’s Land was Great Britain’s second colonial outpost in Australia (following Sydney in 1788), and nearly 60% of the convicts exiled to the

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<sup>16</sup> The Australian Bureau of Statistics estimated the population of Tasmania as approximately 510,600 as of June 30, 2011. See: <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by+Subject/1367.0~2011~Main+Features~Estimated+Resident+Population~7.1> Accessed May 13, 2014.

<sup>17</sup> I can certainly attest to Horne’s points regarding the ignorance of “foreigners.” Over the past seven years I have answered countless questions about Tasmania. In short, my answers usually consist of saying that yes, Tasmania is in fact part of Australia, and no, Tasmania is not in Africa (i.e. Tanzania).

<sup>18</sup> This statement is highlighting the relative importance of Tasmania within the Australian national narrative and how it has changed over time. The idea of Tasmania as geographically and spatially peripheral is not new.

continent reach the small island at some point.<sup>19</sup> The story of the Aboriginal peoples of Tasmania parallels that of the island; both were once of central importance within broader frameworks and have since become afterthoughts. As will be discussed at length in Chapter Two, the Tasmanian Aboriginal peoples were of great significance within Victorian anthropology, and their isolation was used to explain their “simple” culture and rapid dislocation after British settlement. In a short article entitled *The Tasmanians: the longest isolation, the simplest technology*, Jared Diamond states, “The Tasmanians had the simplest material culture of any modern humans... Within a few decades (of British settlement) they were nearly exterminated by European settlers, until the scattered survivors were removed in 1834 to Flinders Island, where the last full-blooded Tasmanian died in 1876” (Diamond 1978: 185).<sup>20</sup> Interestingly, this 1978 publication coincided with widespread protests and general activism of Tasmanian Aboriginal peoples. This juxtaposition points to the extinction narrative’s power. In this dissertation I challenge the assumed finality of loss and the way continuity is typically gauged in anthropological practice, if not in theory.

### ***Fieldwork: Theory and Methodology***

Anthropological fieldwork has historically shared many of these same fetishes of separation and purity. Joanne Passaro reflects on her own research site in an urban environment, commenting:

although explicit reference to primitive natives has generally disappeared from anthropological discourse, conceptions of ‘the field’ that constituted and defined those natives persists... Because ‘the field’ functions as the master symbol of the discipline, even when nontraditional field sites are admitted into the canon of

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<sup>19</sup> Including Ikey Solomon, who is frequently cited (perhaps apocryphally) as the inspiration for the character of Fagin in *Oliver Twist* (Hughes 1988[1986]: 390).

<sup>20</sup> While Truganini, the individual Diamond is referring to, did pass away in 1876, it was not on Flinders Island. The same error is made in the Perrottet article cited above.

anthropology, we nonetheless continue to inflect them with a host of assumptions generated by a colonial worldview (Passaro 1997: 148).

Passaro's comments speak to Gupta and Ferguson's *hierarchy of purity* of field sites, within which archetypal locales and environments are elevated at the expense of less traditional sites.<sup>21</sup>

Although anthropologists no longer think in terms of natural or undisturbed states, it remains evident that what many would deny in theory continues to be true in practice: some places are much more 'anthropological' than others (e.g., Africa more than Europe, southern Europe more than northern Europe, villages more than cities) according to the degree of Otherness from an archetypal anthropological 'home' (Gupta and Ferguson 1997a: 13).

Viewed from this perspective, my field site is doubly removed from this anthropological ideal.

Based in Tasmania's capital city<sup>22</sup> of Hobart, my research was conducted in an urban setting with a dislocated community of "impure" Aboriginal people. I shared many of the same feelings as Passaro. I spent the first months of dissertation fieldwork struggling with whether I was doing "real fieldwork" or not. Despite fully believing in the validity and value of my project, I nonetheless continued to compare my work to the idealized "one person, one place, one people" mythos of anthropological fieldwork.<sup>23</sup> Over time, however, I came to view the composition of my field site as a strength rather than a weakness. By drawing on a host of sources and materials I was able to study topics traditional to cultural anthropology in a seemingly non-traditional environment. In short, my research combined elements of past and present field praxis and accounted for both global flows and the legitimacy/maintenance of difference in the face of discontinuity and disjuncture.

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<sup>21</sup> See Stocking 1983 and Stocking 1991 for excellent examinations of the conceptualization of fieldwork within anthropology. See also Levi-Strauss's *Tristes Tropiques* (2012[1955]) for an iconic instance of ethnographic self-representation in fieldwork. Geertz 1973 and Sontag 1966 offer divergent interpretations of Levi-Strauss's "Heroic Quest" of anthropology.

<sup>22</sup> While many would argue Hobart is really just a large town and thereby a city in name only, it is Tasmania's most-populated region and home to Tasmania's government and numerous state and federal institutions.

<sup>23</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot refers to this as "the ethnographic trilogy," i.e. "one observer, one time, one place" (Trouillot 2003d: 125).



Figure 1.2. Hobart and surrounds from Mount Wellington. (Photo taken by author)

This dissertation is based on sixteen months of research in Tasmania from February 2010 through May 2011.<sup>24</sup> During this period I researched the (re) articulation of Tasmanian Aboriginal culture following their perceived extinction. My methodology was multifaceted and multi-sited. My main site was Hobart's Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, where I had previously interned in 2008. During fieldwork I volunteered in the Department of Indigenous Cultures and worked closely with Tasmanian Aboriginal curators. My work at the museum involved education programs, exhibit design, cultural workshops, and independent research into many topics, including Tasmanian Aboriginal petroglyphs. The community-led education programs focused on red ochre, stone tools, shell stringing, and other core elements of

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<sup>24</sup> When combined with additional trips in 2004, 2007, and 2008, the total research time in Tasmania is twenty-three months.

Tasmanian Aboriginal culture. My involvement in these programs allowed me to get to know many community members and served as the foundation for further dialogue and interaction.

Extensive conversations, informal interviews, and trips to the bush with Aboriginal community members, particularly “culture builders” and artists, were crucial to my research. These individuals generously gave me their time and attention, and together we attended protest rallies, collected shells, went on camping trips, and visited outlying islands and additional sites of cultural importance. These experiences gave me invaluable insight into Tasmanian Aboriginal culture and the delicate relationships between past and present representations (and understandings) of indigeneity.

My dissertation research was un-Malinowskian in the sense that I did not have a captive audience with whom to work. In actuality, my relationships with my interlocutors were the inversion of such a situation. I was very much at their mercy, and I spent copious amounts of time emailing, ringing on the phone, and dropping in in-person, in order to set up an informal chat, interview, or a stop at the pub. Between scheduled visits and events, impromptu meetings, and my work at the museum, I was left with a significant amount of time to fill. This allowed me ample time to conduct archival and historical research, primarily in the State Library and Archives of Tasmania in Hobart. The materials gathered during these hours, newspaper articles and papers from Tasmania’s Royal Society in particular, are central to this dissertation. These resources, combined with my ethnographic research, shed light on the nuances and contradictions of contemporary Tasmanian Aboriginality.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> This is not to say that this is unique to them, as the same could be said about essentially every other cultural group. The specifics of such nuances and contradictions are what are unique, and potentially insightful in a cross-cultural perspective.

## *Chapter Overview*

**Chapter Two** continues to concentrate on isolation, difference, and loss, albeit from different angles and levels of analysis. Following Appadurai's insight that ideas can become "metonymic prisons for particular places (such that the natives of that place are inextricably confined by them)" (Appadurai 1988: 40), I argue the Tasmanians are trapped in a metonymic prison of "The Paleolithic," incarcerated behind restrictive bars of extreme isolation and irretrievable extinction. This chapter explores the formation and consolidation of this prison in the late nineteenth century and describes how it, with minor alterations, continues to have great intellectual and social currency.

Building upon the preceding chapters, **Chapter Three** focuses on the shared colonial (and post-colonial) experiences that have shaped what it means to be, and identify as, Aboriginal in Tasmanian society. Of interest is the "imposition of a name, i.e. of a social essence" (Bourdieu 1991: 120). The bestowal of the label of "Aboriginal," and what its denial implies, is particularly valuable within this context. In addressing the post-colonial narratives of the Tasmanian Aboriginal peoples, I contend that cultural connection is gauged in relation to a geographical hierarchy of value, the most dominant being the Bass Strait Islands (Cape Barren Island and to a lesser degree, Flinders Island).

Taking "culture," a term Raymond Williams calls "one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language" (Williams 1983: 87), as its central focus, **Chapter Four** examines the relationships between tradition, meaning, revitalization, and preservation. Beginning with widespread identity rights movements in the 1970s and gaining strength in the last twenty years, members of the Tasmanian Aboriginal community have re-claimed many aspects of their "lost" culture, with material culture production (basketry, kelp water carriers,



canoe construction, etc.) being one example. Through these projects people have consciously and systematically rearticulated what it means to be a Tasmanian Aboriginal person. These practices represent a way in which deficiencies can be addressed and discursively (and practically) overcome. Drawing heavily on personal experiences with “culture-workers” and Tasmanian Aboriginal artists, I argue that newly emergent meanings are being enacted through the very process of constructing kelp water carriers, baskets, and canoes.

**Chapter Five** extends the discussion of cultural revitalization and cultural ownership to *palawa kani*, the reconstructed Tasmanian Aboriginal language. This chapter relies on extensive interactions with a vital “language-worker,” and analyzes the process (e.g. source materials, word selection process, etc.) through which multiple historical languages were utilized in the construction and consecration of a single “official” Tasmanian Aboriginal language. In the process, I address the issue of language re-birth and the steps necessary for it to shift from being merely a “language program” to a “living” language. Additionally, I discuss the discursive value of *palawa kani* has for the community as a whole.

**Chapter Six** pivots to cultural representation in museums and art galleries. By focusing on two separate exhibits at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, I highlight the continuity of representation and shifting control at one location. This chapter connects directly to the different realms of Tasmanian representation covered in previous chapters. The first exhibit is the 1931 group exhibit, which was heavily informed by ideologies of Tasmanian primitivity, stasis, and extinction. The second exhibit under discussion is *tayenebe*, a celebration of the resurgence of fibre-work (basketry, kelp water carriers etc.) amongst Tasmanian Aboriginal women. In 2008 I helped conceptualize and design this exhibit and attended a number of workshops with its participants. As a travelling exhibition, I had the pleasure of seeing *tayenebe* in both Canberra

and Sydney, taking part in workshops and presentations at the latter. This chapter builds on my discussion of cultural revitalization and reclamation by showing not only the process itself, but how it is depicted and promulgated for public consumption.

**Chapter Seven** explores two cases of Tasmanian Aboriginal heritage, the first being the re-discovery of extensive petroglyphs in the 1930s, and the second being the recent Brighton Bypass controversy. The former, based on extensive archival and institutional research, offers an historical case of heritage legitimation while the latter provides a counterpoint whose ultimate fate is still unfolding. The Brighton Bypass, a new highway project north of Hobart, was the most prominent public issue for the Tasmanian Aboriginal community during my research. Limited archaeological surveys along the proposed route uncovered Aboriginal artifacts consisting almost exclusively of stone tools and dating back as far as 40,000 years at the Jordan River Levee. The site was potentially one of the most important discoveries in years based on this date and its status as “undisturbed.” Both stories share similar trajectories from discovery, to valuation, to possible consecration and protection. Viewed in concert, they highlight the central role of consensus in the anointment of world (or national) heritage status.

**Chapter Eight** returns to the institutional sphere and my experiences at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, specifically my participation in 43 community-led education programs. These programs represent what Kirshenblatt-Gimblett calls “value-added” heritage, a conceptual term that recognizes the very act of presentation “produces something new. Its instruments are a key to this process. Dance teams, heritage performers, craft cooperatives, cultural centers, arts festivals, museums, exhibitions, recordings, archives, indigenous media, and cultural curricula are not only evidence of heritage, its continuity, and its vitality in the present. They are also instruments for adding value to the cultural forms they perform, teach, exhibit,

circulate, and market” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995: 373-4). This insight informs my conclusion, and these education programs represent an idealized depiction of Tasmanian Aboriginal culture. Additionally, however, they also represent an acknowledgement that many aspects are still in the process of being (re) learned while others are forever lost. It also highlights my own participation in this process of collaborative interpellation and reflects upon the ways in which Tasmanian-ness is made today.

## Chapter Two

### Tasmanian Aboriginality and the Prison of the Paleolithic

*Every power, including the power of law, is written first of all on the backs of its subjects. Knowledge does the same. Thus Western ethnological science is written on the space that the body of the other provides for it (de Certeau 1984: 140).*

#### *Introduction*

A 1957 *Scientific American* article, titled *Vanishing Cultures*, begins with the author asking the reader to

Imagine that, on an island in some remote corner of the earth, an explorer were to discover a tribe of people living in the Old Stone Age more or less as man lived 50,000 years ago. One might suppose that scientists would be eager to rush off to that anthropological paradise to study the miraculously preserved living remnant of man's long-lost past. Well, precisely such a discovery was made not too long ago, and men allowed the opportunity to slip from their fingers (Heine-Golden 1957: 39).

The author is referring to the Tasmanian Aboriginal people, a cultural group of “dark, woolly-haired people with an incredibly primitive culture—even more primitive than that of the Australian aborigines,” and who “offered, or rather, could have offered, to modern science the closest surviving approach to the sort of culture that our human ancestors may have had before the last Ice Age” (Heine-Golden 1957: 39-41).<sup>1</sup> Presenting the Tasmanians as the main instance of extinction due to colonial malfeasance has an extensive genealogy. In his 1922 Presidential Address to the Folklore Society of London, Henry Balfour spoke on “The Welfare of Primitive Peoples.” In defending his subject matter, Balfour makes

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<sup>1</sup> In the same article the author argues that with the death of Truganini in 1876, an “invaluable opportunity was lost forever” (Heine-Golden 1957: 4).

no apology for taking the welfare of primitive peoples as the principal theme in my address, since the problem is one of which we are all, as civilized persons, concerned... We all share in the responsibilities arising from our assumption of the right to control the destinies of peoples in a backward state of culture. Our prestige is at stake (Balfour 1923: 13).

Balfour, like the *Scientific American* article, offers the Tasmanian case as an instructive example of “what not to do.”<sup>2</sup> For Balfour, Tasmanian extinction was “one of the greatest blots upon the record of our colonial enterprises” and “was a direct result of the advent of the White man, who found the unsophisticated natives in possession of desirable land suited to civilized exploitation... The island was discovered in 1642; the first small European settlement was established in 1803; and in 1877... the last surviving Tasmanian died” (Balfour 1923: 14). Aside from getting the iconic year of extinction wrong, Balfour shares and recycles many of the motifs that have long hounded the Tasmanian Aboriginal people.

Anthropology has, “more than many disciplinary discourses, operated through an album or anthology of images (changing over time, to be sure) whereby some feature of a group is seen as quintessential to the group and as especially true of that group in contrast with other groups” (Appadurai 1988: 39-40). Following Appadurai’s insight that ideas can become “metonymic prisons for particular places (such that the natives of that place are inextricably confined by them)” (Appadurai 1988: 40), I contend the Tasmanians are trapped in a metonymic prison of the Paleolithic, incarcerated behind restrictive bars of extreme isolation and irretrievable extinction. This chapter is an exploration into the formation and consolidation of this prison in the late nineteenth century and how it, with minor alterations, continues to possess great intellectual and social capital.

History is commonly understood as a collection of known (and knowable) facts with which we make sense of our collective past. However, at the risk of being labeled a post-modern

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<sup>2</sup> Elkin 1950 and Howells 1977 provide further examples of this practice.

deconstructionist,<sup>3</sup> I believe the understanding of our past (collective or otherwise) is in large part contingent upon present circumstances. Reflecting on the practice of History, Walter Benjamin observes how “Historicism contents itself with establishing a causal connection between various moments in history. But no fact that is a cause is for that very reason historical. It became historical posthumously, as it were, through events that may be separated from it by thousands of years” (Benjamin 1968: 263). Rather than strive to understand what history *is*, Michel-Rolph Trouillot suggests we try to understand how history *works*.<sup>4</sup> In a vein similar to Benjamin, Trouillot contends that what history is “changes with time and place or, better said, history reveals itself only through the production of specific narratives. What matters most are the process and conditions of production of such narratives” (Trouillot 1995: 25). Following this insight I argue history is a mediated activity and thus a construction. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that such a perspective relies on fabrication and falsity at the expense of truth. Rather, history is a construction in that its reality is situational and relational and therefore subject to constant change and re-orientation. Based on this position, this dissertation addresses Tasmanian Aboriginal history in a circuitous, gradual, and fragmentary manner. It is a rare people or community that possesses (and adheres to) one uncontested narrative of their collective past, and the Tasmanians are no exception to this rule. In fact, a strong argument can be made that their historicity impacts their daily reality more than most.

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<sup>3</sup> This is a serious accusation in some academic circles and a badge of honor in others. It is also, in large part, the basis of the “History Wars” in Australian Historiography, with Windschuttle 2002 being a major lightning rod (See also Attwood 2005; Attwood and Foster 2003; Macintyre 2004; Manne 2003; and Reynolds 2006[1981]). Klaus Neumann’s *Among Historians* (Neumann 2003) offers a compelling and nuanced interpretation of the debates that followed the publication of Windschuttle’s book.

<sup>4</sup> Positioned between the “mechanically ‘realist’ and naively ‘constructivist’ extremes, there is a more serious task of determining not what history is—a hopeless goal if phrased in essentialist terms—but how history works” (Trouillot 1995: 25).

Even when definitive statements about Tasmanian pre-history<sup>5</sup> are made, instructive disclaimers usually accompany them. N.J.B. Plomley, a preeminent documentarian of Tasmanian Aboriginal history and culture, remarks that the source material's limitations derive from the fact that the "Tasmanian aborigines are an extinct people. Moreover, they had no written language, so that our information about them is not only limited but comes either from the records of those others who were their contemporaries, or through the artefacts and material remains of the aborigines" (Plomley 1977: 1).<sup>6</sup> Archaeologist Rhys Jones opens one of his influential articles with a similar disclaimer: "Before we can attempt any analysis of Tasmanian culture, we must first be aware of the restricted nature of the primary sources and of the limitation this places on the scope of our investigations" (Jones 1974: 319). Despite such limitations, many aspects of pre-historic Tasmanian life are accepted and require description and summary. One common assertion is that from "the time of their colonisation of Tasmania, perhaps 10,000 years ago, it is likely that the Aborigines were isolated from other groups of people until their first contact with Europeans in 1772" (Plomley 2008[1966]: 14).<sup>7</sup> For European observers, the

most striking feature of the Aborigines of Tasmania was their hair. It was woolly, that is, the curled hairs formed tightly coiled spiral ringlets... The men wore their hair in ringlets, often 5-8 cm long behind so that it fell to the neck, and covered the ears; some of the men wore beards and moustaches. It was their practice to load their hair with a mixture of grease and red ochre. The women shaved their heads. Some tribal variations occurred in hairdressing (Plomley 2008[1966]: 15).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> This term refers to the pre-contact/ pre-colonial historical period that started many centuries ago and ending roughly around European settlement in 1803. It is employed in agreement with my source materials, despite its problematic implications.

<sup>6</sup> In a separate piece Plomley adds "When settlement began, in 1803, those who came took little interest in the Aborigines as subjects for scientific observation, and the records left us by residents are, for the most part, not very informative. Those who could have contributed most by reason of their training, the medical men, have provided least" (Plomley 2008[1966]: 14).

<sup>7</sup> Rhys Jones writes: "All the aborigines living in Tasmania at the time of European contact belonged to the same culture" (Jones 1974: 330).

<sup>8</sup> "In appearance, that is, in the shape of their face and in the form of their hair, the Tasmanians certainly looked different from the Australians" (Plomley 1977: 7).

Their skin color “ranged from reddish-brown to black” (Plomley 1977: 15), and Tasmanian material culture “was simple, but was adequate for their needs in the isolated environment which they occupied” (Plomley 2008[1966]: 16). In

their natural state the Tasmanians went naked except for a kangaroo skin which they might drape across the shoulders. The women appear to have used it especially as a means of carrying (and protecting) an infant. The protective function of clothing was fulfilled by smearing the body with grease and with this might be associated powdered charcoal or ochre” (Plomley 1977: 10).

The Tasmanians were mostly a nomadic people and, like their mainland counterparts, “did not practise agriculture or animal husbandry” (Plomley 2008[1966]: 16).<sup>9</sup>

There has been much speculation about pre-colonial Tasmanian social organization, and presumed tribal divisions have informed estimates of pre-European population size. The majority of research done on Tasmanian tribal affiliations is drawn from Rhys Jones’ *Tasmanian Tribes* (Jones 1974).<sup>10</sup> The historical records show Aboriginal Tasmania

consisted of nine tribes, each comprising from five or six to fifteen bands, with an average of nine... The tribes fell into three groups. The eastern and northern groups consisted of the Oyster Bay, North East, and North tribes and had both an extensive coast and hinterland. The midland group, consisting of Big River, North Midlands, and Ben Lomond tribes, had little or no coastline, while the third, the maritime group, consisting of the North West, South West, and South East tribes, had an extensive coast and limited hinterland” (Ryan 1996[1981]: 14-17).<sup>11</sup>

Overall population “has been variously estimated at numbers between 700 and 20 000, but these are nothing more than guesses... Estimates based on tribal distribution and size suggest that the population numbered about 4000” (Plomley 2008[1966]: 18). Jones summarizes his estimates as

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<sup>9</sup> Languages and linguistic communities are addressed in Chapter Five.

<sup>10</sup> For Jones, a “tribe” in the Tasmanian context was an “agglomeration of bands that lived in contiguous regions, spoke the same language or dialect, shared the same cultural traits, usually intermarried, had a similar pattern of seasonal movement, habitually met together for economic and other reasons, the pattern of whose peaceful relations were within the agglomeration, and of whose enmities and military adventures were directed outside it. Such a tribe had a territory, consisting of the sum of the land owned by its constituent bands” (Jones 1974: 328).

<sup>11</sup> Maps reflecting tribal territories can be found in Jones 1974: 327; Plomley 2008[1966]: 1006-1013; Ryan 1996[1981]: 15.



follows: “Altogether there were about 70 to 85 bands, each one consisting of about 40 to 50 people organized into hearth groups corresponding to families. The total population consisted of between 3,000 and 5,000 people” (Jones 1974: 330).<sup>12</sup> These numbers are immensely valuable

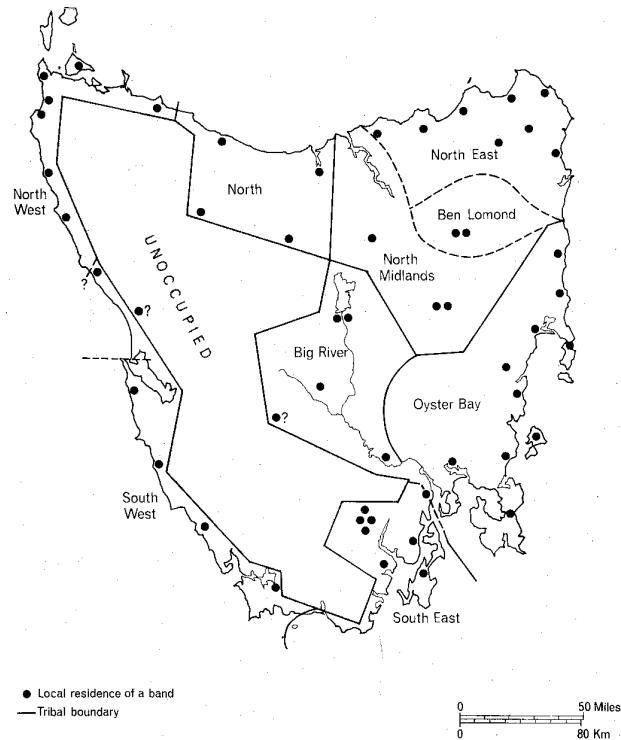


Fig. 1. Location of tribes and bands.

Figure 2.1. Map of Tasmanian Tribes. From Jones 1974: 327.

for a number of reasons. First, small population estimates mean the “isolated” Tasmanian Aboriginal gene pool can be *retroactively* judged as adaptive or maladaptive. Second, and no doubt tacitly connected to the first, Australians care about these numbers. It means something to them, although the reasons why remain unspoken.<sup>13</sup> In my experiences, the population size prior

<sup>12</sup> “If, as Jones assumes, the average band contained between forty and fifty people, the Aboriginal Tasmanian population would have been between three thousand and four thousand” (Ryan 1996[1981]: 14).

<sup>13</sup> Over the course of three days working with at the 2011 Australian Wooden Boat Festival I was asked about pre-contact population size at least twenty times.

to European arrival is intricately tied to competing narratives of extinction and existence. Different estimates impact these narratives in different ways and with contrasting outcomes.

This cursory summary of Tasmanian prehistory provides an understanding of the foundations and materials through which the Tasmanian's Paleolithic prison was and continues to be enacted. The facts themselves are not disputed, or more accurately, the disputes that exist tend to center around secondary rather than primary "facts." The broader arguments in which such facts are deployed as evidence reflect the power and continued pervasiveness of the Tasmanian Aboriginal's Paleolithic prison, the foundations of which are multi-faceted, interconnected, and mutually constitutive.<sup>14</sup> Importantly, its focus is built through the ideological strength of isolation in the already isolated Antipodes and involves the erasure of continued Tasmanian existence and cultural dynamism. What follows is an in-depth discussion of the Tasmanian's place within Victorian anthropology, social evolutionary thought, and Australian anthropology. The focus is not on how the Tasmanians lived before the Europeans arrived, but rather what they came to *represent* within comparative frameworks.

### ***Australia and Primeval Man***

*Even before there were any detailed ethnographic descriptions, Australia had already been identified as the crucial anthropological laboratory. The reasons were obvious enough. The Australian Aborigines were naked, black hunters and gatherers. Compared with the American Indians, they had limited contact with Europeans. In other words, they were as close as could be to the Victorian image of primitive man...If something like the earliest form of society was to be found, if a primeval religious ceremony was still being celebrated, this could only be in Australia. That was the place to hunt cultural dinosaurs (Kuper 1988: 92).*

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<sup>14</sup> The way the deep past is understood and framed within wider genealogies, of progress, etc., has serious repercussions for contemporary peoples as well as their ancestors. As Benjamin writes, "To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was' (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger... The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers. The same threat hangs over both: that of becoming a tool of the ruling classes. In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it. The Messiah comes not only as the redeemer, he comes as the subduer of Antichrist. Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious" (Benjamin 1968: 255).

The interpellation of Aboriginal Australians as the paradigmatic primitive peoples was based in space and time. Australia and New Zealand, dubbed the “Antipodes” because of their relatively distant location, were imagined as the inverse of Great Britain and Western Europe. Tellingly, nineteenth century descriptions of their flora and fauna (including human populations) often mirrored those found in the “Lost World” genre of fiction popularized by Rudyard Kipling and H. Rider Haggard.<sup>15</sup> The descriptions and valuations of the Australians at the tail end of the “Age of Discovery” were variable, with some more favorable than others.<sup>16</sup> There was a degree of agreement, however, for despite “their theoretical differences, scholars inclined toward social evolutionism, ethnology, and polygenism alike continued to consider Australian Aborigines as a measure of humanity at its physical and mental nadir” (Strong 1986: 183). Their status as “primordial man” gained greater consensus following what Thomas Trautmann calls the

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<sup>15</sup> This genre centers on the discovery of a civilization or group either frozen in, or “out of,” time. Often cited as the first to popularize this genre, Haggard’s *King Solomon’s Mines* (Haggard 2007[1885]) involves a great journey into time via distance. While Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (Conrad 1995) shares some of these same themes, its narrative is one of degeneration and pessimism. These same motifs of extreme distance and temporality were historically used in early ethnographic works (See Kuklick 1997).

<sup>16</sup> In *Caliban Discovered* (Stanner 2009[1962]) W.E.H. Stanner recounts at least four distinguishable lineages of thought: “there were vast changes in mentality and atmosphere between 1644 (the time of Tasman and Hobbes), 1770 (the time of Sheridan, Johnson, Rousseau and Cook), and 1898 (the time of Trollope, Sir James Frazer, and Spencer and Gillen). We are thus dealing with several—at least four—distinguishable lineages of thought. The oldest can be linked with the first discoverers who barely—and grudgingly—accorded the Aborigines the status of human beings. The second may be said, with a little courtesy, to have begun at about the same time: an attempt at objective observation of their racial style, material culture, languages, and forms of social life though, for a long time, only unconnected fragments of good knowledge resulted. The third was a rather brief phase of romantic idealism that stemmed in part from Rousseau’s fiction of ‘the noble savage’ and in part from the whole ‘trick and condemnation of civilisation’—with its vast changes of ideas, tastes and sentiments—in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. The fourth is difficult to categorise since it was a mixture of old and new things. In the early years of settlement insensibility towards the Aborigines’ human status hardened into contempt, derision and indifference. The romantic idealism, unable to withstand the shock of experience, drifted through dismay into pessimism about the natives’ capacity for civilisation” (Stanner 2009[1962]: 73-4).

“revolution in ethnological time” in the 1860s (Trautmann 1992).<sup>17</sup> This seismic shift led to increased systematicity within the burgeoning discipline of anthropology vis-à-vis the directionality of change and cultural development. As Trautmann writes, “Savagery became, at last, not only the antithesis of civilization, but, decisively, its precursor” (Trautmann 1992: 389).<sup>18</sup> This placement was wholly comparative, as non-Western groups were described in relation to, and in direct contrast with, European civilization. Stocking masterfully demonstrates the extensive genealogy of this practice. He shows how it even preceded the 1851 Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations at London’s Crystal Palace, where the national exhibits led the visitor “along a line of progress from the Tasmanian savage through the ‘barbaric’ civilizations of the East, northwest across the European continent towards an apex in Great Britain” (Stocking 1987: 5). The quest to uncover humanity’s origins was in many ways a temporal one, and gained urgency in response to the discoveries at Brixham Cave and their implications regarding humanity’s deep history.

The years 1858 and 1859 witnessed not only the publication of the Darwinian theory, but also the discovery of flint tools in association with extinct animals at Brixham Cave in Devonshire and the confirmation by British investigators of Jacques Boucher de Perthe’s similar findings in the Somme valley. The net effect was the opening of a new vista on the antiquity of man and the meaning of contemporary “savagery” (Stocking 1968: 171).<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> “The revolution in ethnological time was the sudden collapse, during the decade of Darwin, of the short chronology for human history based on the biblical narrative, a chronology in which the whole of human history had been crowded into the space of a few thousand years” (Trautmann 1992: 380).

<sup>18</sup> “Because its lowest branches had been obscured in the midst of human time, Darwinians used the ladder of cultural evolution to get from the presumed ground level of human antiquity to a point higher up the trunk that led to European civilization” (Stocking 1987: 183). What made this new science different from previous hierarchical structures like the Great Chain of Being, was that the “Evolutionist narrative was a narrative, in the strict sense. It had a temporal syntax; it was sequential, cumulative and end-driven” (Wolfe 1999: 45).

<sup>19</sup> Stocking makes the same point, with minor variation, in *Victorian Anthropology* (1987). He writes: “Although there had been a cultural push in the early 1850s toward a developmental view of European civilization, and there were important intellectual precedents for such an inquiry, it was only when Brixham Cave established the great antiquity of man, and Darwinism linked man to some antecedent primate form, that this interest was translated into a systematic investigation of human sociocultural origins. In this project, the comparative study of the evidence of contemporary savagery—which had been

After Brixham Cave, champions of upward progress and unilineal evolutionary schemas had concrete evidence challenging the temporal limitations of biblical time. As a result, they gained further intellectual moorings in their battles with the degenerationists. John Ferguson McLennan, a central figure in debates around “primitive marriage,” commented in 1869 that

Our proposition is that the antiquity of man is very great—the popular chronology entirely wrong. The point to be cleared is, Whether all the races of men can have had their progenitors in the members of a single family 2348 B.C., —the date of the deluge? If we can show that to be impossible our proposition will be proved, since the chronology which asserts it is the only obstacle to our believing man to have been on the earth for any length of time (McLennan 1869: 516).

Additionally, a deeper human history could help explain the great variability of culture phases around the world. Due to differential abilities and inequalities,

many existing forms of life [are] structurally more archaic than any recorded, lying nearer, that is, to the beginning of human progress, considered as a development. We have shown how we may classify such forms as more or less archaic, and learn from the study of their interconnexion what were the successive steps in their evolution. Almost every conceivable phase of progress being somewhere presented as existing or recorded, the materials for the sketch are abundant, and the securities against error great... As it is, in the knowledge of the inequalities, and of the ruder forms of life, the mystery is unriddled, and the symbolism is made to tell us as certainly of the early usages of a people as the rings in the transverse section of a tree tell of its age (McLennan 1869: 549).

At the heart of McLennan’s program is the comparative method<sup>20</sup> that, following the revolution in ethnological time, replaced degenerationist and diffusionist frameworks with ones of upward mobility and unaided progress.<sup>21</sup>

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the subject matter of the preevolutionary discipline of ‘ethnology’—became critically important” (Stocking 1987: 172).

<sup>20</sup> “French and Scottish writers shared a belief in human progress, a notion of ‘civilization’ as its encompassing expression, and the idea that its development might be studied philosophically. They also shared the basic assumption of what is often referred to, somewhat anachronistically and rather too specifically, as *the* comparative method: the idea that in the absence of traditional historical evidence, the earlier phases of civilization could be reconstructed by using data derived from the observation of peoples still living in earlier ‘stages’ of development” (Stocking 1987: 15).

The comparative method's foundation in temporality and geography is the core reason why the "Australian" became the symbol that it is. Because "deep time could not be measured in 1859, some nontemporal device was needed in order to explore it and classify its inhabitants. One successful strategy was to equate remote times with remote places—with the uttermost ends of the Earth" (Shryock, Trautmann, and Gamble 2011: 27).<sup>22</sup> It was within this context that the stereotypical Australian Aboriginal became not only the idealized indigenous Australian (in contradistinction to the Tasmanian), but also the exemplary "primitive man." The Australian's position as pure early man was strengthened, and shaped, by their purportedly primitive cultural status, the historical context of European colonization, and the relative location of the Antipodes. Australia, as the only island-continent-country, is the "natural laboratory" *par excellence*.<sup>23</sup> Free

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<sup>21</sup> "Process was critical to sociocultural evolutionism primarily as a negative constraint: man must be got out of the Miocene by mechanisms that guaranteed *unassisted* progressive development" (Stocking 1987: 173).

<sup>22</sup> This excerpt continues: "This device, which substituted distance for time, was already well-used in pre-Adamite investigations. An often-cited example is Joseph-Marie Degenerando's memorandum to the Pacific explorer Nicolas Baudin before he set sail from France to the South Pacific, never to return. 'We shall in a way be taken back to the first periods of our own history; we shall be able to set up secure experiments on the origin and generation of ideas, on the formation and development of language, and on the relations between these two processes. The philosophical traveler, sailing to the ends of the earth, is in fact traveling in time; he is exploring the past; every step he makes is the passage of an age. Those unknown islands that he reaches are for him the cradle of human society'" (Shryock, Trautmann, and Gamble 2011: 27). Baudin surveyed Tasmania in 1802.

<sup>23</sup> Henrika Kuklick writes: "In Darwin's and Wallace's accounts, islands were distinctive places. Compared to continental species, island types enjoyed light natural selection pressures: islands housed relatively few species; and since invading species could reach islands only by sea or (especially) air travel, island inhabitants were relatively secure. A large portion of the species found on any given island were likely to be 'peculiar or endemic forms,' and these were frequently remnants of species that had become extinct elsewhere" (Kuklick 1996: 615). Marshall Sahlins views islands in a similar manner in an article from 1963, writing: "With an eye to their own life goals, the native peoples of Pacific Islands unwittingly present to anthropologists a generous scientific gift: an extended series of experiments in cultural adaptation and evolutionary development. They have compressed their institutions within the confines of infertile coral atolls, expanded them on volcanic islands, created with the means history gave them cultures adapted to the deserts of Australia, the mountains and warm coasts of New Guinea, the rainforests of the Solomon Islands. From the Australian Aborigines, whose hunting and gathering existence duplicates in outline the cultural life of the later Paleolithic, to the great chiefdoms of Hawaii, where society approached the formative levels of the old Fertile Crescent civilizations, almost every general phase in the progress of primitive culture is exemplified... Where culture so experiments, anthropology finds its laboratories—makes its comparisons" (Sahlins 2000b: 71).

from competition, its indigenous peoples were believed to have lived in equilibrium with their environment at the far end of the Earth, ultimately coming to represent the “absolute antithesis of progress and civilization” (Brantlinger 2003: 117).<sup>24</sup> To the armchair theorists of the day, the new ethnographic material from Australia was “manna from heaven, and in the twenty years after the middle 1890s a large literature grew up about the topics which took on a curious independence of the people to whose life they referred—the Aboriginal family, clan and tribe; the systems of kinship, marriage and descent; exogamy, incest and promiscuity; totemism, ritual, magic and myth” (Stanner 2009[1968]: 199). One extended example is illustrative of “the extent to which the literature fastened on the Aborigines a reputation of extraordinary primitivity” (Stanner 2009[1968]: 199). Emile Durkheim’s *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* strives to present the universality of religion within a telos of progress. In order to truly understand such any social phenomena, we “must begin by going back to its simplest and most primitive form. We must seek to account for the features that define it at that period of its existence and then show how it has gradually developed, gained in complexity, and become what it is at the moment under consideration” (Durkheim 1995[1912]: 3). When faced with the fundamental question: “How can one find the common basis of religious life under the luxuriant vegetation that grows over it?” Durkheim looks to the “lower societies” in which the “lesser development of individuality, the smaller scale of the group, and the homogeneity of external circumstances all contribute to reducing the differences and variations to a minimum” (Durkheim 1995[1912]: 5). Following this logic, it is clear why Durkheim selected the seemingly pure and untouched Australian Aborigines as his opus’s centerpiece. Further foregrounding both temporal difference

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<sup>24</sup> “The later decades of the nineteenth century saw the autochthonous people become central to anthropological theory as it developed within the framework of social evolutionism. This occurred... because they were regarded as one of the best examples of early humankind—a paradigm of originality or primordality which opened, it was believed, a window onto our beginnings” (Attwood 1996: xiii).

and genealogical connection, Durkheim's study focuses on "the most primitive and simplest religion that can be found. To discover that religion, therefore, it is natural for me to address myself to societies that stand as close as possible to the origins of evolution... There are no societies that exhibit this characteristic more fully than do the Australian Tribes" (Durkheim 1995[1912]: 93).

Durkheim fails to acknowledge how the Tasmanians have historically (and scientifically) been separated from the rest of Australia's indigenous peoples (as a *marked* marked position, in contrast with the *unmarked* marked position of the "Australian"). Whereas the Australian was the paradigmatic "primitive man," the Tasmanians were saddled with a label of greater historical specificity. Put bluntly, if Australia was the place to hunt cultural dinosaurs, Tasmania was a place to hunt an altogether different prize. In the Australian context, they have been (re) presented as unique and irreconcilably different and, as a result, have a metonymic prison that differs from that of (the various) mainland Aboriginal peoples.<sup>25</sup>

### ***Formation of a Symbol: Tasmania and Victorian Anthropology***

The three primary elements of Tasmania's Paleolithic prison can be summarized as:

- The Tasmanians as "Paleolithic Man;" culturally arrested and frozen for millennia due to geographical isolation; in a "culture phase" (Balfour 1925) analogous to pre-historic European culture.
- The Tasmanians as racially and culturally distinct and wholly separate from the Aboriginal peoples of mainland Australia.
- The Tasmanians are extinct. With the passing of Truganini in 1876, so passed the Tasmanian race.

These three elements are interrelated, complementary, and mutually enforcing. They emerged out of late nineteenth century social evolutionary thought and its foundations of temporality and

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<sup>25</sup> A strong argument can be made that mainland Aboriginal groups are incarcerated in a metonymic prison comprised of Totemism, the "sacred," and the cosmology of "The Dreamtime." See Levi-Strauss 1963; Maddock 1991; and Wolfe 1991 for fine analyses of this topic.



geographical distance.<sup>26</sup> The placement of cultural groups as embodiments of earlier forms of European history represents what anthropologist Johannes Fabian calls the “denial of coevalness.” For Fabian, “What makes the savage significant to the evolutionist’s Time is that he lives in another Time” (Fabian 1983: 27). With this in mind, it is critical to remember that the presumed end of the Tasmanian peoples overlapped with the consolidation and institutionalization of anthropology. Consequently, scientific and theoretical work on the Tasmanians has historically been conducted and framed against the backdrop of loss/ extinction. Such research tends to seek to uncover pre-historic simplicity in Tasmania *or* to employ such simplicity as an explanatory mechanism for the loss of its indigenous peoples (this helps explain the fixation on pre-colonial population size). Both are intricately tethered to ideologies of racial, spatial, and cultural isolation.<sup>27</sup> In both cases, simplicity is taken for granted.

Following the revolution in ethnological time the Tasmanian Aboriginal peoples came to occupy the lowest rung of the social evolutionary ladder for many Victorian anthropologists, with Edward Burnett Tylor being a prime example.<sup>28</sup> When faced with the question whether any contemporary tribe could stand as “living representatives of the early Stone Age,” Tylor “settled

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<sup>26</sup> The placement of the Tasmanians as Paleolithic Man was a post-Brixham Cave phenomenon. Mulvaney notes how “It has become a truism that the status of Tasmanian aborigines was the lowest of mankind. Yet because of the ‘short’ chronology it was assumed that only relatively recently had they sunk to this lowly station. It had not been suggested that they were the type of early mankind, nor realized that European culture had once resembled the Tasmanian” (Mulvaney 1964: 29).

<sup>27</sup> “But what would happen if people colonized, say, a remote island and were then cut off from all contact with the outside world? Would they survive? Would they remain civilized? Would they revert to ‘jungle law’ and end up killing one another? Or would they perhaps gradually die out? There have in fact been such cases... Indeed, Tasmania holds the record for the longest isolation known in human history. One society survived there for 10,000 years until its abrupt destruction by the modern world” (Diamond 1993: 48-50).

<sup>28</sup> Tylor’s *Primitive Culture* (1871) presents a shift away from degeneration and diffusion and a commitment to the belief that all human societies could be placed within a cultural hierarchy of discernible levels of development based upon universal criteria. Tylor’s American contemporary, Lewis Henry Morgan, proffers a famous unilinear evolutionary schema. For Morgan, the universal periods of development were: Savagery (Upper, Middle, and Lower), Barbarism (Upper, Middle, and Lower), and Civilization (Morgan 1877: 12-13).

on the Tasmanians” (Stocking 1987: 176). Tylor explicates this position is explicated in a number of papers, the most relevant being *On the Tasmanians as Representatives of Paleolithic Man* (1894). In the midst of widespread scientific debates between biblical degeneration<sup>29</sup> and Enlightenment-fueled belief in upward progress, Tylor envisioned the Tasmanians as almost literally frozen in time prior to British invasion. He based this conclusion on his study of Tasmanian stone tools, the results of which placed them as prior to the already primordial mainlanders. Importantly, Tylor found no evidence of “degeneration of culture” (Tylor 1894: 148), concluding rather:

Their arts, language, religion, social rules, are on the usual lines of the lowest tribes of man, only at simple and rude stages. The point especially to be noticed is that, just as their stone implements belong to the recognized stone age, though at an especially low level, so it is with the rest of their culture, which is not of an abnormal but only of a low and rude type. They have throughout the characters of mankind in a somewhat more primitive condition than any other tribe among those sufficiently known for detailed comparison, in either ancient or modern times (Tylor 1894: 149).

In other words, the Tasmanians “may be the rudest picture known of the condition of a savage people leading a healthy normal life, getting their living from nature” (Tylor 1894: 150). In terms of material technologies,

The Tasmanians knew nothing of the bow and arrow, nor the spear-thrower characteristic of Australia... They had not the Australian bark canoe, but a canoe-shaped solid float of bundles of bark on which they sat or stood, paddling or punting with a pole. They were string, net, and basket-makers; made fire with the simple fire-drill, and roasted their fish and game; put up such rude shelters of boughs as met the needs of their life of wandering in quest of food (Tylor 1894: 149).

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<sup>29</sup> “The most fundamental limiting factor in mid-century speculation and field research was indeed this implied chronological one. Acceptance of the Mosaic time scale imposed a closed system of dating for Australia as for the rest of the world” (Mulvaney 1964: 29).

Frederick Wood-Jones, scientist and anthropometrist, drew similar conclusions in a series of 1935 radio lectures, entitled *Tasmania's Vanished Race*.<sup>30</sup> According to Wood-Jones, "The material culture of the Tasmanians was at a very low ebb, even for nomadic people who knew no settled mode of life. In all their arts they fell considerably below the standards of the Australian" (Wood-Jones 1935: 24). Tylor shared these views regarding their anthropological and evolutionary distinctiveness.

Tribes who like them knew no agriculture nor pastoral life are common enough, indeed this is the most convenient definition of savages. Many tribes in the late Stone Age have lasted on into modern times, but it appears that the aborigines of Tasmania, whose last survivors have just died out, by the workmanship of their stone implements rather represented the condition of Paleolithic Man (Tylor 1899[1890]: v).<sup>31</sup>

In discussing Tylor and the evolutionary placement of the indigenous Tasmanians, it is crucial to remember that their geographical separation from mainland Australia served as the primary cause of their frozen culture. As a result of such isolation, the perceived pre-contact Tasmanian culture-phase

has no small importance in the light it throws on the problem of civilization. A people isolated from interference from without, and in harmony within their "milieu environnant," to use the term of Lamarck, so that circumstances to no great extent compel improvement or bring on decay, may, it seems, remain comparatively unchanged in their level of culture, even from remote prehistoric ages, just as mollusca of species first appearing back in the earlier formations may continue to live and thrive in modern seas (Tylor 1894: 150).

For his intellectual descendants like Henry Balfour, the long-time director of Oxford's Pitt Rivers Museum, the study of the Tasmanian Aboriginal peoples "affords an instance, a very

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<sup>30</sup> To be contrasted with his 1934 series of radio lectures on *Australia's Vanishing Race* (Wood-Jones 1934).

<sup>31</sup> In 1900 Tylor added, "It now becomes clear that the natives of Tasmania illustrate the culture of the Stone Age at a period of development even below that of the Paleolithic Man of the Mammoth Period in Europe" (Tylor 1900: 33).

striking one, of the past surviving in the present” (Balfour 1925: 1).<sup>32</sup> It was within such paradigms that the Tasmanians were imagined, and incarcerated, as (recently) living fossils of a pre-historic European past.

There is significant overlap between the “Tasmanian as Paleolithic Man” and the “Tasmanian as racially separate and distinct” themes. More critically, the combination of scientific discourses of racial difference and cultural stasis makes the third theme—that of Tasmanian extinction—possible. Viewed jointly, they comprise the three main elements of the Paleolithic prison that continues to imprison contemporary Tasmanian Aboriginal peoples. The main pieces of evidence deployed in support of racial difference were the Tasmanians’ dark skin and woolly hair, which are in contradistinction to the “Australioid type” as defined in 1870 by Thomas Henry Huxley.<sup>33</sup> Known as “Darwin’s bulldog” because of his fierce support of Darwinist evolutionary theory, Huxley views the “Australioid type” as “one of the best marked of all types, or principal forms, of mankind,” and has a number of distinctive physical traits. For males, these traits include

fair stature, with well-developed torso and arms, but relatively and absolutely slender legs. The colour of the skin is some shade of chocolate-brown; and the

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<sup>32</sup> The entire statement reads as follows: “The Tasmanians are probably the only people of whom it can be said with confidence that they remained into quite recent times in an arrested culture-phase which may be described as strictly *Paleolithic*—a very remarkable instance of the persistence of primitive conditions. As such, the Tasmanians have a high intrinsic interest both for the ethnologist and the archaeologist. To the latter, indeed, there is a wider interest in this ‘unrisen’ people, inasmuch as the study of their rudimentary stone-age culture is of value in helping to fill some of the gaps in the prehistoric record. It affords an instance, a very striking one, of the past surviving in the present, of ethnology offering a hand to archaeology, a happy blending of sciences to the advantage of both” (Balfour 1925: 1).

<sup>33</sup> This was in line with the science of racial typologies, the heritage of which goes back to Linnaeus and beyond. These categories and classifications are notoriously fluid and in constant flux. This is nothing new. In *The Descent of Man*, Charles Darwin writes “Man has been studied more carefully than any other animal, and yet there is the greatest possible diversity amongst capable judges whether he should be classed as a single species or race, or as two (Virey), as three (Jacquinot), as four (Kant), five (Blumenbach), six (Buffon), seven (Hunter), eight (Agassiz), eleven (Pickering), fifteen (Bory St Vincent), sixteen (Desmoulins), twenty-two (Morton), sixty (Crawford), or as sixty-three, according to Burke” (Darwin 2004[1979]: 203). Huxley proposed four principal forms of mankind: the Australioid, Negroid, Xanthochroic, and Mongoloid types (Huxley 1870).

eyes are very dark brown, or black. The hair is usually raven-black, fine and silky in texture; and it is never woolly, but usually wavy and tolerably long... These characters are common to all inhabitants of Australia proper (excluding Tasmania)(Huxley 1870: 404).

For Huxley, the Tasmanians exemplified the “Negrito” subtype within the “Negroid type” of humankind.<sup>34</sup> Huxley writes:

The stature of the Negro is, on the average, fair, and the body and limbs are well made. The skin varies in colour, through various shades of brown to what is commonly called black; and the eyes are brown and black. The hair is usually black, and always short and crisp or woolly... In the Andaman Islands, in the Peninsula of Malacca, in the Philippines, in the islands which stretch from Wallace’s line eastward and southward, nearly parallel with the east coast of Australia, to New Caledonia, and finally, *in Tasmania*, men with dark skins and woolly hair occur who constitute a special modification of the Negroid type—the Negritos (Huxley 1870: 405-406)(emphasis added).

E.B. Tylor combines these ideologies of racial distinction (in relation to mainland Australia) and cultural primordiality, referring to the Tasmanians as a “branch of the Negroid race illustrating the condition of man near his lowest known level of culture” (Tylor 1899[1890]: v).

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries there were widespread debates concerning how a racially different (and wholly separate) Tasmanian population came to occupy their island home. This question was of no small importance within the budding field of anthropology, with R.H. Puleine, then President of the Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science (ANZAAS), proposing that “Probably no single anthropological question has been as freely discussed as this, not alone by the leading anthropologists of the present and past, but also by geologists” (Pulleine 1929: 296). “In discussions on the origin of the Tasmanians, and their emigration to Tasmania,” Puleine contends “anthropologists and

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<sup>34</sup> See Rosaldo 1982 for an interesting discussion of how the “Negritos” of the Philippines came to be placed “on the social evolutionary ladder’s lowest rung” (Rosaldo 1982: 317). The classification of the Tasmanians as an early precursor to this population provides the reader with a clear genealogy of difference and valuation across time and space. See also Lindsay 1954 and Birdsell 1950 for discussions of Negrito populations in Australia.

others have formed two groups, the overlanders and the voyagers” (Pulleine 1929: 296), with the former favoring an inland route through mainland Australia and the latter favoring a nautical journey that bypassed it entirely.<sup>35</sup> Although both schools have multiple propositions and varying elements, they share the same underlying foundations. In each case, the cultural and racial distinctiveness of the Tasmanians is assumed. For the “voyagers,” the former Papuans reached the island of Tasmania with the aide of material technology that was subsequently lost. Pulleine, an advocate of the “voyager” school, states that

on an island isolated and free from the bombardment of outside culture—an ideal unchanging environment—the one-time Papuan would gradually evolve a technique of living, a culture reduced to the most primitive grade, forgetting things in course of centuries such as canoe-building of any higher degree than the drift canoes (Pulleine 1929: 303).

For the “overlanders,” the Tasmanians’ trek to the south preceded the arrival of the people that would become the “Australians.” Today we have long known the Tasmanians traveled to the island via a land bridge from mainland Australia. With sea levels rising at the conclusion of the last Ice Age, this connective body of land was subsumed under the Bass Strait.<sup>36</sup> This position was first proffered by A.W. Howitt, who concluded that “one of the fundamental principles to be adopted in discussing the origin of those savages must be, that they reached Tasmania at a time when there was a land communication between it and Australia” (Howitt 1996[1904]: 9). Despite such breakthroughs, ideologies of extreme primitivity and racial distinction continued to operate in tandem to provide the foundations for the third and final element of the Tasmanians’ metonymic prison: extinction. In essence, Tasmanian extinction is contingent upon maintaining a strict separation and disconnection from the Aboriginal peoples on the mainland going back to

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<sup>35</sup> The various positions and proponents are dealt with at length in Berry 1907; Meston 1937, 1965; Wood-Jones 1935; and Wunderly 1938b.

<sup>36</sup> Similar arguments regarding the “arrival” of Native Americans to North America exist, with a land bridge being subsumed under the Bering Strait (“Beringia”) at the end of the last Ice Age.

time immemorial. For example, while Howitt argued for a geographic connection between these seemingly distinct groups he maintains a temporal separation, surmising “It seems therefore evident that there was a land communication between New Guinea and Australia at a comparatively recent period by which the Tasmanians, and subsequently the Australians, might have entered this continent” (Howitt 1996[1904]: 14). While later specialists accept a period of overlap between these “Proto-Tasmanians” and “Proto-Australians” and acknowledge possible intermixture, it is with certain restrictions. Tellingly, such intermixture would have occurred *only* after the loss of the land bridge and therefore would have left the isolated Tasmanian population untouched. On this point, J. Wunderly, noted anthropometrist and physical anthropologist, concludes the only view supported “by evidence resulting from systematic investigations is that [the Tasmanians] were representatives of Asiatic Negritos, who travelled to Tasmania via Australia. The balance of evidence indicates that the Tasmanian race was pure in type, but that the Australian is a mixed race” (Wunderly 1938b: 203). This point is critical, for it follows that if any close connections between the Tasmanians and the Australians, cultural, racial, or otherwise, were established and promulgated in the realm of science, then extinction, by its very definition, could not have occurred. The entire discourse would potentially collapse like a house of cards if any of these things were disrupted. The fact that this has yet to fully occur is valuable and points to the immense paradigmatic power of the Tasmanians as placeholder (for a certain form of savagery) and symbol (of extinction/ colonial malfeasance).

Even in moments where assumptions of isolation are challenged, Tasmania remains conspicuous through its exemption. One example will suffice. In 1952 Claude Levi-Strauss, one of the twentieth century’s preeminent anthropologists, published an anti-racism pamphlet, *Race*

*and History*, as part of a wider effort by UNESCO. Arguing against foundational ideologies of isolation, Levi-Strauss states definitively that the diversity of human cultures is

not the diversity of a collection of lifeless samples or the diversity to be found in the arid pages of a catalogue. Men have doubtless developed differentiated cultures as a result of geographical distance, the special features of their environment, or their ignorance of the rest of mankind, but this would be strictly and absolutely true only if every culture or society had been born and had developed without the slightest contact with any others. *Such a case never occurs however, except possibly in such exceptional instances as that of the Tasmanians (and even then, only for a limited period)* (Levi-Strauss 1952: 10)(emphasis added).

Exceptionalism such as this continues to permeate discussions and understandings of Tasmanian Aboriginality, and helps perpetuate the narrative of extinction to this day. It also serves to shed light on the degree to which Tasmanian Aboriginality remains defined by fatal impacts and loss.

### ***Archaeology and the Science of Degeneration***

These ideologies of extreme difference and stasis remained hegemonic for the majority of the twentieth century, with the 1930s seeing a propagation of studies focusing on the “Tasmanian Skull” (Wood-Jones 1929; Wunderly and Wood-Jones 1933; Wunderly 1938a, 1939). Both Rhys Jones and N.J.B. Plomley cast serious doubt on the validity of these studies, not because they believe the Tasmanians and Australians were ultimately connected (on the Tasmanian side) but because the materials were limited and the records shoddy and incomplete. On this issue Plomley notes how

There is now hardly a single specimen in our museums of which we can say that the person whose remains it is was truly a Tasmanian aborigine. Archaeological material we can be sure about, but nothing collected since the Tasmanians first made contact with Europeans and their associates is known certainly to be the remains of a Tasmanian fullblood... Even when the source of some skull was known, it was not usually recorded, or if recorded the information has since been lost. So today we have in museums collections of skulls which are *said* to be Tasmanian but not *known* to be Tasmanian, and they are identified as Tasmanian



by the possession of characteristics which are *believed* to be Tasmanian (Plomley 1977: 4).

Despite such tangible shortcomings, anthropometrical studies of human remains helped maintained the discursive separation of the Tasmanian from the Australian.

Additionally, the arrival of professionalized Archaeology in Australia led to major shifts in broader perceptions of prehistoric Tasmanian Aboriginal culture (and by proxy its contemporary form). Arguably the most influential figure in Tasmanian Archaeology was the aforementioned Rhys Jones, whose research transformed “how traditional Tasmanian Aboriginal people are understood. As controversial as it was innovative, Jones’s groundbreaking research and dramatic ideas inflamed and inspired his fellow academics, Aboriginal people and the wider populace. Positively or negatively, Jones has influenced almost all subsequent scholarship into Aboriginal Tasmania” (Taylor 2008: 111). His 1977 article *The Tasmanian Paradox* had an incomparable impact on understandings of Tasmanian deep history, and has a complicated legacy. It is in this piece of scholarship where Jones argued that

as a result of their millennia-long isolation, the Tasmanian Aborigines were in a slow cultural decline: they had forgotten how to catch fish, probably lost the use of many of their tools and even the ability to make fire. The result, Jones concluded, was ‘the world’s simplest technology’. Jones had apparently provided the first archaeological evidence of cultural degeneration in world archaeology (Taylor 2008: 111).

This was, and continues to be, a crucial point in relation to the Paleolithic prison entrapping the Tasmanian Aboriginal peoples. Jones’s research directly refuted Tylor’s (and others) anthropological placements of the Tasmanians within a static, “arrested culture-phase.” In its place he took a degenerationist position.<sup>37</sup> This new degeneration differed greatly from that of its

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<sup>37</sup> On this very topic, Jones writes: “Only a few years ago, there was a tendency to view Tasmanian material culture as a fossilised version of its Pleistocene Australian parent, but the archaeological record, on both the mainland and island, shows that this can no longer be presumed. Somewhere on the long road from the tropical Greater Australia of twenty thousand years ago to the Tasmania of 1800 AD, edge-

nineteenth century advocates, which had been based on the “biblical idea of the Fall, on classical notions of a primitive Golden Age, or upon revived conceptions of the cyclical movement of social life” (Stocking 1987: 16). Alternatively, Jones’s degeneration drew its validity, and supporting evidence, from the new science (in Australia, at least) of Archaeology rather than from scripture. To a certain extent this scientifically consecrated degeneration has subsequently replaced ideologies of stasis within broader imaginings of Tasmanian Aboriginal prehistory.

The first professional archaeologist to work in Tasmania, “Jones began his research excavating shell middens in the island’s northwest in 1963” (Taylor 2008: 111), with his most famous excavation being two caves at Rocky Cape where a “continuous sequence was obtained, spanning the past 8000 years” (Jones 1977: 194). His findings had serious implications for the study of Tasmanian Aboriginal peoples (past and present) and his paradigmatic article will be discussed at length. Jones recycles familiar ideologies and tropes in presenting his ideas and theories to a wider audience, with isolation, extreme primitivity, cultural simplicity, and potentially even fatal impacts, being the most prominent. To these metonymic chains he adds a resurrected (and re-calibrated) discourse of degeneration and cultural loss. In total, all these ideologies rely heavily upon Tasmanian extinction to gain contextual value and validity. By this point in the 1970s the “overlanders” had long since claimed victory over the “voyagers,” with Jones stating, matter-of-factly, that

More than 12 000 years ago, Tasmania was part of the mainland, and it was across the Bassian land bridge that the ancestors of the Tasmanian Aborigines walked, bearing with them the cultural inheritance of late Pleistocene Australia... Since that time, due to the post glacial sea level rise, Tasmania has been an island,

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ground axes and presumably some elementary hafting techniques became lost. Whether this occurred when their makers occupied the temperate zones of Australia, or whether within the context of the Bassian isolation is not yet known. Finally the boomerangs and barbed spear heads of Wyrie, found at the very door step to Tasmania and dated to just about the time when the trap was snapped shut, may mean that these implements too were part of the cultural baggage jettisoned by the Tasmanians during their long stay within their closed world” (Jones 1977: 196).

and the archaeological record over the past 8000 years, shows the continuity of a single technological tradition untouched by any of the cultural influences which so transformed the shape of mainland stone tool assemblages. There is no single example of the new 'small tools' and there were no dogs. Demographically and culturally, Tasmania was a closed system. Indeed it will become the classic example of such a system, for no other human society, which survived until modern times, had been isolated so completely and for so long (Jones 1977: 193-4).

The article focuses on a series of "adjustments which the prehistoric inhabitants of north west Tasmania made, following the dislocation of their late Pleistocene economic system by the post-glacial rising sea" (Jones 1977: 194). A key aspect of Jones's analysis is the manner in which he accounts for ecological variability in relation to mainland Australia. By highlighting the change in environment, he attributes causal power to one's surroundings in the development of material technologies. One of his most influential findings was the cessation of scale fish consumption between "3800 and 3500 BP when suddenly, fish completely disappeared from the diet" (Jones 1977: 196). Armed with similar findings from additional sites "in both the north west and south east of the island" (Jones 1977: 196), Jones queries why a cultural group would make such a seemingly maladaptive decision. Drawing off his findings, Jones states:

Thus not only do we have the strange spectacle of a coastal hunting people not utilising a major food resource; even more extraordinarily, we see them at a certain point in their history, actually dropping it from their diet... With this abnegation, part of the economic heritage of early Tasmanians slipped away. An intellectual event caused a contraction in their ecological space (Jones 1977: 196).

The second major finding drawn from Rocky Cape was the relatively diminutive size of the Tasmanian tool kit.<sup>38</sup> It is important to note, however, that the comparative size was tacitly and explicitly juxtaposed with the Australians, with the Tasmanian kit found to be lacking. While Jones did not necessarily deem the Tasmanians as inferior based on this comparison, such a position has been built around his findings. In summary, Jones accounts for about two dozen

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<sup>38</sup> "The outstanding feature of Tasmanian technology was its simplicity" (Jones 1977: 196).

items in total, noting how no “simpler technology has ever been recorded in the world’s ethnographic literature, and for this reason alone, the relationship of Tasmanian Aborigines to their environment has immense theoretical interest, for it documents the extreme case of ‘extra-somatic adaptation’ of biologically modern man” (Jones 1977: 197). Almost all of the items in the Tasmanian kit are found in the southernmost regions of mainland Australia, “but there is also a multitude of other tools absent on the island” (Jones 1977: 197).<sup>39</sup>

The article’s conclusion provides what is certainly the most criticized and circulated statement about Tasmanian Aboriginality from the past forty years. This is due in large part to Tom Haydon’s *The Last Tasmanian* film (1978), in which Jones’s theories, along with Jones himself, play a central role. In general, Jones posits a philosophical question in poetic prose unique within archaeological circles, a fact that may be partially responsible for the manner in which it has subsequently been employed and understood. Jones concludes his proposal of (a new) degeneration by suggesting that we

consider the trauma which the severance of the Bassian bridge delivered to the society isolated there. Like a blow above the heart, it took a long time to take effect, but slowly but surely there was a simplification in the tool kit, a diminution in the range of foods eaten, perhaps a squeezing of intellectuality... The world’s longest isolation, the world’s simplest technology. Were 4000 people enough to propel forever the cultural inheritance of Late Pleistocene Australia? *Even if Abel Tasman had not sailed the winds of the Roaring Forties in 1642, were they in fact doomed—doomed to a slow strangulation of the mind?* (Jones 1977: 202-3)(emphasis added).

Jones’s legacy is complex, due in large part to the ideas commonly attributed to him rather than what he actually said. The “slow strangulation of the mind” doctrine is a prime example of this.

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<sup>39</sup> “These tools include spearthrowers, boomerangs, various composite tools involving a variety of hafting techniques such as edge ground axes, mounted adzes, multi-pronged and barbed fish spears, barbed game spears; fish hooks, various nets for fish, birds, wallabies and other small game; fish and eel traps made from many materials; mats, string bags, baskets and dilly bags of several types; bone awls, points and spatula; possum skin sewn capes, shields, wooden bowls, huts of various types, sewn bark canoes, paddles; the paraphernalia of ritual and art; and also the companionship and use of the dingo” (Jones 1977: 197).

In its extreme form, this phrase has circulated as a definitive statement rather than the conjectural query that it is. As a statement of fact it potentially cleanses the European “invaders” of any-and-all culpability in the purported extinction of the Tasmanian Aboriginal “race.” Within this mindset, they are hypothetically absolved because the Tasmanians were doomed to vanish anyways due to their limited gene pool and extreme isolation.<sup>40</sup> This, of course, becomes much more complicated in light of contemporary existence.

Apart from providing materials that would come to be employed and positioned within larger political arguments on both the state and national level, Jones provided one of the last major elements of the Tasmanian’s metonymic prison, namely an iconic instance of cultural degeneration. While the enactment of the Tasmanians as Paleolithic Man continues to be the major source of their incarceration, it has blended with degenerationist discourses of failed savagery over the last forty years or so. One brief anecdote is illustrative. In September 2011 I was re-settling into life at the University of Michigan after sixteen months of dissertation research. In meeting incoming Graduate Students it is commonplace to discuss your research and regional interests. After hearing that I work with Tasmanian Aboriginal people, one new student asked me, quite earnestly and unproblematically, “Didn’t they lose the ability to make fire?” The fact that this was an incoming student in one of the preeminent departments of anthropology in the world is instructive, and demonstrates the wider circulation and perpetuation of the various ideologies I have discussed in this chapter.<sup>41</sup> The genesis of this belief is attributed to a short passage in George Augustus Robinson’s<sup>42</sup> journals (transcribed and edited by Plomley), but

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<sup>40</sup> This is a major aspect of the ghostly twin of the “romantic stereotype of the Noble Savage... the self-extermimating savage” (Brantlinger 2003: 3).

<sup>41</sup> Rebe Taylor had a similar experience, recollecting how “When on holiday in the Bass Strait in 2006, a fellow tourist told me that the Tasmanian Aborigines were ‘so backward’ that ‘they couldn’t even make fire’” (Taylor 2008: 119-120).

<sup>42</sup> Robinson will be discussed in the chapters that follow.

popularized by Jones and *The Last Tasmanian*. In a short passage, Jones writes “Fire was carried, usually by men, in smouldering slow burning fire-sticks, but the Tasmanians did not know how to make it (Plomley, 1962), having to go to their neighbours for a re-light if their own sticks went out” (Jones 1977: 197).<sup>43</sup> While the use of smouldering fire-sticks has been understood as a response to wet conditions rather than inability, the belief remains. Despite split opinions amongst historians and archaeologists (see Gott 2002), the idea that they either never knew how to make fire, or once had the knowledge and subsequently lost it, has had a considerable impact in shaping popular images and imaginings of the Tasmanians. It is sensationalistic and tethers itself to common ideologies of primitivity, what “primitives” are like, and what “primitives” do. Fire is commonly emblematic of the birth of humanity and group sociality, something that all “primitives” have. The fact that it is frequently denied to prehistoric Tasmanians has significant repercussions for their descendants today.

### ***Concluding Thoughts: Jail Breaks and Tools of Escape***

While the Paleolithic prison is an abstraction, it is not inconsequential. Its various elements, alongside the discipline of anthropology, were consolidated and institutionalized in the late nineteenth century. With minor alterations, Jones’s degeneration being a crucial example, such ideologies continue to have currency. Contemporary Tasmanian Aboriginal people neither live nor look like their pre-historic forebears. This is not unusual. In fact, it is the norm for essentially any cultural or ethnic group on the face of the Earth. What is unique in the Tasmanian

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<sup>43</sup> Alternatively, Meston argues the Tasmanians “obtained fire by rapidly twirling a stick between the palms of the hands, bedding the point in a piece of soft bark lining a hole made for the purpose in a suitable piece of wood. Only on rare occasions in Tasmania are conditions favourable for making fire in this way, so the natives always carried a lighted fire-stick as they journeyed from place to place. They invariably made small fires, and from the method of laying the sticks the smoke in calm weather rose like a coiling pillar. As the colonists never learned the skill, native fires were readily distinguished” (Meston 1949: 148).

context is the sheer strength of the discursive rupture between the past and the present, epitomized by a century of scientific and popular extinction.

The chapters that follow draw attention to the various ways in which Tasmanian Aboriginality has been labeled, defined, and organized over the past two centuries. It is a complicated narrative, perhaps more accurately described as a series of sub-narratives, with shifts that mirror, accept, and deny some of the broader trends of representation described therein. Of great interest are the ways in which the same source materials, drawn from Plomley, Jones, etc., have been re-framed and employed in the cultural resurgence and regeneration of the Tasmanian Aboriginal people. In fact, the argument can be made that the only means of escape from the metonymic prison of the Paleolithic are the very tools of entrapment. By studying the scanty source materials from the colonial period, Tasmanian Aboriginal people, much like the historians and anthropologists that have frequently defined them, gain tangible and concrete insight into their cultural roots. The same resources that preach extinction, stasis (or degeneration) and cultural simplicity provide the best descriptions of pre-historic Tasmanian culture and have been invaluable in the rejuvenation of material culture practices such as basketry and canoe-making (see Chapter Four). They also serve as the foundations for a revitalized language (see Chapter Five), not to mention dress and ceremonial dance. It is a mistake to discount these new practices, conducted by a seemingly “white” community, as false, inauthentic, or as fabrications. When you break out of jail you are still marked as ex-cons, forever branded by your incarceration. Returning to a “pure” state is never truly an option, and such contemporary practices gain value and meaning *in light of* shared post-extinction experiences. It is within this context that they compete, challenge, and often complement,

traditions and practices of more recent origin. In short, the Tasmanians may in fact be quite unique, just not for the reasons one would think.



## Chapter Three

### **“If You Call Me a Hybrid, I’ll Kill Ya”: Race, Community, and Aboriginality in Tasmania**

#### *Introduction*

“Community” is a term social scientists have over-used and under-theorized to the point that many practitioners, myself included, have been advised against using it.<sup>1</sup> While relatively easy to accomplish within the “ivory towers” of coursework, this task becomes increasingly difficult when conducting research in a place where “community,” the word and the social phenomena, are center-stage. In noting its complexity, Raymond Williams writes that Community “can be the warmly persuasive word to describe an existing set of relationships, or the warmly persuasive word to describe an alternative set of relationships” (Williams 1983: 76). The latter, aspirational version is of great value in understanding the complexities of contemporary Aboriginality in Tasmania.

I spent the morning of March 5, 2011 getting myself organized after recently returning from a short, Visa-related trip to New Zealand. It was an important day, for the protest camp at Brighton was holding an “open house” to help garner support for their campaign against the state government’s Brighton Bypass Highway. The short version of the story is that, during archaeological canvassing for a potential roadway, the authorities discovered extensive remnants of a Tasmanian Aboriginal campsite at the Jordan River Levee in Brighton, a small town a few

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<sup>1</sup> For Gerald Creed, community “does not *need* defining, and this is precisely why scholars need to pay attention to it” (Creed 2006: 4).

kilometres north of Hobart. Preliminary suppositions, based on restricted archaeological work, proposed the site was up to 42,000 years old.<sup>2</sup> On December 18, 2010 a number of Tasmanian Aboriginal community members had established a “camp” on the site to protest the planned route.

I rode to the site with a Tasmanian Aboriginal friend of mine. Prior to that day I had kept clear of it, for it was informally operated by the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre (TAC), the quasi-militant arm of the community and an organization with which I had had limited contact. The main reasons for this were research-driven, since the TAC had minimal involvement in the cultural revitalization efforts at the center of my research. Additionally, I had avoided the TAC out of a small sense of loyalty to my main interlocutors and friends, many of who had been the target of inflammatory and hurtful rhetoric from this organization. The TAC, born in the 1970s as the Aboriginal Information Service, has historically spearheaded efforts to provide legal and financial support to its community. The organization later renamed itself as the TAC and overtly modeled itself after the American Black Panthers, amplifying racial rhetoric. Recently there have been calls, almost always behind closed doors, for the TAC to change some of their tactics to reflect wider shifts in the local political and cultural landscapes.

As we walked down to the camp I mentioned how these types of events always make me nervous. My friend looked at me and said it was because I “didn’t like conflict, which is ironic because you chose to work with the most conflicted group in the world.” These comments highlight the fact that the Tasmanian Aboriginal community is no stranger to factionalism and is prone to interpersonal conflict. In the insightful words of one of my Aboriginal friends, this wasn’t even a case of people trying to be “big fish in a little pond,” but merely “people trying to

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<sup>2</sup> The Brighton Bypass and its relationship to ideas and ideologies of heritage is addressed at-length in Chapter Seven.

be medium-sized fish in a small pond.” This metaphor is apt since, with a population of 513,000, Tasmania is one of the smaller “ponds” in Australia.<sup>3</sup> The number of people identifying as Tasmanian Aboriginal has grown by leaps and bounds over past decades, with 19,625 Tasmanian people claiming indigeneity in the 2011 census, a 17% increase from 2006.<sup>4</sup> This number, however, is somewhat misleading, for it encompasses all Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in Tasmania and therefore isn’t composed solely of Tasmanian Aboriginal peoples. In my experience the number is significantly smaller, with an even smaller proportion of which comprised of people who “live and breath” their Tasmanian Aboriginality and are recognized as such by the Office of Aboriginal Affairs. There is a joke within the community about “Tick-a-box Aboriginals,” which references people identify as Aboriginal on census forms (by “ticking” the appropriate box) but presumably have no community ties.

Despite very real division, the Brighton open house is an example of how the community often comes together to support a greater cause. A good analogy I heard repeatedly during fieldwork is that the Tasmanian Aboriginal community is one large family. Like all families, it has competing factions, distrust and jealousy. Additionally, as with all families, such issues can be overcome, or at least tabled, when the occasion demands it. While there are intra-group hostilities and animosity, Tasmanian Aboriginality is fundamentally rooted in the desire to be recognized as who and what they are. Contemporary Tasmanian Aboriginal people do not meet outside expectations of how a “true” Aboriginal person looks and lives, which may be precisely the point. Unlike many of the world’s indigenous peoples, the Tasmanian Aboriginal people in

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<sup>3</sup> For Australian Demographic Statistics see: <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/3101.0/>. Accessed March 11, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/censushome.nsf/home/tas-32?opendocument&navpos=620>. Accessed March 11, 2014.

many respects take contact as the starting point for their identity, and the disjuncture between pre- and post-contact is a critical element in self-definition.

### ***The Great Tasmanian Silence: Colonial History, Ephemerality, Narrativity***

*The history of the now, nearly defunct inhabitants of this beautiful Island, is a dismal one; and its traditions, as well as many of its melancholy facts, are well known to all the old settlers. Hunted like wild beasts, from one part of the Colony to the other, shot down like carrion, their wives and daughters torn from them, —the old story, so often told, of the aggressive power of the strong arm, overpowering, by oppressive cruelty and wrong, the defenceless inanity of the weak (The Mercury, February 20, 1857: 2).*

*After the Dreaming*, W.E.H. Stanner's Boyer Lectures for 1968, are an astute, and common, starting point for understanding Aboriginal Australia in the post-Referendum context.<sup>5</sup> In these lectures he describes how Aboriginal Australians have been sidelined in the historiography of the Australian nation. This "great Australian silence" has regularly been interpreted as meaning Aboriginal people were ignored or invisible in the narrative of Australia. To understand it as such misses the point. In presenting numerous examples of texts about Australia in which Aboriginal people are "footnoted," Stanner argues (in reference to M. Barnard Eldershaw's *My Australia* (1939) but also applicable to general trends) that they are "marginal, and in a deeper sense, irrelevant to the author's story" (Stanner 2009[1968]: 186). While references may be minimal, this does not mean the people themselves are ignored. What is ignored is the formative and active role Aboriginal people played in the development of the Australian nation-state.<sup>6</sup> In an oft-cited passage, Stanner argues

A partial survey is enough to let me make the point that inattention on such a scale cannot possibly be explained by absent-mindedness. It is a structural matter, a view from a window which has been carefully placed to exclude a whole quadrant of the landscape. What may well have begun as a simple forgetting of

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<sup>5</sup> The 1967 Referendum officially made Aboriginals Australian citizens and gave them the right to vote.

<sup>6</sup> His focus is on works circa 1930-1968. He does acknowledge some recent shifts in historiographical tendencies, the majority of which Stanner attributes to the establishment of the Australian Institute for Aboriginal Studies (AIAS) in 1964, a development in which he was instrumental. AIAS later became The Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander Studies (AIATSIS) and is located in the shadow of the National Museum of Australia in Canberra.

other possible views turned into habit and over time into something like a cult of forgetfulness practiced on a national scale (Stanner 2009[1968]: 188-189).

His solution is not simply to “tell the other side of the story” but to meld the various stories into one. What needs to be foregrounded is the story of

the unacknowledged relations between two racial groups within a single field of life supposedly unified by the principle of assimilation, which has been the marker of transition. The telling of it would have to be a world—perhaps I should say an underworld—away from the conventional histories of the coming and development of British civilisation (Stanner 2009[1968]: 189).<sup>7</sup>

This discussion is valuable for two core reasons. First, it perfectly describes the continued failure of the majority of historians to reconcile Tasmania’s colonial and Aboriginal narratives. Second, Stanner’s conceptualization of the “great Australian silence” (somewhat ironically) proffers a vantage point that overlooks certain “quadrants” of the Australian Aboriginal landscape. Stanner, a strong advocate for Aboriginal rights who sought to understand Aboriginal culture on its own terms, effectively omits the Tasmanian Aboriginal people from his purview. This may partly be a reflection of the era in which Stanner was writing, during which Tasmania was peripheral to the larger Australian narrative. Following this logic, it should come as no surprise that Tasmania’s indigenous peoples would mirror the island’s secondary status within Australia.

The underlying goals in summarizing and attempting to reconcile the various narratives of Aboriginality in Tasmania are to present a coherent picture and do justice to the complications of life and cultural identification. “One of our most difficult problems” in combatting the

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<sup>7</sup> The entire passage is insightful and reads as follows: “I am no historian and I should stick to my last but the history I would like to see written would bring into the main flow of its narrative the life and times of men like David Unaiipon, Albert Namatjira, Robert Tudawali, Durmugam, Douglas Nicholls, Dexter Daniels and many others. Not to scrape up significance for them but because they typify so vividly the other side of a story over which the great Australian silence reigns; the story of the things we were unconsciously resolved not to discuss with them or treat with them about; the story, in short, of the unacknowledged relations between two racial groups within a single field of life supposedly unified by the principle of assimilation, which has been the marker of transition. The telling of it would have to be a world—perhaps I should say an underworld—away from the conventional histories of the coming and development of British civilisation” (Stanner 2009[1968]: 189).

devaluation of Aboriginality, writes Stanner, “is to overcome our folklore about them” (Stanner 2009[1968]: 206).<sup>8</sup> If my preceding chapter is any indication, there is plenty of folklore about the Tasmanian Aborigines that needs to be transcended. Interestingly, aspects of the mythology have been appropriated and promulgated by Aboriginal people themselves.

Remember the Tasmanians had come to represent a racially distinct Paleolithic people inhabiting an arrested culture-phase. For many decades this placement was accepted in a mostly-wholesale fashion and therefore shaped narratives of colonial arrival and contact. For example, in 1935 Thomas Dunbabin matter-of-factly wrote, “In Tasmania, there was, when the white men arrived, only the one primitive people, differing completely from the Aborigines of Australia” (Dunbabin 1935: 258). There was an explosion of interest in the Australian continent in the latter parts of the eighteenth century, with prominent explorers from various nations sailing its waters.<sup>9</sup> This group includes Captain James Cook, Bruny d’Entrecasteaux, Marion du Fresne, Matthew Flinders, George Bass, and Nicolas Baudin (See Meston 1949). Drawings and engravings from these voyages have provided contemporary community members with inspiration and instruction in the regeneration of multiple material cultural practices (addressed in Chapters Four and Six). Amicable co-existence was the norm for the first few decades after British settlement of Tasmania in 1803.<sup>10</sup> Eventually, however, the settler’s desire for more inhabitable, and grazing,

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<sup>8</sup> The passage continues: “It tends to run to extremes: canard on one side and sentimentality on the other. There is no point in making them appear better or worse than they were or are. Depreciating them is a way of justifying having injured them in the past and an excuse for short-changing them in the present and future. Sentimentalising them is to go too far in the other direction. We can neither undo the past nor compensate for it. The most we can do is to give the living their due” (Stanner 2009[1968]: 206).

<sup>9</sup> The first record of the Tasmanian Aboriginal people comes from the journal of Tasmania’s erstwhile namesake, Abel Tasman. Meston writes: “In his journal of 1642 Tasman gave to the world the first account of the Tasmanian aborigines. At Blackman’s Bay on the east coast his pilot-major and a party of men went ashore in search of fresh water. They heard human voices, saw trees notched at intervals of five feet with what they presumed were stone implements, and gazed at clouds of dense smoke rising from numerous fires, but they did not see the aborigines themselves” (Meston 1949: 145).

<sup>10</sup> Apart from the 1803 massacre at Risdon Cove.

land for them and their domesticated animals led to prolonged frontier conflict. One highlight of the “Black War”<sup>11</sup> was the declaration of Martial Law in 1828. In addition to putting a price on the heads of Tasmanian Aboriginal people, Lieutenant-Governor George Arthur organized the infamous “Black Line” of 1830, which “attempted by a great drive to have all the natives of the eastern part of the island confined to the southeastern corner. More than 2000 men took part in the ‘Black Line,’ which, after a campaign of seven weeks and at a cost of £35,000, resulted in the capture of only one woman and one boy” (Meston 1965: 106).<sup>12</sup> Following this failure, the next official strategy towards Tasmania’s indigenous peoples was to remove what was believed to be the remaining full-blooded Aboriginals to Flinders Island in the Bass Strait. Charles Darwin, writing aboard the *Beagle* in February 1836, commented:

All the aborigines have been removed to an island in Bass’s Straits, so that Van Diemen’s Land enjoys the great advantage of being free from a native population... Thirty years is a short period, in which to have banished the last aboriginal from his native land, —and that island nearly as large as Ireland. I do not know a more striking instance of the comparative rate of increase of a civilized over a savage people (Darwin 2001[1839]: 399).

The Flinders Island settlement, known as *Wybalenna* (“Black Man’s Houses”) and overseen by the “Conciliator”<sup>13</sup> George Augustus Robinson, employed civilizing and

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<sup>11</sup> The dates for this conflict vary from historian to historian, and cover roughly 1824-1832. The declaration of Martial Law in 1828 serves as an alternative starting point. See Reynolds 2004[1995] for an account of the Black War.

<sup>12</sup> The Black Line was “a proposal to form a cordon and sweep it across the island from north to south-east, driving the Aborigines into Forestier Peninsula. Most of the military and civil forces, as well as numbers of settlers and their servants, took part. As an operation it was ludicrous: one man and a boy were captured. The Line extended along a front beginning in the west at the Mersey River, following the western road eastward until abreast at Quamby Bluff, then swinging more or less south-east to the Macquarie River at the junction of the Lake River with it, thence down the southern bank of the Macquarie as far as the Elizabeth River, where it turned east, following the southern bank of the Elizabeth to Campbell Town, thence north and east to reach the South Esk River, the southern bank of which was followed eastwards, and the Line ended on the east coast at St Patricks Head. Operations began on 4 October 1830 and about seven weeks later everyone returned home happy in the thought that they had been the guests of the government for that length of time” (Plomley 2008[1966]: 31).

<sup>13</sup> Forever memorialized in Benjamin Duterrau’s 1840 painting, “The Conciliation.” A good place to view this painting is: <http://foundingdocs.gov.au/enlargement-eid-49-pid-66.html>. Accessed March 30, 2014.

Christianizing frameworks in hopes of pulling its inhabitants up and out of their perceived savagery.<sup>14</sup> Following Arthur's stated goals, Robinson's methods included Western clothing, the impartation of Western/ Christian names, and instruction in the value of monetary currency via public markets.<sup>15</sup> After Robinson's 1839 departure to become the Chief Protector of Aborigines for Port Phillip (Victoria)<sup>16</sup> the settlement went from bad to worse. Wybalenna was officially closed in 1847 and the remaining forty-seven people, who had survived rampant disease and hardship,<sup>17</sup> returned to mainland Tasmania to "live out their days" south of Hobart at Oyster Cove.

Wybalenna is a tragic location for a multitude of reasons. For one, it had been "set up to save the lives of the Aborigines, but rather it marked for them the extirpation of their culture and their deaths from the ravages of European disease" (Plomley 1987: 107). Oyster Cove was not much of an improvement, and "the neglect was even greater than at the Flinders settlement, in spite of the proximity to Hobart, the head-quarters of the government which was supposed to protect them" (Plomley 1977: 59). The number of Tasmanian Aboriginal "full-bloods" continued to dwindle over subsequent decades, with the penultimate loss being the 1869 death of William Lanne, or "King Billy," the "Last Tasmanian Aboriginal Male." Still in his mid-thirties, Lanne's death, resulting from a mixture of dysentery and cholera (he was a sailor), was a shock to a

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<sup>14</sup> Wybalenna is often positioned, in my opinion quite accurately, as the first mission in Australia. It also predated Richard Henry Pratt's Indian Boarding School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, by almost half a century. See Pratt 1973.

<sup>15</sup> Regarding the success of this settlement, Plomley writes: "Even in its own terms, Arthur's civilisation of the aborigines, the Flinders Island settlement was at most a small success. The aborigines there adopted a veneer of British habits, but only by constant reinforcement of the instruction could this veneer be maintained, the aborigines reverting to their natural habits very quickly under neglect or extreme emergency" (Plomley 1977: 59).

<sup>16</sup> For a fantastic discussion of this complicated man, with a focus on his Victorian period, I highly recommend Clendinnen 1995.

<sup>17</sup> It is a common for contemporary museum exhibits to say the inhabitants of Wybalenna died of "broken hearts." This is akin to Sahlins' "despondency theory," which "became popular in the mid-twentieth century" and "was the logical precursor of dependency theory" (Sahlins 2000a: 503).



lackadaisical public and a call-to-arms for the scientific community. *The Mercury* newspaper noted the importance of his passing, stating, “It is a somewhat singular circumstance that although it has been known for years that the race was becoming extinct, no steps have ever been taken in the interests of science to secure a perfect skeleton of a male Tasmanian aboriginal... consequently the death of ‘Billy Lanne’ put our surgeons on the alert” (*The Mercury*, March 8, 1869: 2). Lanne’s death provoked a mad dash to gather his remains “for the good of science,” and the spoils were unofficially divided between The Royal Society and the London College of Surgeons (Fforde 1992). There has been much debate over where Lanne’s skull ended up, with one candidate being identified in the University of Edinburgh’s collection which was, after much contestation, ultimately repatriated to the Tasmanian Aboriginal community in the 1991 (Brocklebank and Kaufman 1992).

The story of Truganini,<sup>18</sup> the “Last Tasmanian,” is as iconic as it is sad. A Nuenone woman born and raised on Bruny Island, Truganini was an integral “member” of George Augustus Robinson’s “Friendly Mission(s)” to pacify (some would say “conciliate”) remaining tribal groups during The Black War. Truganini had gone to Wybalenna and in 1839, along with a few of her compatriots, accompanied Robinson to Port Phillip. After some controversial actions resulted in the hanging of one of these same compatriots, Truganini was fortunate to return to Tasmania with her life still in her possession. Following the Oyster Cove settlement’s closure in 1874, Truganini spent her remaining years in Hobart and passed away in 1876. She was in her mid-sixties. *The Mercury* newspaper marked her passing in an article entitled, *The Last Of Her Race*. Its tone is one of sadness, loss, and inevitability.

Trucaninni, or Lalla Roohk, as she was sometimes called, the last of the aborigines of Tasmania, passed away to her eternal rest yesterday afternoon, at the

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<sup>18</sup> Ian Anderson playfully and instructively highlights the various spellings of her name in his article, *Re-Claiming Tru-ger-nan-ner: De-colonising the Symbol* (Anderson 1993-94).

residence in Macquarie-street of her protectress, Mrs. Dandridge.<sup>19</sup> The death of this last scion of a once numerous race is an event in the history of Tasmania of no common interest; and it may well serve to “point a moral and adorn a tale” on the question of the gradual but certain extinction of the aboriginal races of these southern lands (*The Mercury*, May 9, 1876: 2).

The funeral was understated, since the state government hoped to avoid a repeat of the debacle that followed William Lanne’s death just a few years prior. Truganini spent her final moments consumed with fear that her corporeal vessel would face a similar fate as Lanne. *The Mercury* writer hoped “that we shall not have a repetition of the scandal in connection with the body of King Billy, though threats have been made that such would be the case. Trucaninni had a vivid remembrance of that disgraceful affair, and she obtained a promise from Dr. Butler that no mutilation of her body should take place” (*The Mercury*, May 9, 1876: 2). Following her death the Royal Society of Tasmania petitioned the government for her body, for “the purpose of preserving the remains in such a manner as may seem best in the interests of science, and of the colony” (*The Mercury*, May 11, 1876: 2). Despite the initial rejection of this request, the Royal Society obtained her skeletal remains in 1878. Her skeleton was mounted and on public display at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery from 1904 to 1947.

With the passing of Truganini passed the Tasmanian race, or so the tired narrative goes. What this narrative erases (and ignores) are the multiple communities of Aboriginal people located in various pockets away from the metropole (with Hobart being the Tasmanian equivalent of a colonial center), the most prominent being on the Bass Strait Islands. From this perspective, it is ironic that when “Trukanini, the so-called last ‘full-blood Tasmanian Aborigine’ died in 1876 and her people were declared extinct, the Aboriginal community in the Bass Strait was petitioning the Tasmanian government to secure rights to the mutton bird rookeries” (Taylor 2000: 74). Some background is needed, as the story of the islands, much like that of mainland

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<sup>19</sup> Mrs. Dandridge was the wife of the former superintendent at Oyster Cove.



Figure 3.1. Truganini Memorial on Bruny Island. (Photo taken by author)

Tasmania, is rife with folklore and posturing. At the turn of the nineteenth century the Bass Strait, the body of water separating Tasmania from the mainland, was the “happy hunting grounds of sealers, and such was the fame of the region that sealers from as far afield as Mauritius and New England came to share in the rich harvest” (Meston 1947: 47). The locale was distant enough from the colonial settlements (on the proverbial periphery of the periphery) that the activities of its inhabitants remained relatively untethered to, and independent from, the colonial government for the majority of that century.<sup>20</sup> Records of the original sealers are scarce,

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<sup>20</sup> Plomley writes: “Sealing began in the straits about 1798 and by the time of formation of the settlements at the Derwent and Tamar [rivers; i.e. Hobart and Launceston] was being prosecuted so actively that as early as 1803 Governor Hunter in Sydney had reported that he was considering measures to restrict the slaughter of the seals in order to preserve the industry. Bass Strait was sufficiently far from the main centres of government to be attractive to those who wished to avoid the law” (Plomley 2008[1966]: 23).

but what we do know is that by 1830 small hamlets and communities, consisting mostly of veteran straitsmen<sup>21</sup> and their Tasmanian Aboriginal wives, had been established on a number of Bass Strait islands (also known as the Furneaux Group).<sup>22</sup> George Augustus Robinson, as part of his “Friendly Mission,” visited the island communities in 1831 and found, “Of about thirty-three sealers resident in the Furneaux and Kent Groups, all, with the exception of about half-a-dozen, appear to have had non-European wives, and most of these were Tasmanian Aboriginals” (Murray-Smith 1979: xvii). These early sealers, and some that followed shortly thereafter, provided many of the dominant surnames found in the contemporary community. Names like Brown, Everett, Mansell, Burgess, Maynard, Thomas, Summers, and Beedon are prevalent, and usually signify a familial connection to the islander communities, past and present.

The most prominent island with respect to Tasmania’s Aboriginal peoples is Cape Barren Island, second in size only to Flinders Island to its north. Along with the continuing (albeit modified) practice of shell-stringing, the islanders adopted the new tradition of muttonbirding (colloquialism for the short-tailed shearwater; also known as the sooty petrel). Muttonbirding is a seasonal activity that entails capturing baby chicks and harvesting their copious amounts of oil for use as a topical medicine and their feathers for use in down dressing (the fine “delicacy” of muttonbird flesh wouldn’t find a market for many years hence).<sup>23</sup> In 1868 a group of islanders,

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He later adds: “It was not until the 1830s that government was established on the Australian mainland north of the straits; and to the south the Tasmanian settlements were ill equipped to deal with the sealers” (Plomley 2008[1966]: 1046).

<sup>21</sup> While still a bit androcentric, this term is more appropriate than “sealer,” as the seal trade had essentially dried up by the 1820s. Graves 1965 offers a sensationalistic account of this “strait of lost men.”

<sup>22</sup> The status and (e)valuation of the original sealers is complicated, due to the fact that they are arguably responsible for the maintenance of Aboriginal existence, via their offspring with Aboriginal women, but also the loss of traditional tribal life, as the loss of the same Aboriginal women led to a drastic imbalance along gender lines in various regions of the state. See Taylor 2000 for a nuanced account of both the sealers and trends in their depiction within Tasmanian historiography. See Also Cameron 2011.

<sup>23</sup> Muttonbird feathers and oil were sent to the 1851 Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations in London. The “feathers are much used for pillows, bolsters, and mattresses, and, when properly

along with Captain Malcolm Laing Smith (a former soldier who had leased Flinders Island after Wybalenna closed in 1847), petitioned the government to reserve Chappell Island for islander use. A.L. Meston, writing in 1947, recounts how in 1881 “6000 acres of land on the south end of Cape Barren Island were withdrawn from sale or lease and set up as a reserve for halfcastes. It is upon this reserve that most of the halfcastes now reside. In 1891 Chappell, Babel and Little Green Islands were reserved for mutton birding, but on each there were freehold blocks, and grazing leases continued to be held, with consequent destruction of mutton bird burrows and decrease of birds” (Meston 1947: 52).

There is strong historical evidence that Truganini was not the “Last Tasmanian,” whatever that fluid label may entail. In addition to Cape Barren Island (and the other Bass Strait Islands), there were Tasmanian Aboriginal people on Kangaroo Island (off the coast of South Australia), where an alternative contender, known as Old Suke (or Sal), lived until 1888 (Tindale 1937: 30-31).<sup>24</sup> Another historical alternative (within the paradigm of Tasmanian extinction and pure racial typologies) is Fanny Cochrane Smith, the focal ancestor for the contemporary Aboriginal community based around Cygnet, “down the channel” from Hobart. This line of descent provides the prominent surnames of Smith, Mundy, and Dillon, amongst others. Fanny is of great historical importance for a number of reasons. In 1834 she was the first Aboriginal child

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prepared, answer the purpose well. Owing to the numbers of this bird which resort to the islands in Bass’s Straits, and the profusion of feathers with which it is clothed, this article can be obtained in abundance” The Official Descriptive and Illustrated Catalogue of the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations 1851: 995). The oil is described as follows: “This is an oil of a deep-red colour, and is obtained by pressure from the stomach of the young bird. It is said to possess virtue as a liniment in rheumatism, and it burns with a clear bright light. The sooty-petrel frequents certain low sandy islands in Bass’s Straits, in vast numbers during the summer, burrowing to lay its solitary egg, and literally undermining the ground” (Official Descriptive and Illustrated Catalogue of the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations 1851: 997).

<sup>24</sup> Truganini “was not the last Tasmanian fullblood, some of the women taken to Kangaroo Island, South Australia, by sealers, and who had lived there with them, outliving her. Tindale, who has studied this matter, gives the names of four of these women –Bumble-foot Sal, Betty, Old Suke and Puss –of whom at least two died later than 1876” (Plomley 1987: 191).

born at Wybalenna and she was among the group that moved to Oyster Cove in 1847. She married William Smith, an ex-convict, on October 27, 1854, and “they had a large family” (Plomley 1987: 858). Recordings of her speaking (and singing) in Tasmanian Aboriginal language were recorded on Edison wax cylinders in 1899 and 1903 are of great value to contemporary Aboriginal identity.<sup>25</sup> These cylinders are part of the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery’s collection. A skilled shell-stringer and basket-weaver, Fanny Cochrane Smith passed away in 1905.

Fanny’s Aboriginality was recognized by the state government in 1851 and formed the basis of a land grant and annuity. By 1888, however, there were rumblings from the scientific community regarding her validity.

The House of Assembly has again decided to grant the last of the aborigines, Fanny Smith, a grant of 100 acres of land she now occupies and 200 acres more, for which a resolution was passed in 1884, but failed to have effect given to it. It is denied by some that Fanny Smith, *nee* Cochrane, is a pure aborigine, Mr. Lette contending with assurance that the lady is a half-caste. The decision of this question would be worth a committee of inquiry, for if Fanny Smith is only a half-caste many more exist in the Straits, and other claims have been set up; while if she is a pure aborigine she deserves much more consideration, and would merit it by her very estimable character. The best testimony in favour of her claim is that she has enjoyed a pension of £50 a year as an aboriginal woman for many years (*The Mercury*, October 5, 1888: 2).

The chief point of contention was her racial composition, and her paternity remains unclear.

While Plomley contends her “father [was] not known (perhaps John Smith, sealer)” (Plomley 1987: 858), A 1993 *Mercury* article claims many of her contemporaries believed her father to be an Aboriginal man named Nicermanic (*The Mercury*, March 27, 1993: 1-2).<sup>26</sup> H. Ling Roth, noted expert of the Tasmanian Aborigines and colleague of E.B. Tylor, took issue with a short paper about Fanny Cochrane Smith given to the Royal Society of Tasmania in September 1889.

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<sup>25</sup> Part of the recordings can be heard at: <http://aso.gov.au/titles/music/fanny-cochrane-smith-songs/clip1/>. Accessed March 30, 2014.

<sup>26</sup> This position is presented by Cassandra Pybus in *Community of Thieves* (1991).

Presented by Mr. Jason Barnard, this paper was “practically a claim asserting that an old resident at Irishtown, near Port Cygnet, named Fanny Cochrane Smith, was a pure blood Tasmanian aborigine and hence the sole survivor of her race” (Roth 1898: 451). His chief objection to this paper was the “absence of any description of her physical characteristics which could enable us to judge” (Roth 1898: 451), and Roth consequently sought to provide a “scientific” judgment of Fanny’s Aboriginality on those grounds. His sources of evidence are illustrative of a wider fixation on the intersection between pure racial typologies and phenotypic features (one later propagated by Tindale and Birdsell in the 1930s, to be discussed shortly). Roth “despatched to Port Cygnet a brother of J.W. Beattie, the well-known Hobart photographer and present possessor of Woolley’s negatives of Tasmanian aboriginals. He was successful in getting me three photographs of Mrs. Smith –full face, three-quarters, and profile. He also obtained a lock of hair, but from what portion of her head he does not state” (Roth 1898: 451-2). Roth compared a variety of facial features thought to be representative of Tasmanian Aboriginal physiognomy<sup>27</sup> with his new resources, concluding that the Fanny Cochrane Smith demonstrated a “considerable modification in almost every feature which tends to show that she is of mixed blood” (Roth 1898: 454).

While Fanny Cochrane Smith’s Aboriginality was (in some sectors) dismissed on racial grounds, the question remains as to why the people on Kangaroo Island were not consecrated as the “Last Tasmanians.” One answer is locational. Kangaroo Island is geographically and psychologically on the outskirts (out of sight, out of mind) whereas Truganini’s final days were

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<sup>27</sup> “The five characteristics of Truganina’s face in common with those of her fellows... are (1) the wild appearance due to the great development of the facial portion of the frontal bone and the deep notch below the glabella at the root of the nasal bones; (2) the shortness of the face; (3) the smallness of the lower jaw; (4) the very dark skin; (5) the woolly nature of the hair... Comparing these facial characters with those of Mrs. Smith we find (1) less development of the frontal bone less deep notch below the glabella; (2) a longer face; (3) a normal lower jaw; (4) a lighter skin; (5) the hair woolly on the forehead and wavy on the temples –altogether a Europeanised type of countenance” (Roth 1898: 452).

“front and center” in the state capital. Within such frameworks, Truganini was the last Aboriginal person physically in mainland Tasmania, which strengthened her candidacy as the “last.”<sup>28</sup> With respect to Fanny Cochrane Smith, the consecration of Truganini was based on more than just racial/ geographical criteria. Even if the scientific and governmental communities deemed her “full-blooded,” Fanny’s candidacy would be dismissed because she had been born on Wybalenna in a post-tribal context and therefore was never a “tribal” Aboriginal person. In this sense her rejection foregrounds the obfuscation of (and the collapse of boundaries between) race and culture, since imagined Aboriginal authenticity relies upon the perceived purity of both.

The third major familial group is that of Dalrymple Briggs (also known as Dolly Dalrymple), with her contemporary ancestors based around Devonport in Tasmania’s northwest. She was of mixed heritage, and therefore was never discussed as a potential candidate for “last” status. Dalrymple Briggs was the daughter of George Briggs, an English sealer, and Woretermoetyenner, also known as Bung, a Tasmanian Aboriginal woman. The exact year of her birth is contested, but it is noted she was “baptized 18 March 1814” (Plomley and Henley 1990: 61). Dalrymple Briggs’ maternal grandfather was Manalargenna, commonly viewed as the last Tasmanian Aboriginal Chief. Manalargenna’s line of descent is also prominent amongst the Islanders, which arguably makes him the critical ancestor for the entire community. Briggs married Thomas Johnson on “29 October 1831, by whom she had several children. She died on 1 December 1864” (Plomley 1987: 857).

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<sup>28</sup> In his entry for **Aborigines, Tasmanian** in the Australian Encyclopaedia, A.L. Meston writes: “Truganini was the last of her race resident in Tasmania; but when she died there was still living on Kangaroo Island, S.A., one of four aboriginal women carried there by sealers. At her death in 1888 the Tasmania (sic.) race became extinct” (Meston 1965: 106).



### ***Aboriginality and Hybridity: Labeling, Institution, and Separation***

*The veritable miracle produced by acts of institution lies undoubtedly in the fact that they manage to make consecrated individuals believe that their existence is justified, that their existence serves some purpose (Bourdieu 1991a: 126).*

At 6:30am on November 26<sup>th</sup>, 2010 I awoke and readied myself for the next few days. In a few hours I was getting picked up to head down to the South Cape of Tasmania, a sheltered and wild area in the island's south. I was going with a few Tasmanian Aboriginal people from Palawa Aboriginal Corporation, with whom I had helped run education programs at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery. The trip's stated goal was to see ochre smears near the South Cape Rivulet.

The arrival of my ride was foretold via the repeated honking of a horn, certainly not appreciated by my neighbors early on a Friday morning. I lived in Battery Point, an affluent enclave of colonial-era houses to the south of the Salamanca strip which has the reputation of being somewhat snooty. I read the honking as the driver's effort to mess with the Battery Point people, which, in retrospect, is hilarious. Sharnie Everett, caretaker of the Risdon Cove site and committed community member, was the driver of the Land Rover and our expedition's unofficial leader. With tattoos, piercings, and a passion for martial arts, Sharnie comes off as a bit rough, and she certainly can be. That said, Sharnie was supportive and helpful during my research, always displaying a deep commitment to Aboriginal rights and recognition in Tasmania.

We drove to the trailhead at Cockle Creek and set out through a shifting landscape of boarded walkways in overgrown fields, muddy hills, and rocky beaches. At the halfway point we arrived at the Southern Ocean and followed the trail along its shores, past Lion's Rock and a few additional outcroppings. After about four hours we arrived at the Rivulet, set up camp, and gathered materials for a fire. As an aside, Sharnie told me it's "disrespectful to go on country and not light a fire." By this point other hikers had arrived to the sheltered campsite and I couldn't

help but feel some of the newcomers did not approve of the fire. I made a comment to Sharnie about this and she said “Our people have been doing it longer than they [the other hikers] can imagine.”

Over dinner and coffee the topic turned, as if often did, to my research and why I had chosen to work with the Tasmanian Aboriginal people (“Why Tasmania/ Tasmanian Aborigines?”). After listening to me describe my project Sharnie, half-jokingly, said, “If you call me a hybrid I’ll kill ya.” Getting a bit flustered, I said that I certainly would not, and that I was seeking to challenge/contest the very idea of the “hybrid.” Her comment was partially serious, and reflected the deep pain and lingering sensitivity around not being acknowledged as what you identify as being. This comment is representative of a broader sentiment amongst Aboriginal people in Tasmania.

This anecdote serves as an insightful introduction to an examination of labels, their consecrating function, and the damages of their refusal. Along with “hybrid,” the Tasmanian Aboriginal people have been labeled “half-castes,” “mixed breeds,” and Aboriginal descendants.” While such labels account for a “strain” of aboriginality they reinforce the refusal of Aboriginality as such. Pierre Bourdieu’s re-interpretation of Van Gennep’s “les rites de passage” is insightful in this respect. The central point of “rites of institution” is how the “institution of an identity, which can be a title of nobility or a stigma (‘you’re nothing but a...’), is the imposition of a name, i.e. of a social essence” (Bourdieu 1991a: 120). Furthermore, the failure to bestow (or impose) a particular name (or label) is the denial of a particular identity or “social essence.” These rites of institution are transitions from one status to another and, by “solemnly marking the passage over a line which establishes a fundamental division in the social order, rites draw the attention of the observer to the passage (whence the expression ‘rites of

passage'), whereas the important thing is the line" (Bourdieu 1991a: 118). Drawing off these insights, the bestowal of a certain label to an individual (or social group) is a performative act (Austin 1975) that enacts a movement across (and between) classificatory boundaries. Likewise, the rejection of a particular label effectively reinforces existing boundaries and status hierarchies. The assignment of the label "Aboriginal" in Tasmania and the implications of its refusal are of value within this context. This section addresses the historical imposition of the labels recounted above, and how their imposition from the outside is concurrently a denial of a more valued label within a hierarchy of authenticity.

The argument is often made that the establishment of the "Half-Caste Reserve" on Cape Barren Island represented governmental recognition of its populations' aboriginality. In 1912 "the Cape Barren Island Reservation Act was passed with the object of settling some 50 families of half castes on Cape Barren Island. Blocks of land comprising 50 acres of agricultural land, and three acres of residential land at the site chosen for the settlement, or village, were surveyed, licenses to occupy these being issued to applicants, approved by the Minister for Lands" (*The Mercury*, November 18, 1929: 7). This act did imply a consecration of difference, albeit one reinforcing the line separating Aboriginal from non-Aboriginal. It also marked a disenfranchisement, as the islanders were incorporated into the machinery of the nation-state. "Hybrid" is one of the most prevalent labels applied to the Tasmanian Aboriginal people and is how people of mixed heritage were classified for the majority of the twentieth century. This label suggests a third status separate from both parental "stocks." People of Aboriginal descent, either on mainland Tasmania or in the larger communities on the Bass Strait Islands, were

governmentally and socially defined as mixed or half-breeds, and therefore denied status as being Tasmanian Aboriginal.<sup>29</sup> Regarding racial mixture in Tasmania, Plomley writes:

It must be emphasised that hybrids are the products of two racial forms, and their characters are the mixture of those two, though genetic dominance may direct the expression of one rather than another. Structurally, physiologically and psychologically hybrids are some mixture of their parents. *In social terms, they belong to neither race (and are shunned by both), and lacking a racial background they have no history.* If they wish to obtain a history, they must wholly identify themselves with the culture of one or other of their parents. If they do not wish to do so they must follow a pathway of independence from both, one adapted to their own needs (Plomley 1977: 66)(emphasis added).

These comments, in addition to giving new meaning to the phrase “people without history,” exemplify the scientific paradigm of pure racial typologies that was hegemonic for (at least) the first half of the twentieth century. Fears of racial mixing on the national level fueled many scientific projects and expeditions, with the Harvard-Adelaide Universities Anthropological Expedition of 1938-1939 being a central instance.<sup>30</sup>

In 1936 Norman Tindale, an entomologist at the University of South Australia, went to Harvard University to meet with E.A. Hooton<sup>31</sup> about a potential expedition centering on Australia’s burgeoning “half-caste problem.” In response to Tindale’s interest in having an anthropometrist on his expedition, Hooton put him in touch with J.B. Birdsell, one of Hooton’s graduate students. Birdsell, in need of a dissertation project, jumped at the opportunity to study race-crossing in Australia. With Hooton’s help, the two garnered support from the Carnegie

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<sup>29</sup> Dunbabin writes: “The blood of the lost Tasmanians still runs in some of the so-called half-castes of Cape Barren Island, whose ancestry is really varied and intricate. It does not appear that either these or the other persons in Tasmania or on the mainland—who are probably more numerous than might be supposed—who are partly of Tasmanian descent, retain any traditions of their primitive ancestors” (Dunbabin 1935: 259).

<sup>30</sup> For the results of this survey see Tindale 1940, 1940-1941, and 1953; Tindale and Birdsell 1941; *The Mercury*, February 9, 1949: 5; and *The Examiner*, February 9, 1949: 5. A detailed description of the expedition can be found in Anderson 2003: 225-252 and Reynolds 2005: 191-206.

<sup>31</sup> Hooton was the proverbial kingmaker of American biological anthropology in first half of twentieth century. Interestingly, he was one of the few who publically supported Boas’s efforts to condemn Nazi racial science.

Institution for their 1938-1939 expedition across Australia. Prior to leaving, famed anthropometrist Charles Davenport invited Birdsell to visit in order to discuss new measuring techniques (Anderson 2003: 235-6). About the expedition Henry Reynolds writes: “The two researchers traveled over 16 000 miles by car in all states over fourteen months, interviewing and examining 2500 people. The objective of all this endeavor, Tindale observed, was to grapple with the problem of racial mixture in Australia as a whole” (Reynolds 2005: 194). In general, Birdsell measured limbs, heads, etc., and Tindale gathered ethnological and genealogical data. While the expedition travelled throughout Australia, its focus was on its lower half (where “mixture” was more pronounced), including Cape Barren Island. It should be noted that the Aboriginal ancestry of the Islanders was acknowledged and recognized. By the mid-nineteenth century “Tasmanian culture was largely to disappear, preserved only in a few slight particulars by a people of mixed blood, the sealer community of the Straits” (Plomley 1987: 107). This statement is indicative of the fact that, while these communities were accepted as having Aboriginal elements, they were not recognized as Aboriginal (or for that matter, white) but as something else altogether.<sup>32</sup>

The Harvard-Adelaide Universities Anthropological Expedition took Birdsell and Tindale to the Bass Strait Islands for the months of January and February 1939. Tindale took the

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<sup>32</sup> Meston provides another example of how communities were recognition of alterity but with the “Aboriginal” label being withheld. He writes: “Today there exists in the Furneaux group, Bass Strait, a colony of hybrids who have descended from the Tasmanian aborigines. Usually but erroneously termed half-castes, they are the descendants of sealers, both white and coloured, and aboriginal women from Tasmania and the mainland of Australia. At Nicholls Rivulet in southern Tasmania there is another but much smaller colony, and a third is situated near Echuca, on the border of New South Wales and Victoria” (Meston 1965: 106).

formation of the settlement as the genesis of a new population<sup>33</sup> and found the average islander to be of

generally sallow complexion, a majority fall within the range of European skin colour. The eyes are brown and of rather characteristic appearance. The stature is moderate, build intermediate. The hair ranges from low-waved to crispy curled; only a single individual in the 4<sup>th</sup> generation, who is a 7/16 Tasmanian, appears to present a rather marked degree of segregation of gene characters considered to be Tasmanian in origin (Tindale 1953: 6).

Tindale's text is littered with fractions measuring blood quantum, with the minority group always being the marked object of measurement and documentation. People are also given shorthand notations in order to mark their generation (F1 Tas being the first generation cross form the union of a Tasmanian Aboriginal woman and a white person of European descent, and so on). Also of interest is Tindale, like the majority of his colleagues and contemporaries, believed that assimilation into the dominant, i.e. Western, way of life was inevitable, and proffered a number of statements supporting such a view. The relatively recent re-articulation (and distinction-making) in Tasmania gives such opinions a somewhat ironic air, with the post-World War II period witnessing a marked rise in Aboriginal identification and demonstration. The "reserve" was officially closed in 1951 and many islanders relocated to mainland Tasmania. It was not long before they started agitating for their recognition.

While rights movements in the 1960s and 1970s led to a stronger presence within Tasmania, they did not lead to the community's immediate governmental (or social) consecration as Aboriginal. One label that is still relatively prominent today is "Aboriginal descendant,"

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<sup>33</sup> Noting the first interracial birth as occurring in 1815, Tindale writes: "A dozen white men from the British Isles, living as sealers on the islands in Bass Strait, between Australia and Tasmania, in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, took to wife aboriginal women from Tasmania and from South Eastern Australia. Living a hard and lawless existence on these islands they nevertheless built small huts, planted gardens, hunted seals and gathered mutton birds. They reared families, sometimes large, of hybrid children. Their descendants, married together for several generations, are the Bass Strait Islanders... Today there exists a group of approximately 350 people bearing the hybrid strain of the Bass Strait Islanders; most of them are on Cape Barren Island but many others are dispersed in Tasmania and elsewhere" (Tindale 1953: 2).

which is a bit harder to parse when subjected to deconstructive analysis than, say, “hybrid” or “half-caste.” First emerging in the 1970s, this label replaced other less politically-correct terms while retaining their points of differentiation. “Aboriginal descendant,” like the terms



Figure 3.2. Truganini Conservation Area Sign. Mount Nelson. (Photo Taken by Author).

preceding it, acknowledges Aboriginal elements while maintaining the line separating its recipients from an unmarked “Aboriginality.”<sup>34</sup> The perpetuation and proliferation of this label is tied, in part, to the *Last Tasmanian* film of 1978, in which a “Cape Barren Island woman tells the camera while (ironically) plucking a mutton bird: ‘I’m a descendant. I’m not an Aboriginal. I’m only a descendant of one. Just compare the Aboriginals that were here with the descendants living today—there’s a hell of a difference” (Taylor 2012: 29). In a recent article, Rebe Taylor insightfully notes how the acceptance of Commonwealth funding in 1973 required the

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<sup>34</sup> The argument can be made that Tasmanian Aboriginality is inherently marked, due to its historical and contemporary distinctiveness within Aboriginal Australia.

community to accept the title “Aboriginal.” For many people “who had grown up with other names for themselves, such as ‘half-castes’ or ‘Islanders’, this change in nomenclature was difficult, even disrespectful, to the ‘old people’. It is a dispute that had largely passed (The Cape Barren Islander regretted her comments)” (Taylor 2012: 30). In a 2004 interview (with me), Tony Brown commented on the nuances of self-labeling in earlier parts of the twentieth century:

Basically prior, a lot of people would call themselves Cape Barren Islanders or Straitsmen, or whatever, but they always knew that they were Aboriginal descendants or Aboriginal people. A lot of Aboriginal people in Tasmania hid their identity, because it was still considered to be the lowest form of human... There are a lot of cases of Aboriginal people actually calling themselves Greek or Italian or even Maori, just so they wouldn't have that stigma attached to them, and it was basically during the 1970s that it all started coming out, people started to bring their identity forward.

Community elder Jim Everett expresses a similar sentiment when he recounts how during “my younger years with my parents and close extended family, I remember how they accepted these labels imposed on them, and how it was a taboo to talk of being ‘black’ or ‘Aboriginal’” (Everett 2005: 397). Whether they refused the label either out of respect for the ancestors or because it was taboo, it is telling that Tasmanian Aboriginal people did in fact refuse it. The shift to not only its acceptance but its promotion was a direct outcome of the public rights movement spearheaded by the Aboriginal Information Service, more commonly known by its later name, The Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre (TAC). This shift was purposeful and self-conscious, and was led to some degree by Michael Mansell. In 1976 Mansell addressed how degrading remarks “from white bypassers lean (sic.) to an inferiority complex, based mainly upon his racial difference. To avoid this we must concentrate on teaching and encouraging the younger Aborigines to be proud to stand up among whites whether at school or in the general community, to announce their Aboriginality” (Mansell 1976). The following year he criticized how the history “of Aboriginal identity in Tasmania has always been based on what white people have



decided to call us. We've listened to whites tell us that the last Aboriginal in Tasmania was Truganini and that we today are not Aboriginals but half-castes, mixed bloods, hybrids, quarter-castes, descendants or ordinary people. All of these terms have been deliberately used to put us down" (Mansell 1977). Mansell called this strategy as a "bloody good one," and felt a focus on blood and appearance had "succeeded in splitting black Aboriginals against light skinned Aboriginals" (Mansell 1977). Masterfully moving away from racial typologies, Mansell states that anybody "who is proud and identifies as being Aboriginal knows that it's the feeling of being Aboriginal that counts" (Mansell 1977). What people like Tindale fail to recognize is that what it means to be Tasmanian Aboriginal had changed (and continues to change), and the accompanying label had changed with it. To refer to oneself as Aboriginal in Tasmania does not imply a 1:1 correlation with one's pre-colonial ancestors.<sup>35</sup> Alternatively, it draws attention to a connection, partially biological but mostly cultural and psychological (Mansell's "feeling"), to one's forebears. Today, "Aboriginal" operates as an umbrella term (within the larger umbrella term of "First Nation" or "Indigenous") that includes more specific labels referencing particular locations. Interestingly, the "islander" label tends to imply a deeper degree of authenticity, and its application within the Aboriginal community is frequently a political statement and a legitimating act.

### ***Tasmanian Aboriginality Today: Locations and Qualifications***

The Tasmanian Aboriginal people have a complicated and varied relationship with their biological heritage. In a 2010 talk at the University of Tasmania, Tasmanian Aboriginal scholar

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<sup>35</sup> John Hirst writes: "Before the Europeans arrived, there were 500 to 600 tribes in the continent speaking different languages. They did not have a common name or share an identity; they regarded each other as enemies. The Aborigines as we know them today, a national group with a common identity, did not exist before European contact; they are a product of the European invasion which destroyed traditional culture, brought people of different tribes together and gave them a common experience of oppression and marginalisation. They are not an ancient people, but a very modern one" (Hirst 2009: 63).

(and member of the Dalrymple Briggs “mob”) Greg Lehman argued “race is a non-starter” in trying to comprehend Aboriginal identity in Tasmania. Greg’s general point was a preoccupation with race obfuscates the more fluid and dynamic aspects of Tasmanian Aboriginality. In general I find this point to be accurate. As a “post-extinction” people, the Tasmanian Aboriginal community is defined by their shared histories in the post-contact period, more so than by their purported idyllic pre-colonial past. Today practices like shell-stringing and canoe-making serve as formative elements of communal bonds in lieu of strong, and immediate, biological ties. Interestingly, however, while biology is far from the “end-all/ be-all” of Aboriginality in Tasmania, it does serve as the baseline for formal membership. As implemented by the Office of Aboriginal Affairs (OAA), the “Eligibility Criteria” for all “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander specific programs and services provided by the Tasmanian Government” as well as for “membership/representation on Tasmanian Government committees/boards/groups etc. where the person is required to be an Aboriginal person or Torres Strait Islander” are three-pronged: That an Aboriginal person or Torres Strait Islander 1) “is of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent”; 2) “identifies as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander”; and 3) “is accepted as such by the community in which he or she lives or has lived” (Policy on Eligibility for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander specific programs and services 2008).<sup>36</sup> These criteria are often mutually reinforcing and inclusive. I know people who have Aboriginal ancestry but do not identify as such and there are certainly cases in which people identify as Aboriginal but are unable to “prove” ancestry and are not accepted by the wider “community.” The Lia Pootah group, for example, consists mostly of people who were excised from the rolls in the early 2000’s because they couldn’t provide concrete evidence of their Aboriginality. Making this process even trickier

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<sup>36</sup> This document can be found via the Office of Aboriginal Affairs (OAA) webpage at: [http://www.dpac.tas.gov.au/divisions/cdd/oaa/eligibility\\_policy](http://www.dpac.tas.gov.au/divisions/cdd/oaa/eligibility_policy). Accessed March 30, 2014.

is the fact that the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre, which is dominated by people who derive their heritage via the islands, has a notable role in formal governmental recognition of Aboriginal status.

It is critical to separate race from lines of descent, and the latter is more valuable in reckoning comparative authenticity within a geographical hierarchy of value. The concept of “homeland” is salient in trying to understand the complicated Aboriginal landscape in contemporary Tasmania. Gupta and Ferguson, drawing off Benedict Anderson’s concept of “Imagined Communities” (Anderson 2006[1983]), observe how in an increasingly untethered world displaced populations tend to fixate on specific geographical locales as “symbolic anchors.” This phenomenon is not novel. This type of thinking “has long been true of immigrants, who use memory of place to construct their new lived world imaginatively. ‘Homeland’ in this way remains one of the most powerful unifying symbols for mobile and displaced peoples, though the relation to homeland may be very differently constructed in different settings” (Gupta and Ferguson 1997a: 39). Further complicating matters is the multiplicity of “homelands” of /for a supposedly unified community. Building on the preceding discussions, the numerous familial groups in Tasmania have corresponding homelands that are symbolic and frequently exclusive.<sup>37</sup> Some are on mainland Tasmania and others are on the islands in the Bass Strait. These homelands result from dispossession and are consecrated (and consecrating) sites for contemporary Tasmanian Aboriginality. The relationships between these community sites, much like inter- (not to mention intra-) familial ones, are often adversarial. Due to the political power of the TAC and its Islander-focus, Cape Barren Island is commonly positioned as “the homeland” and, like most sites of religious and/or sacred import, is a

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<sup>37</sup> I was strongly encouraged by a few Aboriginal people to write about this, as they felt constrained in what they could say in their writing. In one person’s words, they felt “imprisoned within our emancipation.”

destination for pilgrims. In many compelling ways, such a geographical hierarchy of value follows the same internal logic as blood quantum measurements, albeit with degrees of spatial connection in place of biological connection.

I spent a week on Cape Barren Island at the start of 2011, having been invited to accompany TMAG Indigenous Cultures curator, and Cape Barren Islander, Tony Brown on his semi-yearly return to the island. Up to that point I had long fostered a pipe dream of going to the island on my own, the impracticality of which was made abundantly clear during my time there. The majority of the island was “returned” to the Aboriginal community via the Aboriginal Land Council of Tasmania (ALCT) in 2005, and since then the Commonwealth and State governments have decided they are no longer responsible for this place on the periphery of the periphery. Cape Barren Island lacks basic infrastructure like sealed roads or a police presence, and its school is underfunded and under-enrolled. The majority of its roughly seventy permanent residents reside in “The Corner,” a smattering of buildings and houses not far from the airstrip on the island’s west coast. It is here that petrol can be bought (often in long lines and only on designated days) and groceries and supplies can be purchased at the small store. It is also where you can find the church, the schoolhouse, the War Memorial (honoring Islanders who fought in the World Wars and additional operations) and the Aboriginal Centre. The island is littered with a few main roads, all dirt, and countless paths that snake to various coastal locations. The eastern half of the island is wild and even more undeveloped.

Approaching the island in 1872 aboard *The Freak*, Canon Brownrigg, of St. John’s of Launceston (Tasmania’s northern city), reflects:

On our course up the Sound we had a fine view of the Northern Coast of Cape Barren. Mount Munro 2,300 feet high, is a conspicuous feature in the landscape. Cape Barren, or Barren Island, is next in extent to Flinders, being about twenty-three miles long by about seventeen wide. It is, as its name indicates, a *barren*

*island* covered with worthless scrub in many parts, and quite unfit for cultivation. Its bare granite peaks are visible many miles distant, and are exceedingly beautiful (Murray-Smith 1979: 68).

Brownrigg's words rang true when I read this passage shortly after my own trip to the island.



Figure 3.3. The Corner. Cape Barren Island. (Photo taken by author)

Both smaller and flatter than Flinders Island to its north, the inland of Cape Barren Island is a mess of brush and muted colors. The beaches and coasts, on the other hand, are breathtakingly beautiful. The water consists of multiple shades of blue, and its splendor, in my opinion, surpasses the iconic coastlines of Far North Queensland and the Great Barrier Reef. Many of these beaches have served (and continue to serve) as key locations for gathering shells with which to string necklaces. One such beach, Bung's Beach, is named after Dalrymple Briggs' mother. On the southeastern coast, this beach is a prime spot to collect toothie shells and was a favorite spot of Tony's mother, Joan Brown, who was a prominent shell-stringer.



Figure 3.4. Map of Cape Barren Island. Cape Barren Island (Photo by author)

As I wrote in my fieldnotes, the two words that best describe Cape Barren Island are “remote” and “community.” As anthropologists we are trained to challenge the validity of the former, as its use frequently ignores deeper connections in favor of implied isolation and cultural stagnation. On a more emotional and psychological level, however, I find it to be quite applicable and appropriate with respect to Cape Barren Island. On January 4, 2011, we set out from Hobart to the Launceston airport to catch our flight to Cape Barren. The recent conglomeration of the Airlines of Tasmania within the larger Sharp Airlines had led to an increase of flights from one to two-per week. Due in large part to bringing lots of food with us, my three bags combined to weigh 27 Kg (59.5 pounds). We walked on the tarmac towards a small white plane, which turned out to be the flight to Flinders Island, and comparatively larger than our plane that was figuratively hiding behind it. We boarded a few minutes before 10am into the ten-seater plane, with nine passengers plus the pilot. I had never been on a plane that size

before and found the 30-minute flight to be quite intense. Tony dozed off, which I interpreted as him having experienced this flight countless times and was far from fazed. Circling Cape Barren to align with the airstrip at the modest Reg Munro Airfield (consisting mostly of a gate and a small building with an Aboriginal flag blowing in the wind) afforded us great views of Badger and Chappell Islands to the west. One of Tony's mates picked us up in his ute, with me in the flatbed, and we raced through Cape Barren's unsealed roads to Tony's brother's shack where we would be staying. I pitched my tent and helped clean for the rest of the afternoon. This included, among other things, burning trash, getting the wasps out of the rainwater tank (as well as setting up a filtration system on the spigot to keep the mosquito larvae in the tank out of our drinking water), and taking care of the rats in a set of drawers in the shed. Tony accomplished the latter task with the help of a crowbar. The next week consisted of various trips around the island, a tiger snake,<sup>38</sup> coffee and chats with residents, and some rain and wind.

A recurring theme in conversations with residents was how the island had changed. While it is now littered with cars (and many rusting car carcasses), Tony recalls seeing very few cars during his childhood, with people riding horses or simply walking everywhere. There seems to be a loss of sense of community, with one islander telling me in the past there "used to be big families; no money, no power." Additionally, in the past the community would regulate itself, or so the sentiment indicates, while today the island is essentially lawless. There was a palpable feeling of distrust and suspicion. Over a cup of coffee, one islander reflected on how "the word 'respect' is lost in the Aboriginal language" (noting that this one word had "all the ten commandments wrapped into one"). In talking about new "roads" being cut through the bush

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<sup>38</sup> In addition to wasps and rats, we had (fortunately only) one encounter with a tiger snake. One afternoon while we were hanging out outside, a tiger snake nonchalantly slithered by and into the shed. Tony trapped it in a corner and we eventually were able to kill it. It was clearly not his first experience with this poisonous creature.

with industrial machinery, he said, “in our day, if we tried to pull that shit we would get an ass-kicking.” I asked who would do the ass-kicking today, and he drew a breath and said “If you point your finger at them they’ll try to break it.” Another individual said that he didn’t trust most of the people on the island as “far as he could kick them.”

My impression of Cape Barren Island is that several of its residents do not enjoy living there, for many of the reasons discussed above. This point garners added interest in light of the fact that many residents lived elsewhere for many years only to return later in life. Many of these people were simply not happy about it. One person who had moved back within the last few years said that she hates dirt, sand, and heat, openly raising the question as to *why* is it she has chosen to live there. Further comments may help shed light on this topic. In talking about specific practitioners of material culture, such as baskets and shell necklaces, one person stated forcefully that they “need to put money back into their home country.” This phrase, with the referent being Cape Barren Island rather than mainland Tasmania, is fascinating for a number of reasons. First, the people being criticized are members of a different familial cluster and don’t trace their ancestry through the islands. Additionally, the fact that Cape Barren Island, a geographic location that had no Aboriginal presence prior to European settlement, is the counter-hegemonic homeland for the Tasmanian Aboriginal people further demonstrates the fluidity of identity formation and geographical attachment. In a sense, Cape Barren serves as a site for re-authentication. I got the impression many people lived on Cape Barren Island to obtain a certain cache (i.e. to be able to say “I live there”), even if they were objectively miserable. That being said, it would be reductive to say that this was all that was going on. Generally speaking, Aboriginal people on Cape Barren Island (unlike people on mainland Tasmania) feel less of a need to justify their Aboriginality, openly talking about their complicated genealogies without



emphasizing their Aboriginal connections. This is partly a function of remoteness but also reflects the central position of Cape Barren within the narrative of an unbroken Aboriginal presence in Tasmania. In many ways it has gained the unmarked status against which all alternative positionalities are measured and evaluated.

The actual remoteness of this island is notable and deserves some discussion. The weather was a constant topic of conversation, and after a few days I noticed how islanders often opened these conversations by discussing the wind rather than the temperature. The reason behind this was clear on the fourth night when my tent felt like it was in danger of getting blown away, despite being buffeted on all sides by trees and other windbreaks. Weather patterns such as this tend to, as one islander said, “sit down” on the island for a while. Additionally, the day before my scheduled departure the skies opened and “pissed down” rain. There was a significant chance my flight the following day would be canceled for safety reasons, and with heavy rain in the forecast, it was unlikely I would be able to get another flight the rest of the week. We drove around in the rain to gather more firewood and pinecones for the small oven in the shack, and then spent many hours sitting and listening to the rain hit off its metal roof. Later in the afternoon the rain subsided some, and I was able to imagine leaving as scheduled. The small plane did make its way to the island the next day, and the return flight was restricted to four passengers as a safety precaution. I was lucky to be one of those four. The crowd at the airport expressed their dismay that a white person was getting one of the four available spots, but Tony’s status and validation helped me gain one of the spaces without conflict. While my trip to Cape Barren was amazing in many respects, my fear of being stranded made me realize just how much I was ready to leave. Part of this feeling stemmed from the amount I had experienced and needed time to digest and reflect, and another part was due to the fact that I hadn’t showered in a week.

Speaking honestly, the majority of this feeling was the result of the sense of claustrophobia on the island and its rampant gossip. The community on the island is very small, and not the most trusting. I was and continue to be grateful to Tony for, as I told him repeatedly, if I hadn't gone with him, chances are I would never have gotten there. As an outsider it is not an inviting place, but that may be precisely the point. As a microcosm of the entire community, it is insulated and factional, but emotionally connected, direct, and frank. I met many people on the island, and more often than not, the fact that Tony vouched for me was sufficient. People felt comfortable speaking their minds, whether it was looking back fondly at years of muttonbirding on the smaller Bass Strait Islands or complaining about island politics, and I consider myself lucky to have had the chance to just sit back and listen. Cape Barren residents were less concerned with outside validation, with their residency effectively authenticating their Aboriginal validity. Having strong ties to the island is often sufficient, and subsequently, the formal "work" of culture is primarily conducted elsewhere.

Cape Barren Island's remoteness is based on more than just geography. Edwin Ardener, for example, has written about how remote areas do not necessarily correspond with geographical separation or isolation.<sup>39</sup> Ultimately for Ardener, the "lesson of 'remote' areas is that this is a condition not related to periphery, but to the fact that certain peripheries are by definition not properly linked to the dominant zone. They are perceptions from the dominant zone, not part of its codified experience" (Ardener 2007[1989]: 222-223). In retrospect the value of the remoteness of a place like Cape Barren Island is based in part on its disconnection from larger legislative and governmental bodies. On multiple occasions during fieldwork people

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<sup>39</sup> For Ardener, "remoteness" is ultimately a "specification, and a perception, from elsewhere, from an outside standpoint; but from inside the people have their own perceptions—if you like, a counter-specification of the dominant, or defining space, working in the opposite direction" (Ardener 2007[1989]: 221).

would present Cape Barren Island as broken, and based on its minimal infrastructure and inaccessibility, it is difficult to argue otherwise. Still, the lack of development can be explained in relation to one feature of a “remote area,” namely how “those so defined are intermittently conscious of the defining processes of others that might absorb them” (Ardener 2007[1989]: 223). Despite the litany of complaints, one gets the sense that Cape Barren’s residents like its “broken” status since it indicates that they remain un-absorbed.<sup>40</sup>

A secondary site of Aboriginal geographical authenticity is Flinders Island. Unlike Cape Barren, Flinders Island has extensive tourist infrastructure and development, making it a remote area of a different kind. As a possible “homeland,” it tends to be valued behind only Cape Barren Island within a geographical hierarchy of value. The end of my fieldwork was probably the busiest it had ever been (as is often the case), but visiting Flinders Island was a priority. In addition to research reasons, I got the feeling it was important to several Aboriginal elders with whom I had spent time. Many of these people had been born on Cape Barren and their families later moved to Flinders in search of economic and employment opportunities. In talking about my Cape Barren trip, it was common for them to pointedly ask, “Are you going to Flinders?” On a personal/experiential level, my experiences on Flinders Island were very different from those on Cape Barren Island. I was able to make flight, lodging, and car rental arrangements online and my travelling companion was my wife, Mattie, who had joined me for the last two months of dissertation fieldwork.

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<sup>40</sup> This sentiment helps explain the 2010 conflict between the Aboriginal Land Council of Tasmania (ALCT) and the Flinders Council over the management and services the latter purportedly provided to Cape Barren Island. The controversy was based around the Flinders Council’s attempt to recover \$30,000 in unpaid rates and their desire to sell private properties on Cape Barren with outstanding payments. ALCT banned the Flinders Council from setting foot on Cape Barren Island for over a month (See *The Mercury*, June 15, 2010: 5; June 16, 2010: 7; June 17, 2010: 11; and July 17, 2010: 7).

Significantly larger and more mountainous compared to Cape Barren Island, Flinders Island has a population of roughly 900 people, vast grazing territory for sheep and cows, and a number of sealed roads. It is routinely depicted in travel guides as untouched, beautiful, and remote. The cover for a pamphlet published by the Flinders Island Tourism Association, for example, has the words “wild, natural, friendly.” Flinders also has no shortage of thorny Aboriginal history. As the location of the Wybalenna settlement, Flinders Island has a complicated relationship with contemporary Tasmanian Aboriginality, as the disjuncture between its Aboriginal value and populist/tourist appeal may suggest.<sup>41</sup> There is little evidence that any Aboriginal people remained on the island after Wybalenna’s closure in 1847. As Edward Stephens “of Cape Barren Island” wrote in 1898:

It is a common belief that the present inhabitants of Flinders Island are the descendants of those who were deported from Tasmania in 1835. The survivors of those who were taken to the Furneaux Group at that time, and all their descendants who were alive when that settlement was abandoned, were removed to Oyster Cove in Tasmania; not one of them was left here (Stephens 1898: 856).

This sentiment is still prevalent today, with one Cape Barren Islander saying, with disdain in his voice, “fifty years ago there were no Aboriginal people on Flinders Island.” This statement is indicative of a broader rivalry between those who identify with Flinders and those who identify with Cape Barren. Part of this rivalry is economic and class-based, with Flinders’ status as a tourist destination (with the necessary development and infrastructure) standing in marked contrast to Cape Barren to its south.

On May 9, 2011, Mattie and I flew from Launceston to Flinders Island. It was the final leg of a short trip, following a few days on Tasmania’s northeast with an Aboriginal elder that, coincidentally, had lived the majority of her life on Flinders Island. Leaving from the same small

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<sup>41</sup> Unlike Cape Barren Island, there is strong archaeological evidence that there was a human presence on Flinders Island until roughly 8 or 9,000 years ago (See Diamond 1993 for example).

terminal, albeit this time in the larger fourteen-person plane, the flight took about thirty minutes and arrived on Flinders a few minutes after eight in the morning. The differences from Cape Barren Island were readily apparent upon arrival. The airstrip was paved and had lights, and the airport, while small, was significantly larger than the Reg Munro Airfield. We picked up our rental car and headed off down to our lodging in Lady Barron on the island's southern coast. I found the island to be more settled than I had expected, as there are extensive sealed roads, signposts, interpretive signage, and National Parks.

Flinders' interior is grassy, mountainous, and spread out, which is in direct contrast to the scrubby interior of the island to its south. It is encapsulated by a few small settlements, with Lady Barron in the south, Whitemark (the main centre and home of the coffeeshop) in the southwest, Emita (home of the Furneaux Historical Research Association Museum and down the road from Wybalenna) and Killiecrankie in the northwest, being the most prominent. Killiecrankie has a strong Aboriginal history; many elders I know grew up there (with some maintaining houses). It is also the namesake of the precious stones colloquially known as Killiecrankie diamonds, some of which were sent to 1851 Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations at London's Crystal Palace.<sup>42</sup> Under the gaze of Mount Strzelecki on its southwest corner, Flinders Island is home to numerous breathtaking lookouts.

Flinders Island has a complicated history of race-relations, much of which is summarized in the 1992 documentary *Black Man's Houses*. The Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal divide, as it existed in the past, is symbolically present at the contemporary Wybalenna site. Upon seeing the Wybalenna site in 1872, Canon Brownrigg comments:

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<sup>42</sup> Provided by one-time Wybalenna Commandant Joseph Milligan, the item provided is described as "Rock crystal," and is "found in angular pieces in the peaty soil above granite, and in rolled pieces on the sea-coast of Cape Barrow (sic.) and Flinders' Island in Bass's Straits" (Official Descriptive and Illustrated Catalogue of the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations 1851: 998).

it would be difficult to conceive of a more weird, melancholy, and desolate scene than that which now meets the eye. The buildings are a mere heap of ruins. The Superintendent's quarters are almost incapable of repair. The brick church, so far as its interior is concerned, is in a pitiable condition, and is used as a shearing shed. The state of the burial ground is truly deplorable. No vestige of any fence remains. The graves are scarcely distinguishable" (Murray-Smith 1979: 19).

With minimal apparent maintenance after stewardship and ownership were handed over to the Aboriginal community in 1995, the site remains somber and minimalist. The only remaining



Figure 3.5. Wybalenna Cemetery. (Photo taken by author)

evidence of the settlement's existence is a refurbished Chapel (that was restored by the National Trust)<sup>43</sup> and the cemetery. By the chapel is Ida West's Healing Garden, a moving display set up, as the entrance sign states, "In recognition of Auntie Ida West's contributions to the betterment

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<sup>43</sup> A 1970 article in *The Australian Women's Weekly* reflects on how "It is fitting that in this year of celebration of the coming of Captain Cook to Australia (in one of his expeditions was a ship captained by Tobias Furneaux) the National Trust of Australia in Tasmania should be taking steps to acquire and restore the Wybalenna Chapel as a 'memorial to an extinct race'" (Ratcliff 1970: 40).

of Tasmanian Aboriginal people.” Ida West was a focal member of the community for many years and an outspoken advocate of Aboriginal recognition and validity. The cemetery, a short walk from the chapel, epitomizes the past (and possible present) divide on Flinders Island. It is roughly divided down the middle; one half features headstones and distinct gravesites, while the other has the appearance of blank earth. This section of brown earth is free of any adornment and holds the interned remains of “approximately 100 Tasmanian Aboriginals buried in the vicinity of –Wybalenna— 1833-1847” (nearby plaque “erected by the Junior Farmer’s of Flinders Island”), including Manalargenna. As a potential pilgrimage site, Wybalenna represents the tribal past of the Tasmanian Aboriginal people, and in some respect, exemplifies the disjuncture between pre- and post-contact history as it relates to identity formation and referentiality. It is telling that this site of such immense historical and cultural importance lacks any form of concrete protection. There is talk of a caretaker, but such a presence was conspicuous by its absence during our visit.

At first glance Flinders Island stands in contrast from Cape Barren Island, both in terms of concrete development and accessibility. Additionally, its Aboriginal elements are muted and often overshadowed by its beaches, parks, and accommodations. It would be a mistake, however, to discount the similarities shared by these two locations. For example, Flinders is also a remote place and enacts a similar feeling of claustrophobia. At the very end of fieldwork, I had envisioned our Flinders trip as an erstwhile vacation during which we could do some sightseeing as anonymous tourists. From the start, however, prominent community members visiting the island surrounded us. At dinners at the inn, at the café, and even on the plane back to Launceston, we were close to Aboriginal people. These islands are pilgrimage sites for Tasmanian Aboriginal people, just as they were for me. On a personal/ professional level, I really

felt that I would not be taken seriously without experiencing these places firsthand. Although I was encouraged to go to these destinations, there was no strong outside pressure to do so. The majority of the pressure to go was from myself, and in doing so, I myself felt legitimated. I can't help but feel similar feelings are shared by many of Tasmania's Aboriginal peoples.

To summarize, genealogy and locational heritage are arguably more significant to Aboriginality in Tasmania than race. *Who* you come from is of obvious importance, but it tends to overlap (and be subsumed by) *where* you come from. Julie Gough, for example, moved to Tasmania after growing up in Victoria, and told me how she felt she had grown up “in outer space” and had “grown up a visitor.” Another person who identified with one of the mainland Tasmania “families” said that people from the islands “think they’re more Aboriginal than others because they have known each other and lived together for so long.” Such divisions along lines of geographical heritage, and the hierarchy of authenticity in which they are organized, foreground a tension between the divergent drives towards homogeneity and heterogeneity in Aboriginal Tasmania. Homogeneity and singularity were utilized to great effect in the 1970s and 1980s, as the community sought to garner acceptance as Aboriginal in both courts of law and public opinion. This homogeneity, however, positioned the Bass Strait Islands, Cape Barren Island in particular, as the focal point in the broader “return” narrative at the expense of both Fanny and Dalrymple Briggs’ “mobs.” Historically, to say “We are all Tasmanian Aboriginals” included the assumption “We are all Islanders,” since the two were presented as synonymous. Recent years have seen the promotion of alternative sites that speak to different Aboriginalities *within* the umbrella of *Tasmanian Aboriginal* with varying levels of success.

The fact that “community” does emphasize genealogical and locational connection as central to Aboriginal self-identification does not mean that race is nonexistent in such processes.



During my fieldwork I helped with many community-led education programs at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery. The way in which the race issue was addressed during these programs, the majority of which for elementary school groups (roughly 5-10 years old), is instructive. Children would often ask the presenters “How Aboriginal are you,” or the more telling, “what part-Aboriginal are you?” The responses to these miniature Tindales ranged from jokey (“Which part? Do you mean my knees? etc.,”) to metaphorical, with coffee being a standard trope. As the explanation goes, no matter how much milk (white) you add to coffee (black), it is still coffee. This explanation is interesting not only because it is an essentialist racial model, but because it references an internal essence that is invisible to outside observers. Within such logic this essence is insoluble, ultimately unaffected by outward, physical dilution (this point is dealt with at length in Chapter Four). In this sense Aboriginality is a feeling (of belonging, of connection), with ties of community and shared history operating in lieu of strong and immediate biological ties or Aboriginal “blood.”

### ***Concluding Thoughts: Community and Connection***

Midway through my research an Aboriginal friend of mine and I commiserated about navigating the various parties within the wider community. We both had noticed that referencing meetings with other community members often resulted in “shit-talking”; she said, “It may be best to simply not mention people to other people.” Gerald Creed notes how “a positive valence is commonsensical and part of the popularity and utility of the community concept,” but “the same positive valence that makes community attractive may provoke discontent and dissatisfaction when such ideals are not realized” (Creed 2006: 13). With this in mind, it is interesting that another individual took “community” as it was espoused in protests and other public displays as “purely a political construction, as community is based on trust,” which this

person found to be lacking. Additionally, the term also implies a level of singularity and unification. In talking to Patsy Cameron, an Aboriginal writer, shell stringer and basket weaver, she told me “People may talk like there is one [community], there are in fact very many,” adding “the left hand doesn’t know what the right hand is doing.” Viewed through a different perspective, division and factionalism may be evidence supporting (or even enacting) the existence of community rather than the inverse. As Miranda Joseph writes,

Many participants in identity-political movements have recognized that rather than simply referring to an existing collectivity, invocations of community attempt to naturalize and mobilize such a collectivity: on both left and right community is deployed to lower consciousness of difference, hierarchy, and oppression, within the invoked group (Joseph 2002: xxiv).

While Raymond Williams observes how “community,” “unlike all other terms of social organization (*state, nation, society*, etc.)... seems never to be used unfavourably, and never to be given any positive opposing or distinguishing term” (Williams 1983: 76), its divisive elements (i.e. division *within* the unification) need to be acknowledged as well.

Events like the Brighton open house typify the deep connections undergirding surface divisions and hostilities. Essentially since British settlement of Tasmania, cries of inauthenticity and denial of Aboriginality have served as connective tissue for the Tasmanian Aboriginal people. While there are internal factions and rivalries, one thing everyone can agree on is that there is a strong community, the existence of which is in constant need of justification and defense. Community in Tasmania is also an aspirational ideal, what Creed calls “an aspiration envisioned as an entity” (Creed 2006: 22), the movement towards which is in perpetual process. Freed from its reductive (and overly positive) associations, the community concept is revealed to be both consecrated and consecrating, with outside bestowal and insider application operating in a cyclical and mutually constitutive manner.

## Chapter Four

### “We Are Living Our Culture and Learning Our Culture”: Material Culture, Tradition, Meaning

#### *Introduction*

Wednesday November 3, 2010 was a valuable research day for a number of reasons. I spent the day participating in education programs with Sharnie Everett at the Carlton River/ Steele’s Island area east of Hobart. This Palawa Aboriginal Corporation program focused on shell middens and cultural landscapes (as addressed in Chapter Seven). Additionally, that night marked the Hobart premier of *Mathinna*, an interpretive dance performance by the acclaimed Bangarra Dance Theatre, a New South Wales-based group widely considered to be Australia’s leading Indigenous performing arts company.<sup>1</sup> *Mathinna* tells the story of a Tasmanian Aboriginal person and the performance was both a homecoming and a cultural event for the Tasmanian Aboriginal community. Forever immortalized in Thomas Bock’s 1842 portrait as the little girl in the red dress,<sup>2</sup> Mathinna’s life epitomizes the (frequently tragic and often forced) movement between cultures during the colonial period. She was born as Mary in 1835 to her mother Wongerneep and father Towterer (Plomley 1987: 808), and was later renamed Mathinna (in a compelling reversal of the naming process at Wybalenna; in this case from Western to

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<sup>1</sup> “Established in 1989 as a dance company that embraces, celebrates and respects Australia’s indigenous peoples and their culture, Bangarra Dance Theatre has emerged as the country’s premier indigenous performing arts company” (*The Mercury* October 21, 2010: 29).

<sup>2</sup> The painting can be seen at:

[http://www.utas.edu.au/library/companion\\_to\\_tasmanian\\_history/M/Mathinna.htm](http://www.utas.edu.au/library/companion_to_tasmanian_history/M/Mathinna.htm). In the play the majority of colors are muted and dark, a decision certainly made to foreground Mathinna’s red dress. Accessed March 30, 2014.

indigenous/ “traditional”) upon her 1838 “adoption” by Lieutenant Governor John Franklin and his wife, Lady Jane Franklin. Mathinna lived with the Franklins at Hobart’s Government House until 1843, when the Franklins abruptly returned to England and left her in the care of the Orphan School. In 1852, after stints back at Wybalenna and the Oyster Cove settlement, Mathinna, “having become drunk at an inn at North West Bay, had fallen on her face [in a puddle on the road] on her way home and was found dead next morning” (Plomley 1987: 181). She was no more than seventeen years of age. Mathinna has since been portrayed as “betwixt and between” two cultures and ultimately refused by both.<sup>3</sup>

*Mathinna* began a set of three at Hobart’s quant Royal Theater on November 3, 2010. These dates followed two performances in Launceston. There was a palpable sense of excitement upon arriving at the theater. I spotted many Tasmanian Aboriginal people I knew, the strong sisters Verna Nichols and Leonie Dickson, TMAG Indigenous Cultures Curator Tony Brown, AIATSIS resident and writer Greg Lehman, amongst others. I made the rounds and chatted with a number of people, eventually making my way to the “cheap seats” in the balcony. As it was opening night, Leonie Dickson had the honor of performing the “Welcome to Country,” and some elements were spoken in *palawa kani* (the reconstructed Tasmanian Aboriginal language; is the focus of Chapter Five). The show itself was quite good, with the performers demonstrating exceptional athleticism and talent.

The subsequent newspaper review of the show lauded the performers, both front and backstage, stating:

Drawn from what is known of the life of one Aboriginal child, Stephen Page and these wonderful dancers have breathed life into a truly Tasmanian story. Mathinna has finally come home... With visuals and sound at times as important as the movement, Page and his collaborators David Page (music) and Peter England (set

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<sup>3</sup> The tagline for Bangarra’s production is “A Girl’s Journey Between Two Cultures.”

design) describe a landscape and way of being founded on traditional knowledge and practice (*The Mercury*, November 4, 2010: 12).

The performance also foregrounded the visible “deficiency” of the contemporary Tasmanian Aboriginal people, with mainland Aboriginal people with dark skin portraying the former’s ancestors. The majority of the community possess light skin and fair features, and it is telling that no Tasmanian Aboriginal person could feasibly play Tasmanian Aboriginal roles in productions like *Mathinna*. Skin color is but one example of a visible lack (deficiency, or absence) of distinctly “indigenous” or “Aboriginal” characteristics (in terms of language, visibility, tribal lifestyle, etc.) that has defined the community for over a century. As a result, the overall Tasmanian Aboriginal presence (for lack of a better word) remains quite limited, particularly inter-state and internationally. A few months into fieldwork I was chatting with some friends over a few pints in Salamanca. The discussion shifted to my research and Mattieu, a German friend-of-a-friend, became quite disengaged. My friend Darren asked Mattieu about the topic at hand, to which he looked befuddled and earnestly asked, “There are Aboriginal people in Tasmania?” By this point Mattieu had lived in the Hobart area for a number of months. Anecdotal as this example certainly is, I believe it epitomizes a regular occurrence amongst international and inter-state visitors to Tasmania.

That contemporary Tasmanian Aboriginal people neither look like nor share the same cultural practices or religious cosmologies as their tribal ancestors foregrounds a disjuncture and break from (or gap with) the past.<sup>4</sup> This poses a potential obstacle for formal recognition since the “cunning of recognition”<sup>5</sup> (Povinelli 2002) in Australia has a strong racial/phenotypical

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<sup>4</sup> This claim is applicable to the majority of contemporary indigenous people the world over, including Australia. However, the extreme degree of difference, further complicated by the mythos of extinction, is arguably what makes the Tasmanian case unique and insightful.

<sup>5</sup> Povinelli argues that most people would not know that “if Aboriginal persons are to be successful land or native title claimants, they must not only provide evidence of the enduring nature of their customary

component. The relatively recent (re-) construction/activation of “traditional” Tasmanian Aboriginal culture has, however, allowed the community to prove, via fibre baskets and stringy bark canoes, their existence and fill in these gaps. Richard Handler’s work on nationalism and cultural ownership is particularly insightful in this regard. “In modern culture,” he writes, “an individual is defined by the property he or she possesses” (Handler 1991: 64). Since groups are imagined as “collective individuals,” they are also defined in this manner.<sup>6</sup> In contemporary cultural politics, to “have” a distinctive culture is proof of existence and grounds for validation.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the “possessive individualism” inherent in the modern conceptualization of cultural ownership relies upon (and often implies) a clear continuity of both practice and practitioner. One prevalent criticism of modern ethnic groups is “the culture that present-day groups claim as belonging to them from time immemorial, embodied in historically particular pieces of cultural property, is likewise the product of current interpretation and not an objective thing that has possessed a continuous meaning and identity over time” (Handler 1991: 69). The fact that many judiciaries and national native title legislations employ clear and demonstrable continuity into (a vague and romantic) *time immemorial* as the litmus test for legal repatriation of indigenous land further complicates this point. The Mabo court case (taking the name of the plaintiff, Eddie Mabo) set the precedent in Australia. Francesca Merlan remarks how following

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law but also evidence of their ‘degree of attachment’ (dispositional orientation) to their ancient laws and lands” (Povinelli 2002: 51).

<sup>6</sup> “Each nation or group is imagined to be bounded and apart, and internally homogeneous. This is obvious from a glance at any modern map, which uses dark, unbroken lines to portray the boundaries between nations, and which fills the interior of each bounded unit with a different color. These cartographic conventions suggest, first, that each nation is unambiguously separated from its neighbors; second, that each nation, colored differently than its neighbors, possesses a unique identity and culture; and third, that each nation, of one and only one color, is internally homogeneous” (Handler 1991: 66). See also Benedict Anderson’s chapter in *Imagined Communities* on “Census, Map, Museum” (Anderson 2006[1983]: 163-185).

<sup>7</sup> As one Quebecois high school student said, “We are a nation because we have a culture” (Handler 1991: 66).

a historic High Court decision in *Mabo vs. Queensland [No. 2]* in 1992, Australia passed the Native Title Act (1993). The main finding of the High Court was that Murray Islanders of the Torres Strait have native title to the lands they claimed as theirs. The decision behind this specific case was portentous, for it both recognized the general concept of native title at the common law and left open the possibility that it may have survived colonization elsewhere in Australia... The Mabo decision and the act recognize native title as a potentially continuous entitlement, stemming from prior occupation (Merlan 1998: 175).

Povinelli masterfully demonstrates how native title legislation places indigenous claimants in an awkward (both socially and psychologically) double-bind in which they must demonstrate an alterity that is both sufficient and amenable to modern liberal democratic ideals. Thus, “native title in Australia can be extinguished if the genealogical and occupancy relationship to land is severed and, *in addition*, if the customary beliefs and practices of the group claiming native title are severed *more or less*” (Povinelli 2002: 156).<sup>8</sup> Disjuncture is formative of rather than destructive to the community’s conceptualization of Tasmanian Aboriginality, and they have been *recognized on these grounds*. This makes the Tasmanian case quite unique within Australia. Contrary to Povinelli, their conspicuous lack of continuity into *time immemorial* has served as grounds for land ownership rather than the basis for disenfranchisement. The first major land return in Tasmania was based on legislation introduced by Premier Ray Groom on October 17, 1995 and enacted in November 1995. This parcel of land, totaling 3800 hectares, included “five muttonbird islands in Bass Strait [Steep, Mt. Chappell, Babel, Badger, and Great Dog Islands], a small section of a sixth [Cape Barren Island], three caves in the Tasmanian World Heritage Area

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<sup>8</sup> Povinelli shows this to be unique amongst other colonial nation-states. The excerpt continues: “In the United States and Canada, legal proof of native title rests on demonstrating a genealogical connection to the original owners. This legal grounding of native title reflects nineteenth-century notions of usufruct. But although the law of recognition is not grounded in the performance of cultural continuity in the United States, it is supplemented by public accounts of the justice of granting ‘special rights’ to native Americans. Finally, in Brazil courts demand some proof of distinct cultural difference as the grounds for the legal recognition of customary native title rights and interests. The indigenous people of Brazil face the question of the commonsense meaning of difference. But they are not compelled to demonstrate an unbroken connection between contemporary beliefs and practices and the beliefs and practices of their genealogical ancestors” (Povinelli 2002: 156).

[Ballawinne, Kutikina, and Wargata Mina caves], two historic sites near Hobart [Oyster Cove and Risdon Cove] and another at Mount Cameron West in the north-west [a petroglyph site later re-named Preminghana]” (Ryan 1996[1981]: 310). Combined with the later return of the Wybalenna site and the bulk of Cape Barren Island, the majority of these places gained their meaning and community after the disruption of “traditional” tribal society, with some locales being important *because* of the loss that occurred there (e.g. Wybalenna, Oyster Cove) or that they are representative of (e.g. Risdon Cove<sup>9</sup>). The muttonbird islands and Cape Barren Island became valuable sources of Aboriginal identity only *after* the arrival of the British at the turn of the nineteenth century. Additionally, the case can be made the cave art sites were returned *because of* a lack of continuity (of practice or cosmology) rather than in spite of it. These unique grounds for return illustrate why people like Lyndall Ryan can credibly say Tasmania is the “cradle of race relations in Australia” (Ryan 1996[1981]: 310). The areas of returned land, and the community validation the governmental act represents, indicate a simultaneous recognition of pre-historic and post-colonial locations as central to contemporary Aboriginal culture in Tasmania.

These counterintuitive (and variant) grounds for land restitution mirror Tasmanian Aboriginal culture, as the latter is a composite of divergent elements from diverse places and different times. Despite formal recognition, there remains a palpable desire amongst many community members for a cultural continuity that has been conspicuous by its absence. Through cultural revitalization projects, the majority of which seeking to “re-start” traditional practices

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<sup>9</sup> The contemporary value of the Risdon Cove site, being the location of an 1803 massacre of Aboriginal people, is drawn not only from the real deaths that occurred there but also from the symbolism it has come to represent.



that have not existed for over a century,<sup>10</sup> people have consciously (and systematically) rearticulated what it means to be a Tasmanian Aboriginal person. As a result of their shared “post-extinction” existence, traditions from the Bass Strait Islands (e.g. muttonbirding, specific styles of shell-stringing) interact with returning traditions from mainland Tasmania (the roots of which are in the pre-European tribal society addressed in Chapter Two), often with competing valuations and purported authenticities. Taking “culture,” a term Raymond Williams calls “one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language” (Williams 1983: 87), as its core focus, this chapter examines the relationships between tradition, meaning, revitalization, and preservation. It also presents material culture production as a willed connection to one’s ancestors. This connection is often framed as the “awakening” of a dormant (or sleeping) internal essence that has remained pure in the face of racial and temporal distance.

### ***Tools of Re-articulation: Documentation and Source Materials***

Tasmanian Aboriginal culture is defined vis-à-vis a string of gaps. These gaps exist on a sliding scale from abstract to concrete and vary in form and legacy. As previous chapters have shown, these gaps manifest themselves biologically, visually, temporally, and spatially. All these gaps separate the contemporary community from both their ancestors (and ancestral culture) and the predominant public idea (I) of what Aboriginal-ness is. Over the past half-century there has been extensive community-based work done to bridge these gaps, with varying degrees of success. Viewed schematically, whereas Chapter Three addressed the sense of place and the geographical hierarchy of value in contemporary Aboriginal Tasmania (the *where* of culture), the present chapter takes the practice (and production) of culture as its focus (the *what* of culture).

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<sup>10</sup> The actual dates are somewhat foggy, but the general rule-of-thumb is that the internment at Wybalenna marks the period during which a number of traditional practices were lost.

The canonization of specific items of Tasmanian Aboriginal material culture has a long and complicated history, with their iconicity in relation to tribal culture emerging at the turn of the nineteenth century. I use this label to refer to pre-contact Aboriginal culture, as the tribal system was effectively destroyed by the 1820s. It is commonly used to demarcate cultural separations while promoting broader connections.<sup>11</sup> Much ink has been spent lamenting the “missed opportunity” that was the Tasmanian Aboriginal people, and what is known of tribal society is the result of European documentation and collection. It is deeply ironic that the quasi-salvage ethnographic data gathered against the backdrop of extinction are the very materials that make revitalization and ancestral connection possible. Without the documentation of naturalists, settlers, former brick-layers,<sup>12</sup> botanists, and self-styled anthropologists, the majority of tribal Tasmanian Aboriginal culture would be forever lost. These resources are integral tools with which several cultural gaps can be traversed and continuity re-established.

The French “voyages of discovery” provided the first visual documentation of Tasmanian Aboriginal culture, with the Baudin expedition (1800-1804) being the foremost example.

Containing a lingering hint of primitivism, Rhys Jones writes:

The descriptions of the material culture of the Tasmanian Aborigines that were made with varying degrees of detail by the British and French maritime explorers were consistent with each other and were confirmed by later accounts, especially of G.A. Robinson, carried out between 1829 and 1834 when Tasmanian Aboriginal society was disintegrating under colonial impact. Tasmanian material technology, in terms of the number of artefact types and the design of each element, was probably the simplest ever recorded for any ethnographically described group of people. The observers on Baudin’s expedition were aware of such simplicity and gave workman-like descriptions of most of the artefacts... As a set these drawings constitute the best depictions available of key elements of Tasmanian technology (Jones 1988: 46).

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<sup>11</sup> For example, Truganini is now viewed as the last “Tribal” Aboriginal person rather than the unmarked “Last Tasmanian.”

<sup>12</sup> This is, of course, an allusion to George Augustus Robinson.

Amongst such documenters (such as Nicolas Petit and François Péron), Charles-Alexandre Lesueur's work has had the greatest impact on understandings of traditional Tasmanian Aboriginal material culture.<sup>13</sup> Forever recorded in his drawings and paintings are items that have subsequently become the emblems of Tasmanian culture. These items include bark canoes, maireener shell necklaces, fibre baskets, and kelp water carriers.<sup>14</sup> These images are commonplace in museum exhibitions about the Tasmanian Aboriginal people and have inspired the re-establishment (and maintenance) of various practices.

Additional key resources are Tasmanian Aboriginal objects found in institutional collections in Australia and abroad (See Plomley 1961). The collection of these objects was motivated by a belief in their value but also the presumed ephemerality of the knowledge they represented. Many Tasmanian Aboriginal items were sent to international exhibitions and fairs, including 1851's Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations at London's Crystal Palace. Along with muttonbird oil, feathers, and Killiecrankie diamonds, the Exhibition's catalogue includes "Necklaces of shells, as worn by the aborigines of Tasmania" (Official Descriptive and Illustrated Catalogue of the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations 1851: 996),<sup>15</sup> "Seven baskets, made by the aborigines of Tasmania," a "Model of a

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<sup>13</sup> In April 2010 Hobart's Carnegie Gallery housed an exhibition titled, *Littoral*, which was organized around six artist's reactions to Lesueur's work. In her introduction to the exhibit's catalogue, curator Vivonne Thwaites writes: "In the eighteenth century, France was at the forefront of scientific advances and the push to explore and understand the natural world. Through governmental support and private benefaction, expeditions were commissioned to explore uncharted realms and to collect, document and return to France as much empirical data as possible. In the early nineteenth century, the voyage of Nicolas Baudin, on the corvettes *Géographe* and *Naturaliste*, was one of the last of the great French voyages of exploration and discovery" (Thwaites 2010: 4).

<sup>14</sup> A descriptive catalogue of the various drawings and paintings for the Baudin expedition's visit to Tasmania can be found in Bonnemains, Forsyth and Smith 1988: 113-134; 137-159).

<sup>15</sup> "The shell composing these necklaces seems to be closely allied to the *Phasianella*. It is very abundant in the various bays and sinuosities of the island. It possesses a nacreous brilliant lustre, which is disclosed by the removal of the cuticle, and this the aborigines effect by soaking in vinegar, and using friction. Various tints, black, blue, and green, are afterwards given by boiling with tea, charcoal, &c." (Official

water-pitcher, made by the aborigines of Van Diemen's Land,"<sup>16</sup> and "Four models of canoes of the aborigines of Van Diemen's Land" (Official Descriptive and Illustrated Catalogue of the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations 1851: 997).<sup>17</sup> The context of their collection is insightful and gestures towards the refractive nature of Aboriginality in contemporary Tasmania. Joseph Milligan, who followed in Robinson's footsteps<sup>18</sup> as the superintendent and medical officer of Aborigines from 1843 to 1855, provided the aforementioned items to the exhibition. He also served as secretary of the Royal Society of Tasmania from 1848 to 1860, during which time he provided many items to that organization's collection.<sup>19</sup> He collected (and in some cases, commissioned) the majority of these objects from the Wybalenna and Oyster Cove settlements. Milligan, unflatteringly described in an 1857 newspaper article as both "a *quasi* learned man" and a "fop" (*The Mercury*, February 20, 1857: 2), has been integral to the continuation of Tasmanian Aboriginal material culture. His acts of collection (and those of his contemporaries) have added tangibility to the visual recordings of Lesueur, Petit, Péron, and others.

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Descriptive and Illustrated Catalogue of the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations 1851: 996).

<sup>16</sup> "This water-pitcher is made of the broad-leaved kelp, and is large enough to hold a quart or two of water. The only other vessel possessed by the aborigines for carrying a supply of water was a sea-shell, a large cymba, occasionally cast upon the northern shore of Van Diemen's Land, which contained about a quart" (Official Descriptive and Illustrated Catalogue of the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations 1851: 997).

<sup>17</sup> "These are exact models of the large catamarans, in which the natives used to cross to Brune Island: the material is bark of the *Melaleuca squarrosa*" (Official Descriptive and Illustrated Catalogue of the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations 1851: 997).

<sup>18</sup> Milligan replaced Dr. Henry Jeanneret as Superintendent of the Wybalenna Aboriginal settlement on two separate occasions. Plomley writes: "Early in 1844 Milligan replaced Jeanneret as surgeon-superintendent at 'Wybalenna' and he continued there until March 1846 when Jeanneret returned. Jeanneret was dismissed for the second time in May 1847 and again was replaced by Milligan, who supervised the removal of the Aborigines to Oyster Cove in October 1847" (Plomley 1987: 134).

<sup>19</sup> The Royal Society's collection came into existence in 1848 and became the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery in 1889 (Hughes et al., 2007: 4).

## *Preservation and Revitalization*

*I'm stoked, mate. We're just bringing back the past. It's unreal. It's like amazing.*  
-Sheldon Brown, Participant in 2007 Bark Canoe Revival Program<sup>20</sup>

Williams contends that disciplinary imaginings of culture tend to reference *either* material production or symbolic systems. Such practice, however, often “confuses but even more often conceals the central question of the relations between ‘material’ and ‘symbolic’ production which... have always to be related rather than contrasted” (Williams 1983: 91). Following such insights, I consider material production to be a crystallization of culture (however defined) that is visible, tangible, and concrete. Furthermore, its symbolic meaning (concrete and abstract) within its cultural system emerges through the act of production and is stamped on the objects themselves. Culture is likewise imagined to consist of traditions that are inherited, passed down, and belong to certain populations or practitioners. The reality of the latter point becomes evident when “inappropriate” individuals attempt to co-opt that which does not belong to them.<sup>21</sup> Tradition is a critical component of native title legislation. Courts and legislatures conceptualize tradition as grounded in continuity, and it is a common belief that once a tradition is lost it cannot be regained.<sup>22</sup>

While the bulk of this chapter concentrates on cultural practices that hearken back to pre-contact tribal society, I would be remiss if I didn't mention muttonbirding as a central aspect of contemporary Tasmanian Aboriginal culture. As discussed in Chapter Three, the practice of

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<sup>20</sup> This quote is from an ABC television episode of Stateline Tasmania that aired 8/10/2007. The transcript of the program can be found at: <http://www.abc.net.au/stateline/tas/content/2006/s2002244.htm>. Accessed March 30, 2014.

<sup>21</sup> Much like the consecrating value of owning a culture, as described by Handler, “tradition” is frequently used as proof of distinction and cultural difference, with Williams drawing attention to its “ratifying use” (Williams 1983: 319). Defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as “sign or give formal consent to (a treaty, contract, or agreement), making it officially valid” (<http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/ratify?q=ratify>), “**ratify**” is a particularly apt term in terms of cultural legitimation.

<sup>22</sup> See Merlan 2006: 93-94.

muttonbirding is an “Islander” activity, with the majority of rookeries found on the Bass Strait Islands. A number of these islands were returned in 1995 on the grounds that the practice is of great cultural value to the Tasmanian Aboriginal peoples. Muttonbirding is a seasonal activity, and the migration of muttonbirders to the islands mirrors that of the birds themselves. Meston remarks on how the birds “arrive at the islands towards the end of September. The nesting burrows are first cleaned out, then the birds leave for sea again, returning on or about the 25<sup>th</sup> November, when the laying season begins. Only one egg is laid. This takes about eight weeks to hatch. The young birds are unable to fly before the end of April” (Meston 1936: 156-7). While



Figure 4.1. Tony Brown holds a muttonbird during an outdoor program. (Photo taken by author)

tribal Aboriginals certainly exploited this resource, muttonbirding as we know it is the result of dislocation and settlement on the islands. Muttonbirding today is an organized activity with a Ford-esque production line involving their capture, cleaning, and butchering. In terms of

tradition, there is a clear distinction between muttonbirding and shell-stringing, for example. This topic came up in conversation with community elder, Patsy Cameron, who said that the way muttonbirding is currently conducted is “not one of our traditions” (personal communication). I responded that although it is imagined as such, it perhaps is best understood as a “new tradition.” She thought about it for a moment and agreed.

Fibre baskets, kelp water carrier, and bark canoes<sup>23</sup> are the most emblematic items of revitalized Tasmanian Aboriginal material culture. These items, combined with the preserved practice of shell-stringing, are imagined as distinctly Tasmanian. As addressed in Chapter Two, even when the Tasmanians had everything it was still viewed as insufficient. Whereas Rhys Jones interpreted the comparatively small size of the Tasmanian tool kit as evidence of deficiency (and perhaps the result of degeneration), this difference has been re-framed (by practitioners and cultural institutions, amongst others) as uniquely Tasmanian and unlike anything found on mainland Australia.<sup>24</sup> The Tasmanian Aboriginal people never possessed representative items of unmarked Aboriginality like boomerangs, didgeridoos, or spear throwers, but many community members do not (or in many cases, no longer) view this as indicative of any sort of comparative deficiency. In fact, whenever didgeridoos are part of community events (which is quite common at TAC-led rallies), there are always community members who find it inappropriate and even disrespectful towards their own culture. This relatively recent development reflects the success of revitalization projects and the confidence that has accompanied it.

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<sup>23</sup> The canoes are primarily made of stringy bark or paper bark.

<sup>24</sup> While the extent of the uniqueness may tend to be overstated, it is true that maireener shells are predominantly found in Tasmania, and nothing like kelp water carriers or bundle bark canoes are found elsewhere in Australia. Even basketry, which is prominent the world over, is the result of a rare twining pattern in Tasmania.

At first glance, these revitalization projects are rife with contradictions. On the one hand, the practices themselves are (at least partially) defined by their historical loss and the concerted and organized effort required to bring them back. On the other hand, however, many practitioners strive to adhere as much as possible to their ancestors' traditional methods and styles. In the case of kelp water carriers the nature of institutional collections in the digital age (via online databases and image banks) has played a formative role in the consecration of certain styles as traditional. These water carriers, fashioned out of bull kelp, sticks, and twine, were first seen by French explorers at the turn of the nineteenth century, with Meston noting how "La Billardi re relates that the women and girls brought water to the men who sat near their fires, using for the purpose vessels made from kelp and fastened into shape by skewers" (Meston 1949: 147). The personal process of consolidation of "proper" methodology is instructive in this regard. Verna Nichols and Leonie Dickson, a pair of sisters in their sixth-decade, are part of a relatively small group of Tasmanian Aboriginal people who make kelp water carriers in the "traditional" fashion. As with the bulk of practices discussed in this chapter, the available resources from which methodology can be deduced are limited and open to interpretation. Relying on nineteenth century etchings, paintings, and historical objects, people have reverse-engineered these distinctly Tasmanian cultural objects. In their contribution to the *tayenebe* exhibition catalogue,<sup>25</sup> aptly titled *Kelp water carriers: right way or wrong way*, Verna and Leonie give valuable insight into the consecration of particular styles and techniques. In this article they describe a recent shift in their design of kelp water carriers. As a somewhat rectangular object, the prevailing style of the revived water carrier had previously been to have

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<sup>25</sup> During my 3-month internship at TMAG in 2008 I had the opportunity to help envision and plan the planned *tayenebe* exhibition, which itself was a showcase of the objects that resulted from a governmentally-funded "cultural retrieval" program into Tasmanian Aboriginal women's fibre-work. The emphasis was placed on baskets and kelp water carriers. This exhibition is one of the centerpieces of Chapter Six.



wooden sticks implanted into sliced grooves on the long-end of the piece of kelp (as depicted in Lesueur’s drawing). The sisters had recently decided, however, that this was, in fact, the “wrong way” to do it. The impetus for this shift was the emergence and circulation of a photo “from the British Museum that depicted a water carrier donated in 1851. The image indicated it had been made in another way” (Nichols and Dickson 2009: 59; see Figure 4.2). In answering their own question why they “have been making them in the wrong way,” they state that “Previously we only had drawings made by the early European explorers to go by” (Nichols and Dickson 2009: 59). Coincidentally, the kelp water carrier in question was the same one Milligan sent to the Great Exhibition<sup>26</sup> which, along with three shell necklaces and a model canoe, he subsequently gifted to the British Museum.<sup>27</sup> Unlike the carriers depicted in European drawings and paintings, this tangible object has sticks on the short-end, which in-part makes the carriers easier to make, sit better, and easier to handle (Nichols and Dickson 2009: 59). In following this “new” style, the authors feel they “are the first ones since the old fellas to make kelp water carriers this way. We have shown our daughters how to make them this way too, and they agree that it is easier than the old way of making them” (Nichols and Dickson 2009: 59). They feel “the new way as depicted in the photo is the right way to make kelp water carriers. We have decided because of these reasons we will continue to make our water carriers this way, unless specifically asked to make some in, what our opinion is, the wrong way” (Nichols and Dickson 2009: 59). This one

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<sup>26</sup> The meanings of these objects have obviously changed over time and are defined contextually and relationally. See Thomas 1991 for a deeper analysis of such “entangled objects.”

<sup>27</sup> The link to this object in the British Museum’s online database is:

[http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/search\\_the\\_collection\\_database/search\\_object\\_details.aspx?objectid=513966&partid=1&output=People%2f!!%2fOR%2f!!%2f37373%2f!!%2f37373-3-9%2f!!%2fDonated+by+Joseph+Milligan%2f!!%2f%2f!!%2f%2f!!%2f&orig=%2fresearch%2fsearch\\_the\\_collection\\_database%2fadvanced\\_search.aspx&currentPage=1&numpages=10](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/search_the_collection_database/search_object_details.aspx?objectid=513966&partid=1&output=People%2f!!%2fOR%2f!!%2f37373%2f!!%2f37373-3-9%2f!!%2fDonated+by+Joseph+Milligan%2f!!%2f%2f!!%2f%2f!!%2f&orig=%2fresearch%2fsearch_the_collection_database%2fadvanced_search.aspx&currentPage=1&numpages=10). Accessed March 30, 2014.

example indicates how revitalized practices are fluid but nonetheless strive for uniformity with their “traditional” resources.



Figure 4.2. Kelp Water Carrier. © Trustees of the British Museum.

A similar, and possibly even more remarkable, story is that of the re-articulated Tasmanian bark canoe. Witnessed by European observers during the colonial period, there is strong evidence that, despite opinions to the contrary (see Pearson 1939), the vessel was seaworthy and could support transit across fierce waters to outer islands. Meston writes:

The natives crossed the many wide estuaries that intersect the coast line, and frequently visited outlying islands in a specialised form of canoe from ten to fifteen feet in length and three feet in width, made from three bundles of bark lashed together. The longest bundle was fastened between the other two making a shallow double ended craft with long tapering ends curved upwards. Long sticks or spears served as paddles (Meston 1949: 149-150).<sup>28</sup>

<sup>28</sup> It is important to note that there was a second type of canoe witnessed by early European observers, using reeds instead of bark. Meston comments, “there is one record of a raft-like conveyance formed by two logs kept in position by cross timbers interwoven with a kind of wickerwork” (Meston 1949: 150). In a separate publication Meston comments how the “construction of such boats shows considerable ingenuity in utilizing unpromising material” (Meston 1936: 159).

The available source material documenting the bark canoes (materials, size, structural integrity, etc.) is significantly smaller than that of the kelp water carriers or fibre baskets. This is partly a function of their size and ephemerality, since the large canoes were simply not available for collection during the nineteenth century. Additionally, its commission at Wybalenna or Oyster Cove was neither realistic nor plausible. As a result, in contradistinction to other revived practices, there are no “full-size” examples to serve as guidance. In their place are surrogates in the form of model canoes made mostly at Wybalenna, three of which Milligan sent to London in 1851 (see Figure 4.3). Locally, the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery (TMAG) has five miniature bark canoes in their collection.<sup>29</sup> Roth writes:

In the Hobart Museum there are three models<sup>30</sup> of canoes made by the aborigines. Each of the three is made of three bundles of bark—thick in the middle and tapering to each end, like a Teneriffe Cigar. One of these cigar-shaped bundles forms the floor or keel; another bundle of similar shape and size is on each side of the keel and raised above it, to form the sides. The three bundles are firmly bound together with coarse tough grassy fibre, partly knotted, forming a sort of rough open network, very irregular. The bow and stern are finished off with thin projecting rolls of bark, bound to the main part with tough grass, tightly served round them (Roth 1899[1890]: 156).

The revival of the bark canoe resulted from a commonwealth-funded project at TMAG in 2007.<sup>31</sup> The core resources for this project were the miniature canoes, the descriptions offered by people like George Augustus Robinson, and the paintings and drawings of Lesueur and his contemporaries. In a novel move the museum had the internal workings of one of its miniatures scanned in the hope it would approximate that of its traditional (and significantly larger) historical counterparts. One of the miniature canoes was CAT scanned at the Royal Hobart

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<sup>29</sup> In addition to the British Museum and TMAG, the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford also has miniature canoes.

<sup>30</sup> As previously stated, the number is currently five.

<sup>31</sup> One of the main forces behind the project was Tony Brown, Cape Barren Islander and TMAG’s curator of Indigenous Cultures. The canoe builders were four Aboriginal men; Tony’s brother, Brendan “Buck” Brown, Shane Hughes, Sheldon Thomas, and Tony Burgess. Former Naval Officer, Sarah Parry, aided the Project.

Hospital and the results provided significant insight into the model's interior structure as well as its intricate tie system. Bark was collected on Aboriginal land on Bruny Island



Figure 4.3. Miniature Bark Canoe. © Trustees of the British Museum.

and, after extensive trial and error (partly in response to fumigating the bark strips so they could be housed and used in the museum), the team devised a system to re-moisturize the dried-out materials for improved pliability. The final product was a five metre-long canoe that is now the centerpiece of *ningenneh tunapry*,<sup>32</sup> TMAG's revised Tasmanian Aboriginal gallery that opened in late 2007. As the first Aboriginally-made canoe in roughly one-hundred and seventy years,<sup>33</sup> its presence at the front of the gallery is a powerful statement of continuity and strength-of-community. Following the successful TMAG program, a number of organizations and individuals have continued, and passed on, this newfound tradition of canoe-making.

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<sup>32</sup> The title translates to "To give knowledge and understanding." TMAG re-opened in March 2013 after an extensive redevelopment of its historical spaces. The exhibition remained in its original location, albeit with a slightly smaller amount of floor-space. Additionally, the spelling has been changed to *ningina tunapri*, as part of a recent effort to standardize the spellings of *palawa kani*, the reconstructed Tasmanian Aboriginal language. *Palawa kani* is the focus of Chapter Five.

<sup>33</sup> Rhys Jones famously built a bark canoe during the filming of *The Last Tasmanian* film. Rhys Jones, of course, was Welsh and not a Tasmanian Aboriginal person.

Pierre Bourdieu has written extensively about the intricate relationship between demonstration and consecration, making the point that the very act of creation can legitimize difference for both observer and observed. Overlapping thematically with Handler, Bourdieu posits officialization

finds its fulfillment in *demonstration*, the typically magical (which does not mean ineffectual) act through which the practical group—virtually ignored, denied, or repressed—makes itself visible and manifest, for other groups and *for itself*, and attests to its existence as a group that is known and recognized, laying claim to institutionalization. The social world is also will and representation, and to exist socially means to be perceived, and perceived as distinct (Bourdieu 1991b: 224).

Following this logic, it should not be surprising that revived Tasmanian material culture is commonly featured in art galleries and museums. In fact, one of the stated outcomes for many programs is to put on an exhibition. Such public forums provide a forum through which such practices can be validated as authentic and “real.” During fieldwork I participated in many of these events, one of which was organized around the Tasmanian bark canoe. The Australian Wooden Boat Festival takes place biennially in Hobart, and in 2011 TMAG had a stall featuring traditional bark canoes and a demonstration by a couple of fellas from the Tasmanian Aboriginal Land and Sea Council (TALSC). Tony Brown offered me the opportunity to help him with the event and I spent the better part of three days answering questions from festival-goers about the revitalized practice. The stall, housed in the refurbished Prince’s Wharf Shed #1 (re-branded as PW1) on Hobart’s waterfront, was comprised of a dugout canoe from the Tiwi Islands, a Tasmanian bark canoe from the previous festival, and a “work-in-progress” canoe. After helping Tony set up the first two existing canoes (and accompanying signage and interpretation panels) on Thursday, February 10, 2011, I accompanied him the next morning to TALSC’s North Hobart headquarters to help with the delivery of the partial canoe. The bark had been collected in nearby Huonville and the building process had begun at St. Helens in Tasmania’s northeast. It took four

of us to move the partial-canoe just a few metres from a table to a nearby trailer. Sheldon Thomas, a veteran of the 2007 project, had done the main work with help from Sky Maynard, one of the new Tasmanian Aboriginal park rangers employed by Parks and Wildlife.<sup>34</sup> We then caravanned back down to the PW1 shed and got the canoe set up for the festival.

Early the next morning Tony called me to see if I could come in a bit earlier. He needed a hand in transporting the bark from TMAG to PW1. The loose pieces of bark were to serve as the “ties” joining together the different bundles. Sheldon was there for the demonstration, as was Jay-Dee Jackson, a twenty-year old Tasmanian Aboriginal man who had been working at TALSC for four years. My role, apart from finding empty rubbish barrels, filling them with water, and putting bark “ties” in said water, was to answer questions and offer some information to passersby.<sup>35</sup> One major point of interest were the yellow safety lanyards used to keep the bundles together whilst the builders shaped and bound them with the more “traditional” bark ties. A flippant response would be that this was simply an example of what Marshall Sahlins calls “the indigenization of modernity” (Sahlins 2000a: 511-514),<sup>36</sup> which it certainly was, but such an

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<sup>34</sup> There was an initiative in 2010 to train more Aboriginal park rangers. Sky Maynard was one of the five (See *The Koori Mail*, December 15, 2010: 33).

<sup>35</sup> In his argument against the “land-bridge theory” of Tasmanian arrival to the southern island, Meston takes issue with the purported primitiveness of the bark canoe being used as evidence against Tasmanian sea travel. He writes: “That the Tasmanians did not possess seaworthy craft is quite erroneous. Primitive though their bark-bundle canoes were, they voyaged regularly to the islands which fringe our coasts, crossing not only sheltered waterways, but facing the great swell which perpetually rolls in from the Southern Ocean, or the steep ugly seas and racing tides which guard the islands at the western end of Bass Strait. Nor did they always wait for calm weather. They have been seen, for instance, to visit the Mattsuyker (sic.) Islands, off our southern coast, in the midst of a storm” (Meston 1937: 91). While the “land bridge theory” eventually won this battle, Meston’s comments support the seaworthiness of the Tasmanian bark canoe. Interestingly, I essentially spent the duration of the Wooden Boat Festival parroting his sentiments in order to counteract lingering primitivism amongst many visitors to our stall.

<sup>36</sup> One of Sahlins’s main examples is that of the North America’s “northern hunters,” whose “subsistence is dependent on modern means of production, transportation, and communication—rifles, snow machines, motorized vehicles, and, at least in North America, CB radios and all-terrain vehicles—which means of existence they generally acquire by monetary purchases, which money they have acquired in a variety of ways, ranging from public transfer payments and resource royalties to wage labor and commercial fishing” (Sahlins 2000a: 508). Sahlins gives examples of how they are dominated by, but also dominate,

explanation would mean little to visitors who remained fixated on potential discrepancy. Countless people asked about them, with many jokingly asking, “Are those traditional?” This statement reflects a deeper assumption of what are (and equally importantly, what are not)



Figure 4.4. Canoe construction at the Wooden Boat Festival. (Photo taken by author)

traditional Aboriginal tools. Another common question was whether the canoe would actually float (“will it float?”), and people were regularly surprised to hear that the recently constructed canoes had been “test-driven” a number of times, in one instance traveling to Bruny Island from nearby Kettering. In general, people were quite interested to learn about the bark canoe, and the demonstration of the process, and its visibility, arguably served to validate (and authenticate) its existence.

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the capitalist modes of dominations, “simply making the point that the Eskimo are still there—and still Eskimo” (Sahlins 2000a: 509).

During the festival there was an unspoken agreement between Tony and myself to frame our answers in a particular manner. Tense was a major dialogic concern, seeing it was critical to discursively bridge the gap between past and present by making it clear canoes were still being made, even if it had only been for about four years at that point. For example, rather than say, “They used to make ones to sit five to six people,” I would often find myself saying, “They make ones to sit five to six people.” It was critical to present the practice as living rather than lost, which itself was a discursive move that closed rather than opened gaps.

The revitalization of Tasmanian Aboriginal material culture, with the significant exception of the bark canoes, is almost exclusively matriarchal, for most of the practices are “women’s business.” As the conduit through which the Islander populations have passed down their Aboriginality (both genetically and culturally), the Tasmanian Aboriginal wives of sealers (as well as Fanny Cochrane Smith and Dalrymple Briggs) serve as figurative links between two distinct eras. Regarding the role of Tasmanian Aboriginal women in connecting the past with the present, Patsy Cameron writes:

we are a product of our history. The past determines the future. In Tasmania, the surviving Pallawah<sup>37</sup> women became the sole custodians of our cultures, stories and spirituality. They ensured the continuity of our race, because, without tribal male input, only they remained to carry on the traditions... It was the knowledge and sheer tenacity of women like these that contributed to the economic and socio-cultural maintenance, adaptation and survival of the Aboriginal communities in the Bass Strait Islands and isolated pockets of the mainland (Cameron 1994: 65-66).<sup>38</sup>

The one Tasmanian Aboriginal practice of unbroken antiquity is shell-stringing, and as such it has come to symbolize the (often willed) connection between the *before* and *after* of British settlement and the subsequent destruction of Tasmanian tribal society. For example, a string of

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<sup>37</sup> This is one of a few names for the overall community, and is discussed in Chapter Five.

<sup>38</sup> See also Matson-Green 1994 for a discussion of particular individual women and the part they have played in the maintenance and propagation of contemporary Tasmanian Aboriginal culture.



shells line the walls of *ningina tunapri*, powerfully representing the continuity of Tasmanian Aboriginality. While the use of shells is close to a human universal (see Smail, Stiner and Earle 2011), the type of shell employed in *ningina tunapri*, the maireener shell, is often given as the source of Tasmanian Aboriginal shell-stringing's uniqueness. Patsy Cameron continues: "The ancient cultural tradition of the stringing of beautiful and delicate shells into necklaces is also continued through our women. These processes of collecting, preparation and production are still handed down from mother to daughter, from auntie to niece" (Cameron 1994: 66). There are also, however, some disagreements over what are, and what are not, the "proper ways" to style Tasmanian Aboriginal shell necklaces.

Using nineteenth century paintings and descriptions as our guide, it appears that shell necklaces during the tribal period consisted almost exclusively of wondrously luminous maireener shells. This style is depicted in many of Thomas Bock's portraits from the 1830s as well as photographs of both Truganini and Fanny Cochrane Smith. In recounting his 1872 voyage to the islands, Canon Brownrigg comments how

at very low tides, among the seaweed the Mariner shell is obtained. Considerable inconvenience and trouble are often experienced in procuring and preparing these little shells for sale. When carefully prepared and strung together they form a very pretty ornament, and on account of their beauty, are much valued and sought for (Murray-Smith 1979: 9).

In 1908 the continuing production of these necklaces stirred the interest of Henry D. Baker, then the American Consul at Hobart, who wrote the *Launceston Examiner* expressing its potential trade value with the United States. In an extract from the daily *Consular and Trade Reports*, Baker wrote that

The shells which are used for the stringing of necklaces for this export trade are known locally as the 'mariners' shell,' of which there is a green and a blue variety of many different sizes, varying from about one-fourth to one-half inch long, the width being about half the length, and the shape that of a cornucopia. They are

found among the seaweed at low tide, around the south and east coasts of Tasmania, and among the Furneaux group of islands in Bass Strait, to the north-east of Tasmania (*The Examiner*, September 14, 1908: 7).

While tacitly referring to non-Aboriginal stringers, Baker does foreground the participation of Bass Strait Islanders, as well as the use of differing varieties of shells. He continues:

[The shells] of the Furneaux Group are apparently of good quality, and when properly cleansed make very attractive necklaces. In these islands the work of gathering and stringing the shells is performed mostly by half-caste women and children. On a recent visit to this group I found a number of attractive varieties of shell necklaces, which are very little known to the Hobart trade. They were made up from shells known locally as ‘penguins,’ ‘toothies,’ ‘cats’ teeth,’ ‘rice’ shells, ‘feather’ shells, and ‘painted ladies’ (*The Examiner*, September 14, 1908: 7).

This article indicates the coexistence of two different styles of shell-stringing, one that harkens back to the tribal period and one that has come to epitomize the “Cape Barren Way.” In 2010 the ABC<sup>39</sup> program, *Message Stick*, aired an episode focusing on stringing on Cape Barren Island, entitled *The Stringers of Cape Barren Island*.<sup>40</sup> The program is organized around three Tasmanian Aboriginal elders, Gloria Templar, Dorothy Murray, and Nola Hooper, and the need to “pass on” the practice to the purportedly uninterested younger generation, as represented by Gabrielle Gunderson. In describing the various procedures of shell stringing, Dorothy Murray presents a clear separation (and comparative valuation) of the community’s differing styles, stating, rather derisively, that: “Those women that are selling the maireeners, making the whole strings of maireeners, that wasn’t something that our family did. Theirs was the rye shell and you put the other different ones in with them, I suppose, to pretty them up. You’d never see any of them with one big string of maireeners. So those women that are doing that today did not do their culture on Cape Barren Island” (*Message Stick* Program). This latter sentiment, that the

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<sup>39</sup> The Australian Broadcasting Corporation, affectionately known as “Auntie,” is Australia’s national television network.

<sup>40</sup> The video is not available on the ABC website, but the transcript can be found at: <http://www.abc.net.au/tv/messagestick/stories/s2955870.htm>. Accessed March 30, 2014.

alternative style is not “the way things are done on Cape Barren Island,” is a discursive act of marginalization intended to promote the Cape Barren Island “style” as the standard by which all others are to be judged and (e)valuated. In a meaningful way, this elevation of the Cape Barren stringing style as “the way” mirrors the manner in which the island itself has been presented as the center (*homeland*) of Tasmanian Aboriginality (as discussed in Chapter Three).<sup>41</sup> The most valuable point here, in terms of cross-cultural analysis, is the style that links back to pre-contact tribal society (the much sought after, and legislatively legitimating *time immemorial*) is, in many sectors and often quite publicly, devalued at the expense of an alternate style whose very institution is the result of forced dislocation and culture-loss.

There is an endemic sentiment, one that is unfortunately common among indigenous peoples the world over, that Tasmanian Aboriginal shell-stringing is “dying” and therefore in need of preservation.<sup>42</sup> Preservation in Australia (and elsewhere) commonly manifests itself in the form of governmental projects and programs, with a recent shell program taking place in 2011. This project, titled *luna tunapri*, was funded by Arts Tasmania, organized and run through TMAG, and was “aimed at helping to continue the traditional craft of shell stringing, as well as providing mentoring and assistance for makers to create opportunities to develop their craft” (*luna tunapri* Forum Project Brief). The foundations for this program were four workshops held

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<sup>41</sup> Further complicating matters is that many of the prominent stringers who make maireener necklaces have clear ties to the Bass Strait Islands, and some of the resentment may stem from the fact that many identify with Flinders Island more than with Cape Barren Island. One member of a family of prominent stringers told me that she felt that the comments in the *Message Stick* program were an attack on her mother and family.

<sup>42</sup> The narrator of the *Message Stick* program under discussion dramatically states that: “Sadly, the future for this age-old tradition appears to be as fragile as the tiny delicate shells Gaby is being taught to string” (*Message Stick* program). Another example is a 1991 *Mercury* article, entitled “Joan is vital link for a dying art.” The Joan in question is Joan Brown, Tony Brown’s mother, who “grew up on Cape Barren Island and, apart from secondary schooling in Launceston and eight years on Flinders Island after she married, has lived on Cape Barren all her life.” The article positions Joan as “one of a small number of Aboriginal women who keep the Tasmanian Aboriginal tradition alive” (*The Mercury*, December 4, 1991: 1). While Joan Brown has since sadly passed away, a few of her masterful shell necklaces are on display in *ningina tunapri* at TMAG in Hobart.

in various locations across the state, during which “a total of 18 Aboriginal women learnt the basics of shell stringing from three highly respected shell stringers; from where, when and how to collect—to how to clean, sort, process and string the shells. By the end of the final workshop all participants had accomplished stringing a bracelet—many also finished their first necklace, with some enthusiastic women finishing numerous pieces” (*luna tunapri* Forum Project Brief). Arts Tasmania’s Aboriginal Arts Advisory Committee as well as TMAG’s Aboriginal Advisory Council endorsed the project and the organizers consulted with nine senior shell necklace makers. The locations for the five-day workshops, particularly those in the north, south, and northwest, were “aimed at Aboriginal women whose families originated from that area, and whose families have been unable to continue the tradition” (*luna tunapri* Final Report 2012: 3), therefore covering the Islanders as well as Dalrymple Briggs’ and Fanny Cochrane Smith’s respective “mobs.” Zoe Rimmer, TMAG’s RICP<sup>43</sup> Officer and *luna tunapri*’s organizer (not to mention a Tasmanian Aboriginal woman) communicated to me:

The benefits for this type of project in terms of cultural preservation are obvious, but one of the surprising things to come from it was the mutual learning between elders (shell stringing tutors) and the participants. Many of the participants have discovered new collecting beaches in their local areas, meaning that people do not have to go to the Bass Strait Islands and put pressure on these well-known spots (personal communication).

While today shell necklaces are the domain of women (in both manufacture and personal adornment), there are visual depictions (from the aforementioned Baudin expedition) of young Aboriginal men wearing necklaces made exclusively out of a larger type of maireener shell, specifically the “king” variety.<sup>44</sup> The king maireener shell shares the luminescence of its smaller

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<sup>43</sup> RICP stands for “Return of Indigenous Cultural Property” program. It is Australia’s version of NAGPRA in the United States, with which it shares many similarities as well as differences.

<sup>44</sup> The most famous painting depicting this style of necklace is by Nicolas Petit and can be seen in Bonnemains, Forsyth and Smith 1988: 151.

counterparts, and its locations have been hard to come by. However, as Zoe wrote me, one of the most exciting community benefits of the project was how

some of the women have rediscovered spots to collect king marina shells (men wearing these shells were depicted by the early French explorers). And I can't wait to see some of the pieces that the ladies will make with these shells. So it is both preservation of culture through facilitating handing down of knowledge but also revitalisation of the use of king marinas and shells found on mainland [Tasmania] into both traditional and contemporary pieces (personal communication).

### ***Shell Collection and Practice-Based Culture***

As it exists within the (very real) territory of “women’s business,” I did not feel it was appropriate for a male anthropologist like myself to impose too heavily into various processes and aspects of revitalized (and preserved) practices like shell stringing. This is the central reason why I did not take part in *luna tunapri*, even though the majority of the project overlapped with my dissertation fieldwork. Although I didn't have any first-hand experience with the project I did have many conversations about the program with Zoe Rimmer, Tony Brown, and a handful of its participants. Having said that, when I was invited to events I generally accepted without reservation. One such event was collecting shells on Bruny Island with two community elders, Verna Nichols and Leonie Dickson. The day in question was Saturday, May 22, 2010. While I met these sisters in 2008 during workshops for the *tayenebe* fibre project, I really got to know them, and vice versa, while lending a hand with community-led education programs at TMAG in 2010 and 2011. Toward the end of the year's sessions Verna and Leonie invited me to join them in collecting shells on an upcoming Saturday. I leapt at the opportunity, and made it clear that I would certainly “earn my keep,” to which they intimated that that was their expectation (“you better”).

I arose early on the Saturday and was out the door at 6:50am in order to get to our arranged pick-up point, the Shipwright Arms Hotel and Pub. To combat Tassie's chilly May weather I was ensconced in thermals, both top and bottoms, wool socks and trail shoes. A couple minutes after seven a lone car, a white SUV, drove up the skinny Battery Point road. I loaded my bag in the back and we headed to Kettering to catch the 7:45am ferry over to Bruny Island. Verna and Leonie were both visibly excited, passing the time by exchanging ideas about future art projects. They said they had been making baskets for about fifteen years and had "always dabbled" but only really started properly working with shells over "the past few years" (personal communication). After the short ferry ride and the drive to the southern portion of the island (past the rookeries and the Truganini Memorial) we arrived at the selected beach for the day's collecting.<sup>45</sup> The sun was just establishing its presence above the gorgeous Bruny coastline, dotted with gorgeous green eucalyptus trees and rocky beaches. The rationale behind such an early start is that the peak time for collecting shells is at low tide, and the sisters had checked the tidal patterns well in advance to help plan the excursion. I helped carry the bag of materials and tools to the beach as the sisters put on what amounted to fishing gear; rubber wading pants that extended up to their upper torsos and tied behind their necks, with boots attached. At this moment I felt wildly underdressed. Verna and Leonie commenced to actively scour tidal pools and shallow waters, often with water up to their waists and (more often than not) with cigarettes hanging out of their mouths. It was truly amazing to see these two women in their sixth decade of life be so driven in their pursuit. I helped as best I could, but without water-resistant pants I was restricted to smaller pools and low-tide areas, but I found a fair amount of shells early on in

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<sup>45</sup> Knowledge of prime collecting areas is often private and kept secret. This is the reason why I am not providing any more concrete details regarding the location we visited on Bruny Island. In fact, I was put in an awkward position after this event, as I was asked where we had collected by one of the organizers of *luna tunapri*. They were trying to find spots for the upcoming workshop in the south. Rightly or wrongly, I did not feel it was my place to divulge the location, and I directed them to talk to Verna and Leonie.

a good spot. Their strategy was to put large amounts of sand into a plastic basket and then sift its contents either in or out of water. This tactic yielded many shells, and from there the goal was to put the maireeners into a separate container. Verna said I would get better once I “got my eyes in,” and I like to think I did. We got started at 8:30 and when I finally looked at my watch two hours had passed. The weather turned out pretty good, nice and sunny, but a bit cool. We finished at around 1:30 after a lot of work and collecting lots of shells. On the drive back to the ferry they gave me a gift to thank me for helping with the education programs. Along with a basket made out of kelp, they kindly gave me a kelp water carrier they had made in the recently consolidated “new style.” The return ferry ride was a quiet one, as the sisters caught some sleep after a hard day’s work.



Figure 4.5. Shell collecting. (Photo taken by author)

## *Dormancy and Irretrievable Loss*

OLIVIA

*Stay. I prithee, tell me what thou think'st of me.*

VIOLA

*That you do think you are not what you are.*

OLIVIA

*If I think so, I think the same of you.*

VIOLA

*Then think you right. I am not what I am.*

OLIVIA

*I would you were as I would have you be.*

*(Twelfth Night Act 3 Scene 1) (Shakespeare 1993: 335-336)*

Far from exemplifying continuity into *time immemorial*, the practices I have discussed are defined by their historicity and garner their value against a backdrop of loss and destruction. However, in order to understand how revitalization operates in Tasmania it is important to interrogate how race and culture operate in that context.<sup>46</sup> My reactions to the *Mathinna* production, for example, were not shared by many of the community members I talked to afterwards. My pre-occupation with race and racial thinking, due to conditioning both inside and outside of academia, made me ruminate on appearance and the foregrounded gap between past and present Tasmanian Aboriginal people. That many community members did not share this concern highlights the ways in which the Tasmanian Aboriginal people have made absence part of who they are. Phenotypic variability for instance, is an accepted fact, if not an embraced one, for contemporary Tasmanian Aboriginal people. There were countless moments, during exhibition talks, education programs, and informal chats, where community elders would say something along the lines of “some of us have darker skin, like myself, and some have blonde hair and blue eyes. But we are all Tasmanian Aboriginals.” One specific example comes from a

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<sup>46</sup> See Trouillot 2003c for an insightful reflection on the relationship between culture and race, as well as the remaining potential utility of the former concept. In this piece Trouillot notes how following its historicization, “the North American trajectory of the concept of culture seems to offer a contradiction. The kernel of the conceptualization teaches fundamental lessons about humanity that were not as clearly stated before its deployment and that cannot be easily unlearned. Yet the deployment of the world ‘culture’ today, while evoking this conceptual kernel, carries an essentialist and often racialist agenda outside and within the United States” (Trouillot 2003c: 98-99).



community-led education program involving stone tools and shells. The sessions always began with a PowerPoint presentation (often referred to as “the talk”) and one of the younger Aboriginal educators, perhaps feeling a bit nervous about it, jokingly said that he and I could change shirts and that I, with my fair skin and substantial freckles, could give the talk in his place.<sup>47</sup> These sentiments are partially idealizations but also home truths. In a social/ ethnic group defined by gaps and breaks, the genetic distance to “pure-blooded” tribal ancestors is a gap that cannot be overcome or filled. Within this logic, revitalized culture can be imagined as compensation for outward shortcomings, as a gap that can be traversed and closed.

Regina Bendix notes how the “quest for authenticity is a peculiar longing, at once modern and antimodern. It is oriented toward the recovery of an essence whose loss has been realized only through modernity, and whose recovery is feasible only through methods and sentiments created in modernity” (Bendix 1997: 8). Bendix’s insights help make sense of the contradictory discourses surrounding cultural revitalization in Tasmania. As discussed, many cultural practices and objects of material production were “lost” and their historical documentation was scant and necessarily incomplete. Although they are defined by their very need to be brought back, there is a widespread discourse amongst practitioners that these objects (and the knowledge behind them) were never truly gone but were merely sleeping or lying dormant within their personal biology. This “naturalization of culture and tradition,” namely the mindset that “both are ‘in the blood’ of individuals, whose culturally unique traditions are thus natural to them” (Handler and Linnekin 1984: 278), is common amongst ethnic groups the world over. Nonetheless, the extent of work done by “blood” in the Tasmanian case, namely bridging unbridgeable gaps, perhaps makes it unique. By referencing an internal essence that has

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<sup>47</sup> One distinguishing article of clothing was Palawa Education Corporation polo shirts worn by the community members.

remained pure in spite of temporal distance and biological dilution (the black coffee that is imagined to remain coffee regardless of how much cream is added), the Tasmanian Aboriginal community is able to acknowledge rupture/ loss *as well as* demonstrate an internal continuity that is enacted through bark canoes, kelp water carriers, and fibre baskets. The terminology is enlightening in this regard. Commonwealth programs are labeled as “cultural retrieval programs,” and culture-workers speak extensively about the “re-birth” and the “awakening” of an internal (and deeply personal) dormant ability/essence that was “resting” in anticipation of the “right time” to be “re-activated.” It is because of such logic that exhibitions featuring newly activated practices can, entirely un-ironically, have names like *rrala manta manta*, which translates into “strong; long way, long time.”<sup>48</sup> This willed connection to the ancestors is an effort to interpellate a continuity and historical depth that has not always been visible. While revitalization efforts do strive to mirror styles and methods of the “old people,” many projects involve utilizing traditional cultural materials in new and innovative ways. In this sense, adhering to tradition has counter-intuitively served to liberate people’s imaginations and artistic sensibilities. In *rrala manta manta*, for example, baskets lined with maireener and black crow shells, a kelp satchel, and an art installation consisting of a video package and kelp hanging from the ceiling, were positioned alongside “traditional” baskets and bark canoes. Far from being hollow vessels devoid of meaning, these objects draw their value from connecting the past with the present, and the outside with the inside.

By professing the possession of an unchanged, passed down, internal essence the Tasmanian Aboriginal people strive to fill a cultural gap that was severed by British colonialism and dispossession. There are, nevertheless, limits on what can be re-claimed. A great deal of pre-

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<sup>48</sup> This exhibition was held at the Design Centre in Launceston, Tasmania in 2010. The blog about the exhibition can be found at: <http://rralamantamanta.wordpress.com>. Accessed March 28, 2014.

contact tribal society is irretrievably lost and gone forever, from religious cosmology, to the cultural meaning of bodily adornment (such as cicatrices<sup>49</sup>), to more utilitarian aspects of material culture. Regarding the latter, much is forever lost regarding the bark canoes, to name but one example. Tony Brown and I spent the Wooden Boat Festival telling people that we simply do not know how people rode the canoes (sitting or standing), how many at a time, or whether they were predominantly paddled with sticks and similar instruments or by hand. As they have done for many decades now, the community is making due with what they have at hand. In fact, a strong argument can be made that the guess-work intrinsic within the process of re-articulation ferments innovation and cultural free-styling, thereby re-defining what it means to be a *practicing* Tasmanian Aboriginal person. This is similar to one way in which “tradition” has been emphasized in land-related cases in Australia, as Merlan theorizes. This emphasis “allows for some change in the nature of particular social objects but attributes constancy to underlying social processes” (Merlan 2006: 88). As Tasmanian Aboriginal artist Julie Gough writes,

It is entirely appropriate that our community both revere and rework our cultural past, especially when, in some cases, practices have continued to the present day uninterrupted. When Aboriginal artists in Tasmania connect to the past by means of creatively rendering what was as what still is, it is an embarkation on a storytelling journey of affirmation and connectedness with the materials, ancestry and land that is inherently ours (Gough 1997: 115).

### ***Concluding Thoughts: Process and the Invention of Tradition***

*We are living our culture and learning our culture.*  
-Tony Brown, ningina tunapri gallery talk 6/22/2010

One trendy area of anthropological research during the 1980s and early 1990s was the study of “invented traditions,” with an emphasis on *kastom* in the Pacific. The impetus for this

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<sup>49</sup> During the *ballawinne* education program the students were shown one of Petit’s paintings depicting a young man with red ochre in his hair and significant cicatrices (scarification) across his chest. The community leaders routinely commented on the fact that they did not know the meaning of such markings, often saying, “We lost all that.”

scholarship was an edited volume by two historians, Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), in which the authors sought to show how cultural practices of purported antiquity were actually recent creations. While their focus was ostensibly on the role these practices played in the esteem of the nation and the propagation of nationalist sentiments, anthropologists tended to apply such insights to disenfranchised and colonized ethnic groups.<sup>50</sup> While tradition “is now understood quite literally to be an invention designed to serve contemporary purposes” (Hanson 1989: 890), there often remained a tacit dichotomy of “real” custom and fake *kastom*. As Margaret Jolly writes, even in cases “where ‘real custom’ is not essentialized or eternalized, authenticity can be equated with unself-consciousness” (Jolly 1992: 50), adding that while Hobsbawm is careful “not to essentialize and eternalize traditional societies, he does draw a distinction between unself-conscious customs perpetuated by natural communities, such as villages, and self-conscious traditions invented by unnatural ones, namely nations and states” (Jolly 1992: 52). Following vehement and vitriolic responses from native scholars, this area of study devolved into debates over who had the right to talk about their culture in such a manner.<sup>51</sup> My argument has paid minimal attention to this corpus for I feel it fails to address what is happening in Tasmania in a productive manner, nor would its intellectual baggage be beneficial to the present argument. That being said, it is valuable to remember one of the major criticisms of *kastom* scholarship is that it often framed the re-establishment of older

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<sup>50</sup> See Babadzan 1988; Hanson 1989; Keesing 1989; and Linnekin 1983, 1992.

<sup>51</sup> One example is the exchanges between Haunani-Kay Trask and Roger Keesing over the latter’s article about invented traditions in Hawaii (Keesing 1989). Trask argues “Keesing’s peevishness has a predictably familiar target: Native nationalists—from Australia and New Zealand through the Solomons and New Caledonia to Hawai’i. The problem? These disillusioned souls idealize their pasts for the purpose of political mythmaking in the present. Worse, they are so unoriginal (and by implication, unfamiliar with what Keesing calls their ‘real’ pasts) as to concoct their myths out of Western categories and values despite their virulent opposition to same” (Trask 1991: 159). For interrogations of these hostilities see Linnekin 1991 and Munro 1994, and Keesing 1991 for his response to Trask.

practices, such as *hula*, as consciously political and therefore not culturally organic.<sup>52</sup> It should be noted that cultural revitalization in Tasmania is assuredly political, but to portray it as *just that* obfuscates the value it provides to individual practitioners as well as the collective whole.

Viewed in its entirety, Tasmanian Aboriginal cultural revitalization is simultaneously forward-looking and historically-driven, with numerous people expressing the sentiment that the revival of lost culture has led to a stronger and more confident community. Contemporary cultural practices, both maintained and re-started, epitomize the tension between demonstrating continuity and acknowledging rupture. The Tasmanian Aboriginal presence is growing, slowly but surely. As a marker of continuity, the bark canoe built at the Wooden Boat Festival was commissioned to be part of a new cultural walk at Melaleuca in Tasmania's southwest. The Needwonnee Walk, a collaboration between Parks and Wildlife and TALSC, was completed in 2011. Along the walk are baskets, the canoe, and traditional shelters signifying both past and present Aboriginal existence. Like the rest of Tasmanian Aboriginal culture, its meaning is contextual and in a constant state of becoming.

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<sup>52</sup> Babadzan, for example, writes that opposing “the values of *kastom* to those of the West may appear paradoxical on another level: *as a Western criticism of Westernization*” (Babadzan 1988: 206).

## Chapter Five

### *palawa kani* and the Valuing of Language

#### *Introduction*

In March 2013 the Tasmanian State Government unveiled its new naming policy affecting many of the island's landmarks and geographical regions. The appropriately-named Aboriginal and Dual Naming Policy "allows for an Aboriginal and an introduced name to be used together as the official name and for new landmarks to be named according to their Aboriginal heritage" (*The Mercury*, March 14, 2013: 5). Premier Lara Giddings addressed the policy's goals and potential benefits, stating that recognizing "Aboriginal names for Tasmanian features will help preserve and promote Aboriginal language, which has endured thanks to the committed work of the Aboriginal community."<sup>1</sup> Some examples of Aboriginal names gaining formal recognition are *kunanyi* (Mount Wellington), *putalina* (Oyster Cove), *wukalina* (Mount William), and *larapuna* (Bay of Fires). This policy is a major coup for the Tasmanian Aboriginal people for it continues the trend of formal recognition and positive valuation of both the ancestors and the contemporary community. An Op-Ed in the following day's paper echoed this point, with the writer noting how Tasmania "is an ancient land with a deep history of human culture that remains lurking in the landscape around us and within those contemporary Tasmanians whose ancestry dates back thousands of generations here... By using Aboriginal

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<sup>1</sup> This statement is from an ABC radio piece, the text of which can be found at: <http://www.abc.net.au/local/audio/2013/03/13/3714934.htm?site=hobart>. Accessed March 22, 2014.

names we can break through the artificial ‘glass floorboards’ that stop us from reaching down into this island’s rich, deep human history” (*The Mercury*, March 15, 2013: 20).<sup>2</sup>

The new policy further legitimates *palawa kani*, the recently constructed Tasmanian Aboriginal language.<sup>3</sup> In the realm of cultural politics, the possession (and concomitant demonstration/ demonstrability) of a non-majority language is a notable marker of cultural distinction. Such markers are particularly valuable for groups who, like the Tasmanian Aboriginal community, lack many stereotypical indicators of “otherness.”<sup>4</sup> Linguist Terry Crowley remarks how “physical appearance is no longer a reliable guide to ethnic identification” and, as a result, “having a language of your own that is clearly different from that of the English-speaking mainstream in today’s overwhelmingly Anglo-Celtic Tasmania would be a powerful symbol of ethnic distinctiveness” (Crowley 2007: 4). However, the difficulty in doing so lies in the fact that, like the majority of tribal Tasmanian Aboriginal culture, the various languages and dialects were severely disrupted and compromised to the point of alleged death. Concerted efforts over the past few decades to re-claim and revitalize “lost” practices refute ideologies of finality and irrevocable loss (as discussed in Chapter Four). Such revitalization-work is one example of the bridging of gaps (between eras, races, locations) that is inherent in, and formative of, contemporary Tasmanian Aboriginal identity. Re-claimed cultural practices represent

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<sup>2</sup> Tasmania is the final Australian state to implement such a policy. Support of its implementation is at least partially coloured by the successful re-branding of the Northern Territory’s Uluru, formerly Ayers Rock.

<sup>3</sup> “Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre chief executive Heather Sculthorpe said the policy was the start of recognising that Aboriginal languages, palawa-kani, were important. . . ‘History doesn’t start from when the English invaders arrive—we go back 40,000 years,’ she said. ‘This is a fantastic day for us, we have been working on this for decades’” (*The Mercury*, March 14, 2013: 5).

<sup>4</sup> A classic anthropological example is the Québécois in Canada. Richard Handler has written extensively about the ways in which this minority population has worked to distinguish itself from the admittedly similar majority, with language being a central tool towards this end. Handler recounts how, “When asked to specify the elements of Québécois culture, most people immediately mentioned the French language, yet beyond that there was little agreement and even little sense of how to answer the question” (Handler 1988: 36). See also Handler 1985.

connections into antiquity that can be erected (i.e. gaps that can be bridged) and compensate for others, like race and phenotypic appearance, that cannot. Broader (public) acceptance of revitalized languages is often more difficult to obtain compared with other elements of culture, like basket-weaving or shell-stringing, that are viewed as more malleable. Language is commonly imagined as the living, breathing, personification of culture and, as David Crystal writes in his oft-cited *Language Death*, “To say that a language is dead is like saying that a person is dead” (Crystal 2000: 1), and, as for people, language death is final. These sentiments are part of the “language as biological” theme present in language revitalization work, which “represents language as a living organism, where indigenous languages can be discussed in terms of health or well-being” (Meek 2010: 149). Such themes potentially make the work of language revitalization that much harder.

Built within this presumed finality of language death is the concomitant loss of a particular way of thinking and being, namely a cosmology. This sentiment is strong in the words of community leader Jimmy Everett when he writes “Aboriginal history records the loss of our first languages to the English language, affecting Aboriginal identity quite early during the colonising of Tasmania. With the loss of language came the loss of knowledge, changing the way we Aborigines saw the world, and ourselves” (Everett 2005: 397). This statement presents a pop version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis,<sup>5</sup> the crux of which suggests a group’s language, and its component linguistic cultural categories, shape/ make sense of one’s reality. Benjamin Whorf’s most iconic evidence supporting this hypothesis is his comparisons of tense in SAE (Standard Average European) and Hopi linguistic systems, ultimately concluding they reflect very different cosmologies (See Whorf 1956). Relevant to this argument is Whorf’s conceptualization of habitual thought worlds as the “give-and-take between language and culture

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<sup>5</sup> Attributed to Edward Sapir and his student, Benjamin Whorf.



as a whole” (Whorf 1956: 146). As part of a broader (and distinct) cultural system, a “thought world” is “the microcosm that each man carries about within himself, by which he measures and understands what he can of the macrocosm” (Whorf 1956: 146). Following this logic, one’s language provides a unique cosmology or world-view, a cultural lens through which life is filtered.<sup>6</sup> From this perspective, Everett is arguing that the replacement of Tasmanian languages by English resulted in the loss of a unique Tasmanian Aboriginal cosmology. It is this cosmology, and the abstract power that accompanied speaking (and thinking) through Tasmanian Aboriginal language as a first/primary linguistic system, which are potentially lost forever. Consequently, with the exception of race, language is perhaps the ultimate gap to be closed and *palawa kani*, or “Tassie Blackfella Talk,” is the means through which cosmological connections to the past can be enacted. In this light, the monumental importance of formal consecration of *palawa kani*, via the recent naming policy for example, gains clarity. This chapter continues the discussion of cultural revitalization/ preservation by focusing on language as a specific form of revitalization. It also addresses issues surrounding the legitimacy of composite languages and the potential value they can provide for communities like the contemporary Tasmanian Aboriginal people.

### ***Tasmanian Languages: Collectors and Collection***

*Most of the Palawa Kani language had been salvaged thanks, ironically, to the white settlers who recorded how the indigenous people referred to places and objects (The Mercury July 13, 2001: 7).*

Between 1829 and 1859 Lancelot Threkeld, “apothecary, actor, missionary, linguist, humanitarian, coal developer, postal reformer, and Congregational minister” (Carey 2010: 449),

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<sup>6</sup> Regarding French in Quebec, Handler notes, “the idea is widespread that language is the ‘vehicle’ and ‘motor’ of thought, and that a distinctive style of thought and way of interpreting the world is the essence of a culture” (Handler 1988: 160). This is particularly insightful as it relates to a group that is otherwise semi-indistinguishable from the larger majority population and, as a result, language is proof of distinction and validation of difference within the sphere of cultural politics.

undertook a sizeable translation and documentation project. Through his partnership with Biraban,<sup>7</sup> an Aboriginal man from the Lake Macquarie-area of New South Wales, Threkeld translated the Bible into (what has become-known-as) the Awabakal language.<sup>8</sup> This gargantuan effort is peerless in the Australian context and is a testament to perseverance and inter-cultural collaboration. As a project of missionization, however, it was a failure, for “it produced no conversions, supported no ongoing Christian community, and did not appear in print until the language concerned had become extinct” (Carey 2010: 449). This tragic example is insightful, for despite the prevalence of this style of missionization in the Pacific region (and elsewhere)<sup>9</sup> there are few instances of scripture being translated and printed in indigenous Australian languages.<sup>10</sup> This dearth can be partially explained by noting that Australian Aboriginal language documentation was simply not emphasized during the first century of European colonization of the region. When linguistic documentation did take place the native tongues were valued as a tool for religious or cultural conversion (such as Threkeld’s Bible) and not for their own intrinsic worth.

The twentieth century, however, saw the emergence of influential scholars with strong humanitarian streaks that included hints of holism. Alongside W.E.H. Stanner were people like

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<sup>7</sup> “Threkeld’s chief collaborator on the [Bible] project was an Aboriginal man known originally as Johnny McGill or We-pong, and later as Biraban (c. 1800-d. 1846)” (Carey 2010: 450). See footnote #4 on the same page for a more detailed discussion of Biraban’s names etc.

<sup>8</sup> For its publication, Carey argues that Threkeld’s editor, “who had never heard a native speaker use the language, called it ‘Awabakal’ after the Hunter River and Lake Macquarie (HRLM) name for Lake Macquarie (Awaba)” (Carey 2010: 455). The contemporary groups in the region now identify as Ku-ring-gai, Wonnarua, and interestingly, Awabakal (Carey 2010: 456).

<sup>9</sup> One of the most powerful displays at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian in Washington D.C. is that of a menagerie of Bibles translated into a multitude of Native American languages.

<sup>10</sup> “In 1963, the Bible Society catalogued its holdings of scripture translations in the languages of Australia, New Zealand, and the main island groups of the North and South Pacific (Dance 1963). Of the 712 printed scripture translations no more than four were listed from Australia, the earliest being Threkeld’s 1857 revised translation of the Gospel of St. Luke” (Carey 2010: 454). In the 1830s a man named Thomas Wilkinson translated sections of *Genesis* into Tasmanian language (Plomley 1976: 40-43).

A.P. Elkin, whose 1938 ethnography, *The Australian Aborigines*, is a classic in the field of anthropology. In this text Elkin posits the integral connection between language and thought must be the starting point for understanding cultural systems other than one's own. Elkin argues that his evidence suggests

that an Australian language is an adequate means of expressing thought in Aboriginal life. This does not mean that thought processes are expressed by them in the same way as in English, or that a literal translation of their texts is satisfactory. Their languages belong to their own cultural world and the words, phrases and methods of expression derive their meaning from it. The corollary is that knowledge of the language and an understanding of thought, belief and custom must proceed together (Elkin 1964[1938]: 16).

Unfortunately, for many Aboriginal communities such insight came too late to inform documentation/ translation efforts. The situation for the Tasmanian Aboriginal languages is particularly dire for two core reasons. First, widespread cultural disruption had occurred by the 1820s and therefore preceded the proliferation of missionization to (and of) the Antipodes.<sup>11</sup> Second, the Tasmanian's scientific status as "Paleolithic Man," and the wider interest that accompanied it, was consolidated *after* the majority of linguistic and cultural practices had disappeared or fallen into disuse. As a result, by the time the Tasmanians gained prominence in the new discipline of anthropology the purported object of study had essentially already been lost. Linguistic documentation is frequently positioned as the most lacking of all Tasmanian Aboriginal materials within the "missed opportunity" paradigm through which the Tasmanians have historically been defined.<sup>12</sup> The central editor of Tasmanian languages is N.J.B. Plomley, who remarks, "Only about twenty people recorded anything from the Tasmanians concerning

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<sup>11</sup> There were missionaries but their numbers were relatively small prior to The Black War and the opening of the Wybalenna settlement.

<sup>12</sup> According to Plomley, the "lack of opportunity or will to study the Tasmanians is nowhere more apparent than in records of their languages" (Plomley 1976: xiii). Interestingly, language is conspicuous-in-its absence in many of the mid-twentieth century "summaries" of Tasmanian Aboriginal culture, in which well-respected authors like Meston and Wood-Jones barely mention language (particularly curious in the case of Meston).

their languages” (Plomley 1977: 32).<sup>13</sup> What is known of collecting methodologies is scant but illuminating. One example comes from J.W. Walker,<sup>14</sup> A Quaker missionary who gathered vocabulary at Wybalenna in 1832 and described his collecting process in his journal.

Several of the aborigines were invited into the commandant’s hut for the purpose of enabling me to take down a few words as specimens of the language, which I had already commenced doing. The plan I adopted was to point to different objects, which they named, several repeating the word for my better information. At a subsequent period, I uttered the words in the hearing of others with whom I had had no communication on the subject of their language. If these understood my expressions, and pointed to the object the word was intended to represent, I took for granted I had obtained with tolerable accuracy the word used by them for that purpose (cited in Roth 1899[1890]: 179).

Joseph Milligan also collected words at Wybalenna. In the 1850s Milligan was commissioned with compiling a vocabulary of the Tasmanian Aboriginal peoples, for which he employed a methodology similar to Walker’s. In his paper published by the Royal Society, Milligan attempts to assuage any potential critiques of his work:

In order that ethnologists and others interested in the vocabulary of aboriginal dialects referred to may be inclined to place perfect confidence in their accuracy, I have to explain that every word before being written down was singly submitted to a Committee (as it were) of several aborigines, and made thoroughly intelligible to them, when the corresponding word in their language, having been agreed upon by them, was entered. This, of course, was a most tedious method to

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<sup>13</sup> The entire (informative) paragraph reads as follows: “Only about twenty people recorded anything from the Tasmanians concerning their languages. These records begin with Cook’s third expedition to the Pacific, when Surgeon William Anderson listed nine Tasmanian words and their meanings, and David Samwell another three words. The French expeditions recorded long vocabularies, a total of about 85 words by the D’Entrecasteaux expedition and about 120 words by that of Baudin, and both are very valuable contributions to our knowledge. These were the only pre-settlement records of the language, but Robert Brown recorded a short vocabulary at the Derwent in 1804, during the first few months of settlement. During the whole period of settlement only one extensive vocabulary was compiled, that of G.A. Robinson during the years between 1829 and 1834. The other records of this period are useful but not of great value, the outstanding collections being those of Allan Cunningham from the natives at Macquarie Harbour in 1819, J. -P. Gaimard from a Tasmanian woman living with the sealers in 1828, Charles Sterling from the eastern tribes about 1830, Backhouse and Walker from eastern (?) natives at the Flinders Island aboriginal settlement in 1833, and Joseph Milligan from three groups of the tribes at the same settlement in 1844” (Plomley 1977: 32-33). An earlier list of recorders can be found in Roth 1899[1890]: 178.

<sup>14</sup> Walker and James Backhouse were prominent Quaker missionaries and, coincidentally, at one time travelled with Biraban.

pursue, but it was the only plan which gave a fair chance of precision and truthfulness (Milligan 1890[1858]: 7-8).<sup>15</sup>

That Milligan was commissioned such a project in the first place is indicative of the overall quality of gatherers and materials gathered. At the time of his commission *The Mercury* printed a scathing attack on his character questioning his ability and suitability for such a task. The author was shocked to discover the job had been

confided to the former superintendent [at Wybalenna], DR. MILLIGAN, a *quasi* learned man, and supposed to be deep in the Aboriginal dialect of Tasmania; but when this document will be completed, if it ever will, remains to be seen... the very idea of obtaining the required philological information from the miserable remnant of a miserable race, and by such a fop as DR. Milligan is extremely absurd (*The Mercury*, February 20, 1857: 2).

In retrospect, it is ironic that Milligan has proven invaluable to contemporary revitalization efforts, particularly in relation to material culture. In the linguistic realm, on the other hand, the quality and consistency of his vocabularies are routinely called into question.<sup>16</sup>

Before addressing the linguistic elements that were collected, it is informative to first take a deeper look into the backgrounds of the collectors themselves. In doing so, the most critical factor to keep in mind is that, apart from the early explorers (whose visits were short), the documentarians of Tasmanian languages were mostly laypeople void of formal training and “scientific” expertise. This may help explain their lack of interest in recording Tasmanian Aboriginal concepts or understandings of their cultural-world, as reflected in their linguistic

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<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, and perhaps the result of inattention more than anything else, Milligan continues: “On being completed the manuscript was laid aside for two or three years, when it was again submitted, *verbatim* and *seriatim*, to a circle of aborigines for their remarks, —a revision which led to the discovery and correction of numerous blunders originating in misapprehension, on the part of the aborigines in the first place, of the true meaning of words which they had been required to translate” (Milligan 1890[1858]: 8).

<sup>16</sup> Plomley, for example, concludes “Milligan failed to record anything of much use, and his vocabulary is only superficially impressive: it is cluttered with unperceived synonyms and shows an inability to differentiate between variants of a common usage and the original dialects which he thought he was recording” (Plomley 1976: 4).

systems.<sup>17</sup> In this respect, the documentation of Tasmanian Aboriginal languages was filtered through a European (cultural) lens, with the various collectors sharing a collection ideology that emphasized the translation of Aboriginal content into English/ European concepts and categories rather than the opposite. Simply put, “we are quite ignorant of the range of aboriginal thought because so few topics were explored in conversing with them” (Plomley 1976: xiv). This “failure of the European recorders to ask appropriate questions” (Plomley 1976: 32) is a major reason why a full understanding of tribal Tasmanian Aboriginal cosmologies is impossible.

### ***Tasmanian Languages: Caveats and Conclusions***

*Many of my readers have possibly never heard of Truganini. Some of you may have heard of her, but you may know little of her life. But I want to begin this volume by asking, ‘What could Truganini have taught us?’ (Crowley 2007: 1).*

I have argued language is possibly one of the greatest gaps defining Aboriginal Tasmania. This statement gains further validity in light of the available tools, namely the *what* of historic Tasmanian Aboriginal languages and dialects, with which *palawa kani* has been constructed. Plomley finds that all records “suffer from two defects, a failure to sample from all the tribes who inhabited the island and a failure to deal with any but a limited range of topics” (Plomley 1976: xiii). The records likewise share two potentially fatal flaws, one typological and one temporal. First, the *type* of information is almost exclusively limited to word-lists, with minimal data about grammar or sentence structure.<sup>18</sup> Without sufficient grammatical

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<sup>17</sup> Regarding the original collectors, Plomley surmises that “With the accumulation of this mass of material, problems concerning its classification were seen to be very important, and it became clear that they concerned the aboriginal words as much as the meanings assigned to them by the recorders” (Plomley 1976: xiii). In a separate publication, Plomley makes a complimentary point, writing that the “Tasmanian languages were not written but entirely verbal. In consequence our only records of them are transliterations by Europeans who had contact with the aborigines, or who repeated their evaluations of the aboriginal words to others who recorded them at second hand. None of the few aborigines who learnt to write English is known to have recorded anything of their native languages” (Plomley 1977: 31).

<sup>18</sup> “There is a good deal of vocabulary, but only a little sentence material and a few songs” (Plomley 1976: 33). Linguists Crowley and Dixon make a similar point when they write that “Almost all the

documentation, there are very real limitations placed on what can be done in terms of language revival. Second, the word lists cover a period of at least fifty years, during which time the languages would have changed both naturally<sup>19</sup> and as a result of death and forced relocation.

Regarding the latter point, Plomley writes:

it must be emphasised that the Tasmanian language was not a static collection of vocabulary, or even of grammar, but was subject to change, this being extremely rapid from the time of first contact with Europeans... Once contact had been made with Europeans, language change seems to have been rapid, involving vocabulary at first and later even grammar. Among the tribes two types of change occurred, one the use of new words and the other the adoption of the whole or part of the language of another tribe (Plomley 1976: xiv).

With this in mind, it is clear that the materials collected at different points in time, even if they were attributed to the same tribe or region, reflect variant forms of the same “language.” Another complicating factor is that the spelling and notational systems employed by the various collectors lacked uniformity and consistency. This has made comparison across collectors a very cumbersome task.

Faced with these constraints, when linguists have made any (often tentative) conclusions about the Tasmanian languages they do so with many caveats and reservations. In 1981 Terry Crowley and R.M.W. Dixon published an influential chapter on *Tasmanian* in the second volume of the *Handbook of Australian Languages*. In general, Crowley and Dixon believe linguistic standards need to be adjusted in this particular case, for the “material on Tasmanian is so poor

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Tasmanian material consists of simple word lists, sometimes indicating the part of Tasmania an item comes from and sometimes omitting this information” (Crowley and Dixon 1981: 399). The latter authors also surmise that many of the translations that do exist were likely “translated word by word from English: little about the structure of Tasmanian can be inferred from it” (Crowley and Dixon 1981: 399). The only audio in existence are the recordings of Fanny Cochrane Smith made on Edison wax cylinders and recorded by Horace Watson in 1899 and 1903. There is also evidence that some language “lingered” amongst the islander populations, and elsewhere. See Crowley 1993: 66-67 for a brief summary.

<sup>19</sup> “It is well known that language changes with time, and it would be difficult to conceive of any situation where language remained static in a living people. There is no reason to think the Tasmanians an exception to this” (Plomley 1977: 32).

that almost nothing can be inferred with any degree of confidence. Standards that are applied to work on other language families tend to be relaxed when scholars approach Tasmanian, so that speculation becomes the order of the day” (Crowley and Dixon 1981: 420). Relying heavily on the materials consolidated in Plomley’s *Word-List*, Crowley and Dixon conducted lexical comparisons of Tasmania’s different tribal regions and, in finding points of overlap or divergence, speculated on the number of tribal languages and dialects.<sup>20</sup> Based on their research they conclude “there were probably at least eight distinct languages in Tasmania. There may have been considerably more... It is possible – although perhaps not likely – that there could have been as many as twelve (or even fourteen?) languages” (Crowley and Dixon 1981: 404).<sup>21</sup> In general, words in the east and northeast languages, for which the most material was collected, begin with consonants and end in vowels, while words in the western languages, for which material is scarce, almost always end in consonants. This led to some interesting encounters at Wybalenna when people from different tribal regions and mutually unintelligible language systems were shunted together. The *lingua franca* that emerged is integral to the understanding of contemporary *palawa kani* and will be discussed shortly. Linguists have had difficulty drawing any conclusions regarding ancestral relations with other language families, most notably mainland languages. Crowley and Dixon, for example, propose the “best summary is, perhaps, to

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<sup>20</sup> The methodology of this comparison, and the grounds for concluding groups as part of a single language, as “two distinct languages which are closely genetically related,” “probably not closely related, but have come into contact relatively recently,” or “not possible to draw any conclusions,” can be found on Crowley and Dixon 1981: 401. Prior to stating their conclusions, the authors provide an additional caveat, stating “The number of words which can be compared is so small that we would hesitate to hazard *any* conclusions if we were not dealing with so difficult and obscure a situation as that in Tasmania” (Crowley and Dixon 1981: 401).

<sup>21</sup> The eight languages consist of: 1) Oyster Bay, Big River, Little Swanport, 2) South-eastern, 3) Piper River, Cape Portland, Ben Lomond, Northern, 4) North Midlands, 5) Port Sorell, 6) North-western, Robbins’ Island, Circular Head, 7) South-western, and 8) Macquarie Harbour (Crowley and Dixon 1981: 403). A recent publication by Bovern concludes that there were twelve distinct languages in pre-colonial Tasmania (Bovern 2012).



say that there is *no* evidence that some or all of the Tasmanian languages are *not* ultimately related to the Australian language family” (Crowley and Dixon 1981: 420). In summary, the quality and consistency of linguistic materials are severely lacking. However, as with many projects of revitalization in Tasmania, ingenious individuals and groups have successfully made the most of limited historical resources.

### ***Palawa kani: Process and Officialization***

*The main thing is you gotta get that whitefella out of your head when you are doing this stuff.*  
-Theresa Sainty, Aboriginal Language Consultant for palawa kani Languages Program, Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre

In *Language Death*, David Crystal notes a “language is said to be dead when no one speaks it anymore. It may continue to have existence in a recorded form, of course—traditionally in writing, more recently as part of a sound or video archive (and it does in a sense ‘live on’ in this way)—but unless it has fluent speakers one would not talk of it as a ‘living language’” (Crystal 2000: 11). This sentiment gestures towards the fundamental hurdle to negotiate in language revitalization work, namely the stigma of death and finality in cases where language-use essentially ceased. One discursive strategy employed to counteract this particular stigma is to classify such cases as “sleeping” rather than “dead” languages (See Hinton 2001: 413). That the Tasmanian Aboriginal people employ this framing device with regards to their languages is entirely consistent with what I have written to this point, as it reflects the discourses of dormancy (pure essences) and innate cultural knowledge discussed in Chapter Four.<sup>22</sup>

*Palawa kani* is an example of a sleeping language awakened from the edges of irretrievability. It is not without contemporaries, however, with Cornish, Miami (the language of the Miami Nation), Hawaiian, and most notably, Hebrew, being major instances of language

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<sup>22</sup> “We’d rather not call them lost languages, we prefer to see them as sleeping languages” (Gaye Brown, as quoted in *The Sunday Tasmanian*, July 20, 2003: 15).

revitalization and return.<sup>23</sup> An additional point of comparison are the Wampanoag peoples of coastal Massachusetts, whose language was revived in large part by tribal member Jessie Little Doe Baird's Masters Thesis in Linguistics at MIT.<sup>24</sup> The *palawa kani* Language Program started in 1992 as part of a larger commonwealth-funded Language Retrieval Program. The Australian Federal Government's interest in the maintenance and revitalization of its multitude of indigenous languages reflected a broader global effort that included new programs at the national and inter-national levels. The latter projects were undertaken by organizations like UNESCO. A 1992 *Mercury* article quotes Vicki Matson-Green, then-president of the Tasmanian Aboriginal language retrieval management committee, as saying: "The decimation of our tribes during the early 1800s meant that most of the spoken language was replaced by English... Research will mainly be through archival records, books, historical documentation, written by those people closely involved with our tribal people and the Aboriginal oral histories" (*The Mercury*, March 24, 1992: 1). While the initial State Project was to be "jointly run by the Aboriginal community and Riawunna, the Centre for Aboriginal Education at the University of Tasmania at Launceston" (*The Mercury*, March 24, 1992: 1), the commonwealth-funded *palawa kani* program would eventually be run almost exclusively through the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre (TAC). Funding for the TAC's project has come from the Australian Government's Indigenous Languages Support program and its predecessors for many years, including \$290,000 in both 2008-2009 and 2009-2010, \$293,500 in 2010-2011, and \$314,000 in 2012-2013.<sup>25</sup> The project's goals for the 2008-2009 funding round were to "Revive, record, maintain and promote

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<sup>23</sup> See Hinton 2001: 415-416 for an in-depth discussion of these instances. Regarding Hebrew, Hinton writes: "This revitalization of a language that had not been spoken in daily life for 2,000 years is an inspirational model for others whose languages are no longer spoken" (Hinton 2001: 416).

<sup>24</sup> This story is recounted in the 2011 documentary, *We Still Live Here: Ās Nutayuneân*.

<sup>25</sup> The links to the recipients for these funding rounds can be found at: <http://arts.gov.au/indigenous/ils/recipients>. Accessed March 22, 2014.

Tasmanian Aboriginal languages, in particular Palawa Kani,<sup>26</sup> and following minor alterations their goals remain essentially the same today. The TAC was recently awarded multi-year funding of \$340,000 per year for 2013-14, 2014-15, and 2015-16, with the activity description “To retrieve Tasmanian Aboriginal languages and promote knowledge and use of the revived language Palawa Kani.”<sup>27</sup> The project’s stated goal is for Tasmanian Aboriginal people to speak *palawa kani*, and the TAC has created many educational tools, like storybooks, games, and activities, to help teach the language to their children.<sup>28</sup>

After the initial involvement of people like Terry Crowley, the project was (and is) very much an Aboriginal one, with one person telling me the TAC didn’t want non-Aboriginal people “working on the words.” One of the project’s stated goals was the revival of a way of “thinking Tasmanian Aboriginal” in a Sapir-Whorfian sense. Michael Mansell, for example, views the revival of Tasmanian language as a means to combat the fact that “Aboriginal culture is being eroded by white lifestyle. We send out kids to white schools and they lose their cultural links” (*The Sunday Tasmanian*, July 20, 2003: 15). This goal is common in discourses of indigenous language advocacy from both community and non-community sources. While the specific meaning and content of this “language as Carrier of Culture and Worldview” trope (Hinton 2002: 153) vary based on audience and context of use (and by and for whom), its predominance in linguistic revitalization and maintenance-work is a testament to its currency and power (see also Hill 2002).<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> <http://arts.gov.au/sites/default/files/pdfs/milr-funding-2008-09.pdf>. Accessed March 22, 2014.

<sup>27</sup> <http://arts.gov.au/sites/default/files/indigenous/ils/ILS%202013-14%20Approved%20Activities.pdf>. Accessed March 22, 2014.

<sup>28</sup> <http://arts.gov.au/indigenous/ils/case-studies/TasmanianAboriginallanguagerevived>. Accessed March 22, 2014.

<sup>29</sup> See Chapter Five of Meek 2010 for an analysis of how such tropes manifest themselves amongst Kaska speakers in the Yukon.

As discussed in Chapter Three, the Tasmanian Aboriginal community is small and closely-knit (albeit not without divisions), and it wasn't long before my work at TMAG (and other avenues) put me in contact with prominent culture-workers. These opportunities were frequently the result of familial relations, i.e. I would get to know one person through various projects and it would just so happen that their mother, aunt, cousin, etc., was involved in activities of great interest to a cultural anthropologist. It was through such a relationship that I got in touch with Theresa Sainty, the Aboriginal Language Consultant for the TAC and one of, if not the, core expert on *palawa kani*. Through a few in-depth discussions with her I gathered critical insight into the community's motivations, uses, and goals relating to *palawa kani*. More concretely, *what*, specifically, was being constructed, and what were the procedures through which it was accomplished? "To begin the process of reclaiming an unspoken language," Leanne Hinton writes, "the first step is to find and acquire copies of whatever documentation of the language exists" (Hinton 2001: 413).<sup>30</sup> Luckily for Theresa and her compatriots Plomley undertook such a task, and his *A Word-List of the Tasmanian Aboriginal Languages* has been the primary resource in the construction of *palawa kani*. As she herself said, "it really comes down to the word-lists" (personal communication). During a long chat at her house Theresa went to this book a number of times, with the condition of her copy reflecting many years of use. In flipping through the 500-page opus she was careful not to lose any of the loose, dog-eared, highlighted, and marked pages that were no longer held together by its compromised spine. Additionally, as Theresa made clear to me, the other core text for the language-workers was

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<sup>30</sup> Hinton continues: "Besides publications, there may be a rich store of unpublished documentation, such as linguistic field notes, field recordings, and old manuscripts. There may be other documents as well, such as letters, old newspapers, and so on... Someone first starting out to reclaim a language that has been lost will need to do a lot of research on what documentation exists, where it is, and how to access it" (Hinton 2001: 413-414).

Crowley and Dixon's *Tasmanian* chapter. Both of these texts are supplemented by ongoing archival research.

Building upon a reconstructed (and formalized) alphabet, language-workers like Theresa are heavily involved in the word-selection process through which *palawa kani* has been built, brick-by-brick, word-by-word. This selection process involves a number of stages, beginning with someone, often Theresa, recommending a word to “revive” (beginning with the English meaning). Following the go-ahead from above, she “will start recording them all” (personal communication). This task is one of consolidation, and all the recorded Tasmanian Aboriginal words sharing the same translation are arranged and ranked in terms of desirability. In describing the process to me, Theresa said that “because of the scant records that we have, we’ve got to work with what we’ve got, and so there are a number of different... criteria for choosing a word for that, and its around who recorded the words, when it was recorded, so the earlier the better, less time for it to be distorted.” She later added: “you would only use the worst recorders if you only have the one word that’s recorded by that person, and we have had to do that” (personal communication).<sup>31</sup> Based on these factors, Theresa decides which word will be consecrated as the *official* community word for a certain thing, whether it is “hello,” “goodbye,” “sun,” “canoe,” “red ochre,” and so on. Standardized spelling and notation are also a part of this process.

One of, if not the, core factors in word consecration and revival is the region from which it comes, with the *palawa kani* program emphasizing east and northeast languages and dialects. This favoritism arguably mirrors the hegemony of the islander narrative within public depictions of the community as a whole. On this point, Theresa acknowledges “Where possible we do go for the east, northeast words, *because that’s where we are all from*, and in an ideal world we

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<sup>31</sup> Overall, Theresa feels the early French explorers are probably the most credible, in large part because they were the earliest. Milligan was good recorder of sounds but not of translation (personal communication).

would have speakers of those languages, or at the very least we would have many, many more records of those languages, and all of our language would be from east, northeast” (personal communication)(emphasis added). This is a function of a few factors, one being that the program’s overall goal is to re-create the language as it was found at Wybalenna. A 2003 newspaper article notes: “Because many of the words and phrases were from different areas in Tasmania and different languages, the revived language is based on that used by Aborigines removed to Flinders Island in the 1830s... When the 200 or so Aborigines were taken to Flinders, they found they were from different groups and spoke different languages” (*The Sunday Tasmanian*, July 20, 2003: 15). In the same article, language worker Gaye Brown matter-of-factly states, “the language is modelled on that spoken at Wybalena [sic.]” (*The Sunday Tasmanian*, July 20, 2003: 15). The intermixture of different groups with different tongues at Wybalenna

led to the adoption of a common vocabulary at least in regard to things of importance in their lives, and this vocabulary was predominantly that of the eastern and north-eastern tribes because of the dominance of those tribes on the settlement. This vocabulary was probably related to or found expression in a lingua franca, which was in use among the sealers and their women in the Straits and, because the majority of those women came from eastern and north-eastern tribes, its words were predominantly words of those tribes (Plomley 1976: xv).

As a result, while *palawa kani* is presented as representative of all, in actuality it skews towards the majority population.<sup>32</sup> It is important to make clear, however, that this may be due to the very real and concrete limitations of the historical records and not necessarily a case of a dominant faction enforcing its will on secondary groups. As I have discussed, both the recordings and recorders are so far from ideal that linguists rarely draw conclusions about the historical Tasmanian languages without caveats firmly in place. Existing materials skew towards the eastern and northeastern tribes because the majority of documentation was conducted at

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<sup>32</sup> The majority in terms of numbers and status.

Wybalenna wherein those groups were the majority. This fact gestures towards a compelling dilemma of language revitalization in Tasmania, namely that the majority of documentation occurred at a site of alleged contamination and syncretism.

Over the past decade there have been a few public instantiations of *palawa kani*. One example is the 1995 installation of interpretation boards at the summit of Mount Wellington, re-named *kunanyi*, near Hobart (See Figure 5.1). The limited public use of the language was intentional since, as TAC spokeswoman Trudy Maluga has said, “the Aboriginal community decided to release parts of the new language only when it benefitted the Aboriginal community” (*The Sunday Tasmanian*, June 19, 2005: 13). However, such “for community/ by community” rhetoric tends to be more idealization than reality, and the TAC has a history of limiting its use by community members. This is the result of the fact the program is run through the TAC, and therefore anything that is produced is done so under its umbrella. While this remains short of a formal copyright, there is a tacit understanding that the TAC informally owns *palawa kani* and its usage in broader media is reliant on their approval. The community’s Language Use Policy is summarized in *Respecting Cultures*, a 2009 (revised from 2004 version) pamphlet put together by Arts Tasmania’s Aboriginal Arts Advisory Committee. Regarding language, the pamphlet states:

Much Tasmanian Aboriginal language has been lost through colonisation, leaving few words being used by members of today’s Aboriginal community. Following consultation with the Tasmanian Aboriginal Land and Sea Council (TALSC), many public sites have been renamed with Aboriginal place names, mainly sourced through Plomley’s Aboriginal Word List. Although these words are now in general usage for these locations, permission needs to be sought when using these names in another context, eg exhibitions, book titles or in song (*Respecting Cultures* 2009: 13).

Additionally, the Committee endorses the recommendation that “palawa kani words must only be used after gaining permission from the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre” (*Respecting Cultures*

2009: 13). While this policy is theoretically sound, I am familiar with at least a couple of instances in which community members requested permission to use the language in museum exhibitions and the TAC simply did not respond. As a result, exhibitions have used alternative spellings or words from the original word lists that differ from the “official” *palawa kani* words.

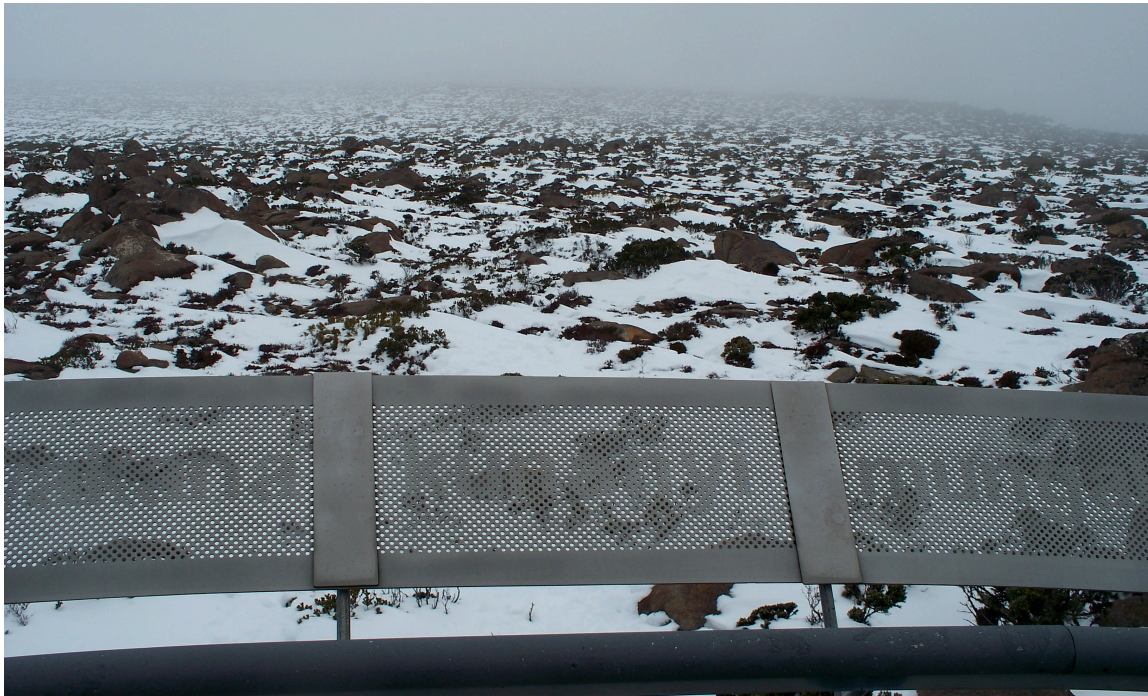


Figure 5.1. Top of Mount Wellington (*kunanyi*). (Photo taken by author)

Theresa Sainty is aware of the shortcomings of the various protocols, but ultimately feels that the TAC controlling the usage of the language in an official capacity is a good thing, saying that, “the way that we are set up here in Tasmania, at least there is some community control” (personal communication). She acknowledges, however, that placing limits on broader community-use may ultimately deny *palawa kani* one of the central features of a bona fide, living language, namely the ability to (and opportunity for) change.<sup>33</sup> Reflecting on protocol, usage and control, Theresa comments:

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<sup>33</sup> As Crystal writes, “The true life of any language is found in the breadth of its variation and its readiness to change, to adapt itself to new circumstances. The only languages which do not change are dead ones” (Crystal 2000: 116).



At the end of the day, if we are saying that this is a language, if at the end of the day there is too much control over the use of that language, it will always remain a language program and not a language. And that's a discussion that the community needs to have now... I understand why we need to have these protocols and we should still have protocols. However, on the other hand, we need for community to be comfortable to use language wherever and whenever they see fit (personal communication).

It is telling that the TAC appears more concerned with protecting the language from other members of the community than from outsiders. This linguistic hoarding is an outcome of loss, and shows an awareness that it is ultimately theirs to lose, that it has been lost before, and that it could become lost again. Despite the need for internal community dialogue regarding the overall goals of *palawa kani*, whether it should be a living or a “pickled language” (Hinton 2003: 45) for example, the Tasmanian Aboriginal community has a language to call its own. This is a statement that could not be made with any validity even fifteen years ago. The composite language is the result of countless hours of work on the part of a small number of highly dedicated people, and it should be recognized as the major achievement that it is.

### ***All For One and One For All: Singularity, Consecration, and Creating Community***

In the realm of cultural politics, espousing the possession of a bounded, concrete, and most importantly, singular, culture often expedites broader legitimation and recognition. In this regard, having *palawa kani* represent all the regions and familial group has the potential to further authenticate the Tasmanian Aboriginal people on the national (and international) level. Coupled with bark canoes, kelp water carriers, fibre baskets, and shell jewelry, the possession of a unique language is further proof of existence and cultural distinction. Nonetheless, the selection and use of particular “revived” words reflect community divisions and leakages in uniformity. One example is the consecrated Aboriginal word for Tasmania itself. Initially, *truwana* was the “revived” word for Tasmania but has since been replaced by *lutruwita*. This

shift was based on the conclusion that *truwana* was probably a word for “island,” generally speaking, but not the island of Tasmania. Since 2005 *truwana* has been the consecrated *palawa kani* word for Cape Barren Island. Despite the officialization of *lutruwita*, it is common to see t-shirts and various community paraphernalia employing the previous name. This may be a benign function of antiquated materials, but alternatively could be emblematic of an active resistance to standardization.

A more-telling example of officialization and regional divisions is that of the word for “Tasmanian Aboriginal people,” as reflected in the dispute between *palawa* and *pakana*. Translated roughly into “Man (black),” both words were recorded by Joseph Milligan at Wybalenna and reflect different tribal regions. In his *Vocabulary of Dialects of Aboriginal Tribes of Tasmania*, Milligan presents “Pugganna or Weiba” as from “*Tribes from Oyster Bay to Pittwater*” and “Pallawah or Wiebah” as from “*Tribes about Mount Royal, Brune Island, Recherche Bay, and the South of Tasmania*” (Milligan 1890[1858]: 35). Plomley provides a few more details, stating that both “pallawah,” from the Bruny Island language from the island’s south, and “Puggana” (albeit with the added qualifier ‘minyenna’), from the Oyster Bay language from the island’s east, translated into “black man” and “adult man” (Plomley 1976: 316-317). Theresa Sainty tracks this debate back to a 1995 meeting in which the attendees discussed a name for their community. To that point they had often employed “koori,” which is a broad term for urban Aboriginal people in Victoria. Theresa recounts how “we thought we would use one of our own words to identify ourselves with because we don’t have [specific tribal affiliations like]... Trowrurary or whatever, but just on a whole if you don’t want to use ‘Tasmanian Aborigines’ we can use *palawa*, and that’s just what they decided” (personal

communication). In *palawa kani*, as the name suggests, *palawa* has been consecrated as the word for “Tasmanian Aboriginal person/people” (i.e. “Native Tasmanian”), but *pakana*, the *palawa*

<i>palawa kani</i>	pronunciation	meaning	English spelling(s)
<i>ningina tunapri</i>	neeng ee nah tu nah pree	To give knowledge and understanding	Ningenneh Tunapry
<i>Lutruwita</i>	lu tru wee tah	Tasmania	*the word Trouwerner or <i>truwuna</i> is also sometimes used to refer to Tasmanian. <i>Truwuna</i> is also used to refer to Cape Barren Island.
<i>Pakana</i>	pah kah nah	Tasmanian Aboriginal people (used to refer to today's community only)	*the word <i>palawa</i> is also commonly used to refer to today's community. We have chosen to use the word <i>pakana</i> as this is the word revived from the north east language group where the community today is descended from.
<i>Muwinina</i>	mu wee nee nah	People from country around Hobart	Mouheneenner
<i>Nipaluna</i>		Hobart area	Nibberloonne
<i>minanya timtumili</i>		Derwent River	
<i>Mumirimina</i>	mu mee ree mee nah	People from country around Pittwater and Risdon	Moomairrenene
<i>Kunanyi</i>	ku nah nyee	Mt. Wellington	
<i>raytji</i>	rie tchee	White man	
<i>Tuylini</i>	toy lee nee	Stringy bark canoe	Toillinne
<i>Trukanini</i>	tru kah nee nee		Truganinni
<i>Manalakina</i>	mah nah lah kee nah		Mannalargenna
<i>Wurati</i>	wu rah tee		Woorady / Woureddy

Figure 5.2. *palawa kani* usage at TMAG. (Courtesy of Zoe Rimmer)

*kani* word for “people,” is also employed as a label for the community. This division reflects a larger north/south divide, as the words come from different tribal and geographical regions.

Theresa explained this divide when she told me that if the community was currently looking

for something to call ourselves, we would use *pakana*, because *pakana* is a northeast word that means the same thing, “Black Man,” and its from our country, and we were using it for many years In our English spelling for [a community newsletter] Pakana News, or Pugganah News. In fact, some people call themselves *palawa* now and some people call themselves *pakana*, and largely it’s

become a north-south thing, where people from Fanny Cochrane Smith's family more-often-than-not refer to themselves as being *palawa*, and people up north, that are mostly from island families, like us, would probably, well I prefer to use *pakana*, and so its sort of become this regional thing. And yet people of Bruny [Island] and south-east down here [in Hobart-area] call themselves *palawa*, and people from up east, north-east, did call themselves *pakana* so it's just two different words from two different languages that mean the same thing (personal communication).

While the TAC would probably like to replace *palawa* with *pakana*, they may be hesitant to do so because the former has attained some semblance of national and international recognition and social currency. This fact gestures towards the interface between politics and historical accuracy in the work of language construction/ revitalization. Echoing Theresa's sentiments, *pakana* is still used to refer to the Tasmanian Aboriginal community, specifically its islander-contingent, and I have attended many events in which community members have used both labels in concert to reference different segments of the larger whole. Furthermore, I have recently been informed that *pakana* may officially overtake *palawa* sooner rather than later.

An additional sober truth about *palawa kani* is that very few people actually speak it, let alone are fluent in it. At this point, the majority of its use is ceremonial and emblematic, whether it is in museum exhibits, art galleries, or "Welcome to Country" discursive acts. Overall, English remains the community's first language, and therefore the linguistic matrix through which people make sense of the world around them. Perhaps this is a meaningful end in-and-of-itself. As Hinton suggests, "a language revitalization program need not be extremely ambitious. It may not have as its goal the reintroduction of the language as the primary language of interaction, but rather may simply want to give the language a small place in ceremonial life or have a few phrases to use in community interaction" (Hinton 2001: 416). Nonetheless, dismissing ceremonial or emblematic use of revitalized languages as inconsequential would be shortsighted. Anthropological research has shown how such usages can lead to a stronger sense of community

amongst those to whom it belongs. Writing about “endangered” Native American languages in California, Jocelyn Ahlers discusses the “kinds of creative uses to which even moribund languages can be put in the performance of identity, and in the creation of a broader Native American community” (Ahlers 2006: 62). The public use of *palawa kani* in Tasmania by nonfluent speakers, whether it is in a “Welcome to Country,” the recent dual-naming policy, or as markers of indigeneity in social media (such as facebook), is valuable because it puts an “Aboriginal stamp” on the landscape (both cultural and physical). It is proof of existence (of both community and language), even if it is drowning in a sea of English. Over the course of my research in Tasmania I witnessed many “Welcome to Country” ceremonies conducted by Tasmanian Aboriginal community members. Over time the usage of *palawa kani* became noticeably more prominent. These ceremonies consist of indigenous peoples “welcoming” visitors to their traditional land through speech, singing, or other means.<sup>34</sup> These “welcomes” mark the start of sessions of parliament, gallery openings, and school programs, amongst other events. They are discursively meaningful in that they validate the speaker’s community as legitimate and interpellate them as that area’s “traditional owners.” Whereas in 2007 and 2008 a few words of *palawa kani* were sometimes present during these ceremonies, by 2010/2011 it was common for the welcome to be spoken entirely in language, and the fact that the speaker was rarely fluent was often irrelevant.

### ***Concluding Thoughts: Simulacra and Symbolic Value***

Jean Baudrillard describes simulacra as the re-creation of something that never existed in that form in the first place (Baudrillard 1994). As the consolidation of multiple historical source

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<sup>34</sup> More information about “Welcome to Country” and “Acknowledgement of Country” greetings can be found at: [http://hr.anu.edu.au/\\_documents/staff-equity/reconciliation-australia-what-is-welcome-to-country.pdf](http://hr.anu.edu.au/_documents/staff-equity/reconciliation-australia-what-is-welcome-to-country.pdf). Accessed March 23, 2014.

languages into a singular form, *palawa kani* qualifies as simulacra in the Baudrillardian sense. Viewed through this lens, a number of critical questions emerge, the most important of which have to do with truth. Specifically, is a simulacrum *necessarily* false? How should we, as anthropologists, social critics, and social scientists, judge instances of indigenous cultural revitalization that appear to have a tenuous footing in historical reality? I tend to think that framing (which is arguably interconnected with the act of judging) such phenomena in terms of truth or falsity fails to account for the often intangible, but equally real, power and meaning they have for practitioners and possessors. This does not mean that all indigenous practices (revitalized or otherwise) need be accepted at face value. If anything, it is an acknowledgement of the often-Herculean efforts on the part of indigenous peoples to “stay true” to their ancestors, as the preceding discussions of cultural and linguistic revitalization have sought to foreground. It is recognition of both resurgence and irreversible loss. Despite the successful composition of *palawa kani*, the desired Whorfian cosmology through which a uniquely Tasmanian Aboriginal reality can be constructed is probably forever lost. At best, it has been compromised, but so has traditional Tasmanian Aboriginal culture more generally. The interesting thing for the anthropologist is how this “post-extinction” people continue to find (some would say re-activate) ways to feel and be Tasmanian Aboriginal that are defined as much by antiquity as by contact. In this sense, *palawa kani* is a perfect representation of the often contradictory, sometimes complementary, interaction between the two. It also commemorates gaps that have been traversed in other forums, by memorializing, and serving as a reminder of, the hardships of return.

## Chapter Six

### Tasmanian Aboriginality at the Museum: Primitive Pasts, Indigenous Futures<sup>1</sup>

#### *Introduction*

In January 1931 a sculptor from Melbourne named E.J. Dicks was hard at work in a Hobart studio. The task-at-hand for Mr. Dicks was to build visual representations of the “Lost Tasmanian Race” for the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery. On January 17, 1931 *The Mercury* reports

Mr. Dicks [had] already completed the man for the group, and is occupied with the female figure. It is a strange commentary on life to see the modeler at work with his clay, and beside him the skeleton of the last of the true Tasmanian aborigines, Truganini, while at odd intervals skulls peep out here and there, all contributing a moiety of past life to give reality to a present figment (*The Mercury*, January 17, 1931: 6).

The 1931 group exhibit<sup>2</sup> was made possible by a gift of £500<sup>3</sup> and sought to give Hobart residents a glimpse into the “life and habits of a vanished people” (*The Mercury*, January 17, 1931: 6). These three figures, naked, with midnight-black skin, and comprising a natural familial triad of mother/father/child, were a visual depiction of a people who had come to represent the most “primitive” culture ever documented.

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<sup>1</sup> Portions of this chapter have been adapted from Berk 2012.

<sup>2</sup> While this exhibit is commonly referred to as a diorama, the original newspaper and institutional descriptions give it the label of a “group exhibit.” Group exhibits are in fact dioramas that depict a group of individuals engaged in some activity. I use this label for accuracy and consistency with the historical sources.

<sup>3</sup> “The group exhibit of Tasmanian aborigines in the Museum at Hobart” is “the outcome of the gift of Mr. John Arnold, who for 47 years was a member of the Museum staff” (*The Mercury*, May 23, 1931: 10). At the time, the £500 gift was the largest TMAG had ever received.

The perpetuation of such ideologies by cultural institutions is far from unique. In his chapter on *Museums as Contact Zones*, James Clifford recounts attending a 1989 community consultation meeting with Tlingit representatives at Oregon's Portland Museum of Art. Rather than discuss objects in the museum's collection, the Tlingit people preferred to tell politically-motivated tales relating to land rights and other community concerns. The story of the Raven, in particular, is an apt metaphor for the fraught relationships between indigenous communities and cultural institutions. As told by Austin Hammond, the story begins as the Raven flies "down the whale's blowhole, sets up a little stove, and cooks the salmon the whale swallows. *But he can't get out*. The humorous tale turns tragic. To our white brothers here, Hammond says, *our prayers are like the Raven's. Who will cut open the whale, so we can come out?*" (Clifford 1997: 190)(emphasis added). This metaphor describes not only the historical relationships between indigenous communities and cultural institutions but the idea of Savagery more generally.

Over the last few decades a multitude of indigenous peoples have challenged (and often co-opted) the idea of the Savage by employing the very tools of their entrapment as a means of escape. The ethnographic literature is full of insightful instances of indigenous-created media and self-representation in film, television, and museum exhibitions. At national museums like the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian in Washington D.C. and Te Papa in Wellington, New Zealand, the "natives" have struck back and asserted authority over how their histories are told, often with little concern for populist nationalist mythologies.<sup>4</sup> Australia has its own examples, with one of my favorites being the Walpiri of rural Yuendumu in the Northern Territory. In 1985 the Walpiri took control of incoming television signals and started creating their own televisual content that sought to maintain "Warlpiri-ness" in the face of outside

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<sup>4</sup> This is especially true at Te Papa, which is openly hostile and critical of *pakeha* invasion. Interestingly, however, this may reflect the fact that Maori history *is* the populist national narrative of New Zealand rather than a challenge to it.



pressures to homogenize into an unmarked category of “Australian Aboriginal” (Michaels 1994c).<sup>5</sup> These cursory examples are representative of wide-ranging indigenous campaigns to take control over representation and matters of culture, however defined. These changes reflect a broader perspectival shift from *primitive pasts* to *indigenous futures*. This shift is marked by changes in nomenclature and temporal focus (i.e. forward-looking rather than backward-facing).

This chapter pivots from cultural revitalization to representation in the domain of cultural institutions. It seeks to provide clarity into the dynamics of continuity and shifting control at one locale by focusing on two exhibitions at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery. The first is the aforementioned 1931 group exhibit. This exhibit was heavily informed by the ideologies discussed in Chapter Two and therefore denied Tasmanian Aboriginal existence and cultural dynamism. The second exhibit is *tayenebe*, a celebration of the resurgence of Tasmanian Aboriginal women’s fibre-work. In 2008 I had the opportunity to help conceptualize and design this exhibit, a task that included a number of workshops with its participants. While designed and debuted at TMAG, *tayenebe* was a traveling exhibition that I saw in Canberra and Sydney in 2010-2011. Viewing these exhibits in tandem affords a glimpse into the enactment of an almost literal Paleolithic prison (the 1931 group exhibit) and how the same institution offered a means of escape. The Tasmanian Aboriginal people are on display in both instances, either through their objects or cultural surrogates, with varying levels of community involvement and subtext.

For my discussion of the enactment of Tasmanian Aboriginality at TMAG I draw inspiration (if not necessarily methodological rigor) from Science Technology Studies (STS),

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<sup>5</sup> Jupururrla, the main figure in Michaels’s work, is the creator *Bush Mechanics*, a popular series that foregrounds Warlpiri ingenuity in fixing car problems in a uniquely Aboriginal manner. Clips from their various productions, along with oral histories of Warlpiri television, can be viewed at the Paw Media website: <http://www.pawmedia.com.au/>. Accessed March 30, 2014.

particularly Bruno Latour and Annemarie Mol.<sup>6</sup> The latter's *The Body Multiple: Ontology in Medical Practice* (Mol 2002) is a particularly valuable resource in this regard. In this ethnography Mol recounts her experiences at Hospital Z, an intentionally anonymous teaching hospital in the Netherlands, during which she studied atherosclerosis. By discussing numerous hospital departments and the varying ways atherosclerosis, a disease that leads to the hardening of arteries in a person's lower leg, is imagined (or *brought into being* as an object of study), she concludes there are many different forms of atherosclerosis existing under the singular umbrella term. Depending on the methods employed, be it via a microscope, a deceased person's leg, or conversation, an atherosclerosis is brought into being, only it is not necessarily the same one. Countering perspectivalism, Mol views these divergent practices as not merely different ways of getting at the same object; they are all getting at a different object that is given the label "atherosclerosis."

Mol's conceptualization of "enactment" is valuable for it provides a more nuanced understanding of creation than a term like "construction," which "suggests that material is assembled, put together, and turned into an object that subsequently goes out in the world all by itself" (Mol 2002: 32). Emphasizing process, on the other hand,

suggests that in the act, and only then and there, something is – being enacted... Thus an ethnographer/ praxiographer out to investigate diseases never isolates them from the practices in which they are... enacted. She stubbornly takes notice of the techniques that make things visible, audible, tangible, knowable. She may talk bodies – but she never forgets about microscopes (Mol 2002: 33).

In light of these insights we must never forget about skeletal materials, plaster-of-Paris, wiring and paint, and the jobs to which they were entrusted in the 1931 group exhibit (not to mention *tayenebe*'s baskets and kelp water carriers). Specifically, we must pay attention to how these objects and human remains were used in concert to exclude and dismiss alternative Tasmanian

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<sup>6</sup> As Latour writes, "No science can exit from the network of its practice" (Latour 1993: 24).

Aboriginalities.<sup>7</sup> What is concerning is not that there are different phenomena falling under the label of *Tasmanian Aboriginal People*, but that the scientific and political world has historically given credence not to living, breathing human beings but empty vessels in the form of skeletal remains and the imagined reality of the group exhibit. It is this gap between the presumably idyllic and extinct Tasmanian people and the contemporary community that was enforced by the 1931 group exhibit and which exhibitions like *tayenebe* seek to close. The underlying (and often overt) goal of the *tayenebe* project and the subsequent exhibition was to somehow acknowledge difference (from the historical ancestors; between the “old” and the “new” baskets; between different Tasmanian Aboriginalities<sup>8</sup>) while enacting connection and continuity. To understand how this was accomplished, we must pay attention to the work entrusted to baskets and kelp water carriers. In both cases people are attempting to create and present something about the Tasmanians that operates around missing “stuff,” albeit in very different ways.

### ***TMAG and the 1931 Group Exhibit***

*The history of collecting is concerned with what, from the material world, specific groups and individuals choose to preserve, value, and exchange (Clifford 1985: 240).*

Overlooking the Derwent River in downtown Hobart, TMAG is Australia’s second oldest museum<sup>9</sup> and one of the country’s three remaining “museum-and-art galleries.”<sup>10</sup> It was established in 1848 as the collection of the Royal Society of Tasmania and officially became the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery in 1889 (Hughes et al., 2007: 4). TMAG has been a major

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<sup>7</sup> Mol writes: “The practices of enacting clinical atherosclerosis and pathological atherosclerosis exclude one another. The first requires a patient who complains about pain in his legs. And the second requires a cross section of the artery visible under the microscope. These exigencies are incompatible, at least: they cannot be realized simultaneously” (Mol 2002: 35).

<sup>8</sup> In terms of social organization, religion, language, skin color, subsistence practices, etc.

<sup>9</sup> In terms of age, TMAG is second only to Sydney’s Australian Museum, which was founded as an institution in 1827 and re-named in 1836.

<sup>10</sup> The name refers to institutions whose collections and specialties combine art and natural history. The other two museum and art galleries in Australia are The Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery in Launceston, Tasmania, and The Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory near Darwin.

research site for me, having interned there in 2008 and volunteered as part of my dissertation fieldwork in 2010-2011. The majority of my work was for the Indigenous Cultures Department and its curator, Tony Brown.

While viewing indigenous peoples as ephemeral was quite common,<sup>11</sup> the Tasmanian case is compelling because they were thought to be a dead. The collection of Tasmanian Aboriginal remains by cultural institutions, royal societies and universities (amongst others), frequently through illegal means like grave-robbing,<sup>12</sup> was one practice that reinforced the myth of extinction. Their presumed value for science (of the capital “S” variety) served to rationalize such actions. As James Urry writes, “Given the importance of the Australian Aborigines, and particularly the ‘extinct’ Tasmanians, in the evolutionary speculations of Nineteenth century anthropology, it is not surprising that the body snatching and grave robbing of their remains continued for some time” (Urry 1989: 12). TMAG was not innocent in these practices, having displayed Truganini’s skeletal remains from 1903 to 1947.<sup>13</sup> A 1924 *Mercury* article entitled *TASMANIAN MUSEUM. Other Features of Prized Collections. Extinct Aborigines of the Island. Anatomical and General Exhibits* (*The Mercury*, October 13, 1924: 5), describes TMAG’s exhibit spaces. Interspersed with exquisite photographs of model canoes, an exhibit case of human skulls, and the “Milligan baskets” (as mentioned in Chapter Four and to be addressed in due course), the author textually walks the reader through the exhibit, noting how

The Tasmanian aborigines were such a distinct type that they claim foremost interest even among the varied types met with in the Australasian zone. Apart

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<sup>11</sup> The trope of the “Vanishing Savage” was often unquestioned *doxa* for the governing bodies of Australia, the United States, and Canada, to name but a few.

<sup>12</sup> See Plomley 1961 for a fine overview of Tasmanian human materials in institutional collections at that point in time.

<sup>13</sup> Truganini’s American equivalent would be Ishi, the “last Yahi” (Kroeber 1961). In 1976, after further arguments with the trustees of the museum over ownership of Truganini’s skeleton, her remains were cremated and scattered in the D’Entrecasteaux Channel near her homeland of Bruny Island (Ryan 1996[1981]: 264).

from the dusky inhabitants of pre-settlement days, there is the romance attached to the early history of this State... Within the four walls of the small room at present devoted to Tasmanian history and ethnology are crowded many specimens and pictures of absorbing study. The largest single collection in the world of osteological specimens relating to the extinct Tasmanian race has been gathered in that room – a collection priceless both in scientific interest and intrinsic value. Near by are grouped examples of the weapons and implements of the aborigines, whilst round the walls are views and drawings relating to the aborigines and the early days of the State (*The Mercury*, October 13, 1924: 5).<sup>14</sup>

There was, however,

one specimen in the Tasmanian Ethnological and Historical Gallery which deserves more than passing remark before this realm of the past is left. The specimen referred to is the skeleton of Trucanini, the last of the Tasmanian race, who died in 1876. To the anthropologist it is one of absorbing scientific interest, and it is by the researches of anthropologists into the past that the people of to-day gain (*The Mercury*, October 13, 1924: 5).<sup>15</sup>

Through the collection and curation of human and non-human cultural materials, TMAG reinforced many of the prevailing ideologies of Tasmanian Aboriginality, with non-existence being a core message.

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<sup>14</sup> In a newspaper article from 1932, a visiting physical anthropologist, J Wunderly, commented on the relative value of the museum's collection of Tasmanian remains. The article states: "Mr. Wunderly, who was surrounded by the mortal relics of Tasmania's lost race, said: In the Tasmanian Museum at Hobart there is a collection of specimens which is the envy of those in control of museums on the mainland, in Britain, and in the United States. It comprises the skulls and other bones of that very interesting and extinct race, the Tasmanian aborigines" (*The Mercury*, January 14, 1932:11; see also Wunderly 1939).

<sup>15</sup> This newspaper article has a pronounced humanitarian strain, particularly in terms of "learning from past mistakes" in relation to the treatment of the Tasmanian Aboriginal peoples. This excerpt continues: "But the specimen may well be regarded from another aspect. Does it not carry a note of appeal to present-day Tasmanians? Standing before the last remnant of the race whose happy hunting grounds were for untold centuries the eucalypt forests of this southern isle, and realizing only in a dim manner the methods by which the race was wiped out, there surely arises the thought that the former inhabitants, as well as the Tasmanian emu, and other creatures, have been exterminated, and that many of the records relating to the early historical era of the State have been allowed to vanish, or sold to other countries. Should this state of affairs be allowed to continue?" (*The Mercury*, October 13, 1924: 5). Regarding collection more generally, the author writes: "Truly it is a vast and noble heritage, but how many Tasmanian realise it? How few are aware of the great attempts which are being made by the Museum authorities and others to save and preserve such great treasures as those of which the present generation is the temporary guardian! Against great odds, a small band of those sufficiently interested are making valiant attempts to gather together and keep in good preservation a unique collection relating to the State. Does the skeleton of Trucanini, to say nothing of the other aboriginal exhibits at the museum, carry no message to the public at large? It is for the public of Tasmania to respond" (*The Mercury*, October 13, 1924: 5).

In a manner similar to the Akeley dioramas at the American Museum of Natural History, the 1931 group exhibit “is eminently a story, a part of natural history. The story is told in the pages of nature, read by the naked eye” (Haraway 1989: 29). For Haraway, dioramas are “meaning-machines” through which nature “is, in ‘fact’, constructed as a technology through social praxis” (Haraway 1989: 54). One story told by the group exhibit is about progress and accumulation.<sup>16</sup> Jean Baudrillard’s playful description of the mummy of Ramses II is an illustrative example of this deft interplay between museum displays and ideas of social evolutionary progress. For Baudrillard, the mobilization of the mummy of Ramses II “after it was left to rot for several dozen years in the depths of a museum,” was a reaction to the West being

seized with panic at the thought of not being able to save what the symbolic order had been able to conserve for forty centuries, but out of sight and far from the light of day. Ramses does not signify anything for us, only the mummy is of an inestimable worth because it is what guarantees that accumulation has meaning. *Our entire linear and accumulative culture collapses if we cannot stockpile the past in plain view.* To this end the pharaohs must be brought out of their tomb and the mummies out of their silence. To this end they must be exhumed and given military honors. They are prey to both science and worms (Baudrillard 1994: 9-10)(emphasis added).

Within this context it is important to remember the group exhibit was envisioned as a necessary response to a fundamental lack. As a visual representation, the group’s figures collaborated with human remains to form a “moiety of past life to give reality to a present figment” (*The Mercury*, January 17, 1931: 6).

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<sup>16</sup> When applied to museum curation, this mindset often takes the form of typological displays in which similar objects from different cultural groups are presented in tandem to show the hierarchical stages of universal progress. The exemplary example was, and continues to be, the Pitt Rivers Museum at Oxford, the history of which is expertly summarized in Chapman 1985.

### *Building Bodies at the Museum*

In contrast to older styles of ethnographic display, group exhibits and dioramas are more amenable to Haraway's "eye-nature," and in effect, are more truthful. In many ways, such displays descend directly from public displays of actual human beings. Whether it was a menagerie of Native Americans (amongst other groups) at Chicago's World's Columbian Exposition in 1893 (see Boas 1893)<sup>17</sup> or Pocahontas at the court of King James,<sup>18</sup> there is a long history of indigenous and native peoples being put "on display." It is this very history that was brilliantly critiqued by Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña's "Couple in the Cage."<sup>19</sup> Despite criticisms, such displays offer the allure of an authenticity<sup>20</sup> found to be lacking in traditional ethnological displays. It is this sense of realism that group exhibits and dioramas seek

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<sup>17</sup> Colloquially known as The Chicago World's Fair, this exposition featured ethnological displays curated by F.H. Putnam and Franz Boas. The young Boas describes the organization, and value, of such displays when he writes: "The meaning of the ethnographical specimens is made clearer by the presence of a small colony of Indians, who live in their native habitations near the Anthropological building. The most striking among these buildings are the houses from British Columbia, with their carved totem posts. The collection from this region is particularly strong in paraphernalia used in religious ceremonials, and their use is illustrated in the dances which the Indians perform. Another instructive group of dwellings are the bark-houses of the Iroquois Indians, which are inhabited by a number of members of the various tribes composing that stock. Other tribes and dwellings represented in this group are the Eskimo, Cree, Chippewayan, Winnebago, Navajo, and the Arawak of British Guiana. In this connection must be mentioned the highly instructive villages of Midway Plaisance, in which a great variety of races are found. A mere enumeration will give an idea of the scope of these exhibits: Java, the South Sea Islands, Dahomey, the Soudan, Lapland, Arabia, Turkey and Algeria are represented here" (Boas 1893: 609).

<sup>18</sup> This scene is powerfully re-created in director Terrence Malick's *The New World* (2005).

<sup>19</sup> "The Couple in the Cage," a collaboration between Fusco and Gómez-Peña, was based around their portrayal of the Guatinaui, a fictional recently discovered culture from an obscure island in the Gulf of Mexico. As the Guatinaui they traveled around the world and their Savagery was put on display for the viewing public. While it was designed as a counter-commemoration "in opposition to uncritical celebrations of the Columbus Quincentenary" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998: 218), it is telling that a large number of viewers failed to get the joke. James Clifford provides further insight when he writes: "As Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña discovered when they performed a broad satire in which 'undiscovered' Amerindians were confined in a golden cage, more than a few visitors took them literally. Fusco (1995) discerns an 'other history' of intercultural performance, which runs from Columbus' kidnapped Arawacs and Montaigne's 'cannibals,' to populated 'villages' and 'streets' at world exhibitions, to Ishi at the University of California Anthropological Museum" (Clifford 1997: 197).

<sup>20</sup> Bruner and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's *Maasai on the Lawn: Tourist Realism in East Africa* (Bruner and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1994) is a classic anthropological analysis of strategic essentialism and public performance.

to capture. Franz Boas designed a number of group exhibits for the Hall of Northwest Coast Indians at the American Museum of Natural History, writing in 1896 that it “is the avowed object of a large group to transport the visitor into foreign surroundings. He is to see the whole village and the way the people live” (Boas, as quoted in Jacknis 1985: 101). A 1931 *Mercury* article describes TMAG’s rationale for such an approach in similar terms: “In these days, group exhibits are looked upon by scientists generally, as the proper way to show objects, instead of in the purely conventional and isolated manner of the glass case containing an array having small relation to ideas” (*The Mercury*, January 17, 1931: 6). Lynette Russell’s work on dioramas and group exhibits of Australian Aboriginal peoples is valuable in this regard. All the Aboriginal dioramas she examined “focused on economic pursuits; they are centred around the preparation of food. Women are usually shown undertaking grinding, or other cooking preparations, and childcare. Most of the dioramas showed men returning to camp with game draped over their shoulders” (Russell 1999: 38). The TMAG group exhibit was arranged in a very similar manner.

Over a series of articles, *The Mercury* describes the exhibit as:

A Tasmanian aboriginal camp, an old kitchen midden and the figures will be shown as illustrating the life and habits of the vanished people. The foreground of the group will be built, and given actual form, so as to portray conditions of actuality (*The Mercury*, January 17, 1931: 6).

The figures of the male, female, and child representatives of the aboriginal inhabitant of Tasmania are grouped on a beach with Mount Wellington and the river as a background, which is carved to give stereoscopic effect (*The Mercury*, May 23, 1931: 10).

In the centre of the scene is a fire, beside which the woman is sitting, tending the roasting of several crayfish. Just behind her is the child, watching anxiously the cooking operations and to the right is the man, carrying a strip of gum-bark for the building of the hut, the beginning of which is shown (*The Mercury*, May 23, 1931: 10).



Upon its completion this exhibit would allow later generations to see via a “glance at almost reality, the kind of people who once fished, played, and fought, where now stands Hobart” (*The Mercury*, May 23, 1931: 10).

There are a number of *leitmotifs* woven throughout the newspaper accounts of the exhibit’s creation. One theme is that of near-reality; another is of near-regeneration and cultural (or racial) resuscitation. Viewed in concert, these motifs foreground the understanding that these figures are life-like surrogates for the Tasmanian Aboriginal people, but their surrogacy is inherently incomplete. Therefore this exhibit, when taken as a whole, was imagined as offering the best and most realistic image of Tasmanian Aboriginal-ness possible, but that it remained “not quite” reality served to remind the viewer that extinction was complete and irreversible. Returning to Mol (2002), this is far from an “object that subsequently goes out in the world all by itself,” but one created and maintained. In analyzing its creation, it is critical to pay attention to the work done by the materials themselves and the tasks to which they were entrusted.

The January 22, 1931 edition of *The Mercury* provides an exhaustive account of the building process. I quote these articles extensively in order to point to the presence of the subtle messages and *leitmotifs* mentioned above, and to provoke reflection upon the macabre nature of such work. This article describes a revolving platform upon which

[Dicks] builds his frame-work of lead piping and wood, using the iron standard of the clamp-frame as the upright to carry the length of the body. Lead piping gives stability to the arms, iron stays to the legs, and the head-frame consists of two pieces of lead piping, one bent round the other, to support head and neck... Having disposed his frame in the correct position, the arm extensions are bent to the required angle, and actual work begins. At first little more than masses of clay are used to fill in the body of the statue, the legs, head and arms, but as the basic structure increases, the pieces of clay used decrease in size. *Gradually a skull-like head appears*, attenuated arms and legs showing outlined muscles, and the general form of the body is seen... *It is now that out of dead clay emerges living form until at the end the result appears like a piece of suddenly halted life, checked in its action.* With subtle touch and delicate moving fingers the modeler

moulds expression, thought, movement, life, till at last there stands before him, *almost living*, the idea that had slept in his brain, less than a breath, *yet not a reality* (*The Mercury*, January 22, 1931: 3)(emphasis added).

Framing and moulding is followed by casting, during which the statue is

marked off in sections, perhaps six or seven, or more. Each section has then a wall of clay built round it to act as a container, and into the receptacle so made is poured plaster of Paris, mixed to the consistency of thick cream. When this is set, the wall of clay is removed, the edges of the mould greased to prevent sticking, and the next section walled in and cast, until all are finished. The sections are then numbered, detached from the clay, and assembled again. When this is done there is a shapeless lump of plaster, hollow inside, the hollow coinciding with the form of the clay statue, which is then broken up for use again... The head, arms, and sometimes the legs are then cast separately, and the cast joined to the body by rivets. The hollow parts of the mould are greased and liquid plaster poured in, great care being necessary to avoid bubbles. When the plaster has set hard, the mould is knocked off – a task requiring skill – and the statue in several parts is ready to be joined together (*The Mercury*, January 22, 1931: 3).

After framing/moulding and casting is the penultimate stage in which the pieces are joined to form the “near-reality” of the presumably authentic Tasmanian Aboriginal people. A short blurb from February 1931, aptly titled *Building Bodies*, emphasizes

The delight of the sculptor as he puts together, *limb by limb*, the products of his mind and hands, who is engaged in the modeling of the aboriginal group for the Tasmanian Museum. The male figure of the group, now cast in plaster, *stands complete with the exception of the head*, while the clay model of the female figure is nearing completion and its head has already been cast. *The head of the male figure sits upon its neck on the artist's table*, while experiments are carried out upon it with regard to colouring. The colour for the face has been brought almost to finality, and looks most natural. The stringy hair is in process of being tinted to discover the most satisfactory colour, and presents at the moment a somewhat patchy appearance (*The Mercury*, February 7, 1931: 6)(emphasis added).

The group exhibit officially opened on Friday, May 22, 1931 and was lauded for its perceived accuracy:

It is all so natural and lifelike that it has almost the effect of shock to realise that it is only an exhibit, *and not a living fact*. The groupings and setting have been done with such accuracy and detail, based on the most authoritative historical evidence, that *the effect is one of reality*... its naturalness and charm... give one so vividly

to realise the life in this island all those centuries before the dawn of civilisation (*The Mercury*, May 23, 1931: 10).<sup>21</sup>

The group exhibit itself “occupies the whole of one end of the large room on the right of the main entrance,” and along the sloping base of the containing case “there are bas-reliefs of William Lanne and Truganini, the last male and female Tasmanian aborigines, with a series of illustrated descriptive tablets, showing on one side the history of the race, and on the other the general characteristics of the original Tasmanians” (*The Mercury*, May 23, 1931: 10). The exhibit’s unveiling was accompanied by public addresses and comments from the chairman of the Museum Trustees, W.H. Clemes, the Attorney-General, the Honourable H.S. Baker, the museum’s curator, Clive Lord, and W.L. Crowther, scientist and collector of Aboriginal remains.<sup>22</sup> In his address the Attorney-General

briefly sketched the development of the idea of the group, highly praising the sculptor, Mr. E.J. Dicks, for his lifelike representation and his skill, and paying special tribute to the Curator of the Museum (Mr. Clive Lord), who had bestowed such thought and care upon the exhibit... Everybody, continued the Attorney-General, would recognise the extreme interest of the group from the scientific point of view. The subject was one to invite reflection; and he added: We who are the possessors of this country should seek to understand the people who were here before us... Mr. Clemes proposed a vote of thanks to the Attorney-General, and in doing so alluded to the long research and painstaking efforts made by Mr. Clive Lord and Dr. W.L. Crowther to ensure absolute and authoritative accuracy throughout... Dr. Crowther, seconding the vote of thanks, said that the exhibit was the realisation of a dream which had been with them for many years. In designing the group they had sought to strike the imagination of children. For long they had desired to have a picture of paleolithic man, in order that the

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<sup>21</sup> The article continues: “The wallaby just killed, as may be judged by the trickle of blood on the ground, from the nose, empty oyster, scallop, and mutton fish shells scattered about, the spears leaning against the she-oak, the fibre-fish-bag, flints, anvil-stones, throwing-stick, all are so much part of the whole, that the first glance scarcely observes them, so truly do they belong to it. There is even a bag on the ground containing the red ochre beloved on the aboriginals, with which the man’s hair is plentifully smeared” (*The Mercury*, May 23, 1931: 10).

<sup>22</sup> The Crowther Collection was drawn mostly from Oyster Cove graves. The majority of the collection was ultimately returned to the Aboriginal community in 1984.

children growing up in the community should realise clearly the nature and habits of the aboriginals of Tasmania (*The Mercury*, May 23, 1931: 10).<sup>23</sup>

In essence, the stated goal of the exhibit was to provide an embodiment of Aboriginal Tasmania, one comprised of plaster, wiring, and paint. By highlighting an image of the Tasmanian Aboriginal peoples based on their “lowly” position within social evolutionary schemas, TMAG enacted a Tasmanian Aboriginality incompatible with the lived, and living, realities of Aboriginal life in the Tasmanian context.

Community responses to the group exhibit have been critical. Julie Gough, Tasmanian Aboriginal artist and *tayenebe*’s curator, views it as

an inescapably bizarre and totally constructed fabrication of Tasmanian Aborigines. Intended as an education tool, it is a totally invented version; a kind of historic folklore. It tells much more about its makers than its purported subject. It portrays the myth of the Tasmanian Aboriginal nuclear family clustered around a solitary campfire, rather than typically within a large extended family or band of people. The figures are based on Truganini and Woorrady with a child with a child which Truganini, who was physically maltreated by Europeans, was unlikely to have ever had... The people represented were not from the region painted as their backdrop. The diorama invents its own time and place. Not only are other people missing from the picture, but by this time in their lives (in real time) Truganini and Woorrady were familiar with and using European materials: axes, dogs and guns – none of which are depicted... The scene freezes Aboriginal Tasmanians into ‘no-time’; into an unknowable distancing space. In this it both justifies and illustrates the story of genocide, rather than dispelling it as a myth (Gough 2001: 36-37).<sup>24</sup>

While I agree with the majority of Gough’s analysis, I believe the exhibit enacts a Tasmanian Aboriginality into a specifically Paleolithic temporal space rather than into “no-time.”

Debates around the group exhibit tended (and in many cases continue) to circulate around its perceived inaccuracies. In the early 1990s TMAG itself acknowledged problems with the display, going so far as to post a “dilemma label” in 1992. Among other criticisms, the label

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<sup>23</sup> Interestingly, the article covering the unveiling of the group exhibit also commented on the rediscovery of the Edison wax cylinder recordings of Fanny Cochrane Smith.

<sup>24</sup> These comments are written to accompany Julie’s 1997 artwork *Folklore*, which was a direct response to the 1931 group exhibit.

contended the exhibit presented a Euro-centric ideal of the “nuclear family” that was not the historical norm amongst Tasmanian Aboriginal people, nor were men the primary “breadwinners” as depicted by the man bringing home the proverbial bacon. Other details, however, have been lauded for their scientific accuracy, with Margaretta Pos writing in a 1992 *Mercury* editorial that “[w]hile their skin is black rather than a coppery-brown, care was taken in



Figure 6.1. TMAG group exhibit.

creating the diorama and the figures were based on Aboriginal busts by Benjamin Law” (*The Mercury*, December 12, 1992: 26). Since the designers used available source materials to make them as “life-like” as possible, the bodies are arguably accurate. In my estimation, however, framing the debate in terms of historical accuracy misses the crux of the problem of the group exhibit, namely how it, through its very singularity, erased and dismissed alternatives. It was framed as the definitive representation of a lost people, and this message remained overpowering

regardless of subsequent “window-dressing” about contemporary existence. I made many visits to TMAG during my first trip to Tasmania in 2004, and despite my best efforts, the image of the Paleolithic Aboriginal nuclear family was burned into my mind. At that time the Tasmanian Aboriginal Gallery was a conceptual mish-mash, with text from different eras and motivations occupying the same exhibition space. Despite newer text discussing the contemporary community, the messages embodied in the plaster figures were difficult to ignore. Tony Brown was frustrated by the continuing presence of the group exhibit and pessimistic regarding his ability to make any alterations. In a 2004 conversation Tony told me:

I'd like to basically get it out, throw it away, chuck it in the river if I had my way. But that will never happen, because it's probably one of the most talked about, most viewed exhibits in the museum. People from the mainland, as well as from overseas, come and look at the diorama and look at those figures, and get their idea of what Aboriginal people looked like (Personal Communication).

Since that point, however, there have been major changes at the museum; changes that are indicative of wider shifts towards indigenous self-representation. The old gallery was taken down in 2007, group exhibit included, and replaced with the previously discussed *ningina tunapri*, a concerted community effort that exemplified a broader reclamation narrative. *Ningina tunapri* conceptually serves as the connective tissue between the 1931 group exhibit and the *tayenebe* project, challenging the former and inspiring the latter. It is critical that it was installed in an exhibitionary space that had previously been occupied by the group exhibit and Tasmanian Aboriginal remains, including Truganini's. It was common during my time at the museum for Tony and Zoe Rimmer to emphasize, in everyday conversation and gallery talks, how the presence of *ningina tunapri* served to cleanse and redeem the space. In addition, the successful canoe project (as described in Chapter Four) inspired *tayenebe*, and ultimately served as a

template for the revitalization of the Tasmanian Aboriginal women's fibre-work at the exhibit's core.

### ***Tayenebe, Metonyms, and the Crafting of Connection***

*It makes my heart sing when I complete each beautiful basket. I think the old women would be pleased.*  
-Patsy Cameron, as quoted in *tayenebe* exhibition catalogue (Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery 2009: 66)

Since *tayenebe* was organized around fibre objects, it is valuable to briefly describe a theoretical discussion of the value and meaning of museum objects. Richard Handler describes “an enduring tension, in the museum world and beyond, between the idea that the value of objects is relative and contingent, and the idea that true value is based upon universal criteria and is intrinsic to the object itself” (Handler 1992: 21). This dichotomy, between what Handler calls the “relativistic” and “positivist/ essentialist” positions, has strongly influenced museological theory and curatorial practice over the past thirty years.<sup>25</sup> Regardless of which side of this debate one may favor, it is critical to acknowledge, at minimum, *some* value of museum objects is enacted through practices like collecting, which is

one activity amongst several—including the self-conscious creation of objects as ‘art,’ the marketing of art and artifacts, and the ritual utilization of objects that in other contexts can come to be seen as art—that contribute to the ongoing creation of the values of objects. Those values are never static, never fixed once and for all in objects. Rather, they change ceaselessly as human relationships to objects change (Handler 1992: 26).

Meaning is also enacted in relation to the larger exhibitionary or institutional context. It is an anthropological truism that displaying the same object at either an art gallery or a natural history museum creates/ perpetuates divergent meanings and valuations. The rhetoric around authentic

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<sup>25</sup> Handler summarizes these positions in more detail when he writes, “With respect to objects, the relativist position claims... that value is conferred upon objects by human discourses and activities which are contextually specific; change the context, and the value and significance of the object change. By contrast, the essentialist position claims that value is intrinsic to the object itself; it resides there awaiting discovery (hence the appropriateness of the term ‘positivist’ for this position). In this perspective, true value does not vary across contexts” (Handler 1992: 21).

primitive art, and its institutional framing, is instructive in this regard. Often defined as art by appropriation (or metamorphosis) rather than art by intention, non-Western objects have historically been separated from classic objects of art such as sculpture and painting.<sup>26</sup> The emphasis on objects as “art” (primitive, or otherwise) in art galleries involves a minimization of cultural context and social utility, the very things traditionally emphasized at ethnological and natural history museums.<sup>27</sup> Shelly Errington provides insight into the connections between institutional setting and classificatory systems in her summary of the shifting categorizations of the non-Western art in the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Rockefeller Wing.

They have been moved great distances—from New Guinea, or Mesoamerica, or Africa—and have come to rest in New York City. Once in New York, they have continued their peripatetic existence. Over a period of decades, they have moved, some literally and some metaphorically, out of the American Museum of Natural History on the west side of Central Park, down to Midtown on 54<sup>th</sup> Street to the Museum of Primitive Art, and then up the other side of the park to the Met. These spatial movements parallel and help constitute their movements across categories (Errington 1994: 202).<sup>28</sup>

My motivation in discussing these topics is not to dredge up the category of authentic primitive art, as that corpse has hopefully been put to rest within anthropology (if not the general public), but to highlight how the meanings of objects are polysemic, in that they are contextual and situational. The miniature canoe on display in *ningina tunapri* has a very different meaning when presented in tandem with the new full-sized canoe than when it was presented in tandem with the 1931 group exhibit and Truganini’s skeletal remains. In the first case it represents a link in a

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<sup>26</sup> This statement is referring to pre-twentieth century ideologies of art. It should be noted that wood sculpture is at the core of the canon of “primitive art.”

<sup>27</sup> These categorical separations also involve the “denial of coevalness” (Fabian 1983). The canonical anthropological texts on these topics are, amongst others, Clifford 1985, 1988a and Price 1989. See also Morphy 2008 and Myers 1998, 2002, and 2006 for discussions (and classifications) of Aboriginal art in Australia.

<sup>28</sup> In this article Errington provides valuable insight not only into the foundations of the category of authentic primitive art, but also the concrete factors, such as size, durability, etc., that impact what is, and is not, consecrated as such. See Errington 1998 for an extended discussion of this topic.



continuous chain while in the second it serves as a marker of death and loss. In addition to possessing polysemic meanings, museum objects have a *metonymic* quality, meaning they have a tendency to “stand in” (or act as surrogates) for the individual creator as well as that individual’s cultural group.<sup>29</sup> In general terms, if an object is accepted (through whatever means) as legitimate and meaningful, its creator/ creator-culture is legitimated. Following this logic, if an object is deemed unworthy (either through its inability to be collected or because it is dismissed as “tourist” or “kitsch” art), its creator /creator-culture is devalued. These judgments have very real consequences within the realm of cultural performance and revitalization.

These insights are valuable in thinking about *tayenebe*, a project that simultaneously sought to re-frame historical baskets and celebrate the practice’s “return” as embodied in the newly-crafted objects. Bill Bleathman, TMAG’s Director, remembers the idea for *tayenebe* first arising during discussions at Canberra’s National Museum of Australia (NMA) in 2006, noting how “Tasmanian Aboriginal women had expressed a need to revitalise basket making knowledge, techniques and processes throughout the Community for future generations” (Bleathman 2009: 1). Commonwealth funding was obtained as part of a Cultural Retrieval Program (as discussed in Chapter Four), and the project was co-managed by TMAG, the NMA, and Arts Tasmania.<sup>30</sup> In broad terms, the *tayenebe* project, taking its title from a Bruny Island word meaning “exchange,” involved two key interrelated components, a set number of “on

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<sup>29</sup> Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett distinguishes between *in situ* and *in context* framings of the ethnographic object, arguing that the “notion of in situ entails metonymy and mimesis: the object is a part that stands in a contiguous relation to an absent whole that may or may not be re-created” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998: 19).

<sup>30</sup> The *tayenebe* website provides the following project information: “This project is the result of various forms of interaction. Individuals and institutions have worked together; women have worked to teach and re-learn fibre skills, and to learn about the plants once used everyday and the places that grow them. The Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, the National Museum of Australia and Arts Tasmania co-managed the project to ensure that women involved had support and opportunities to express ideas from making to exhibiting to writing and planning future work” (<http://static.tmag.tas.gov.au/tayenebe/tayenebe.html>). Accessed March 30, 2014.

country” workshops and a traveling exhibition. This project was of great importance for a number of reasons. First, following on the heels of *ningina tunapri*, it represented an additional act of good faith on the part of TMAG, whereby a cultural institution that had perpetuated the myth of extinction validated the Tasmanian Aboriginal people and their fibre-work. Second, the successful revitalization of fibre-work, whether it be kelp water carriers or twined baskets, would potentially provide the Aboriginal community with an additional item of demonstrable alterity, not to mention a connection to their ancestral culture.<sup>31</sup>

From May 2006 through November 2008 there were seven workshops throughout Tasmania (see Greeno 2009 for a detailed description of these gatherings). These workshops emphasized the sharing of space, time, and knowledge (of plants and twining). *Tayenebe* curator Julie Gough recounts how whereas prior to the project “[the skill] was only in the hands of two or three women – now there’s 35 who took part in the workshops” (*The Mercury*, July 7, 2009: 13). With the exception of a few “self-taught” individuals, the revitalization process of women’s fibre-work followed that of the bark canoes and, in many ways, the construction of *palawa kani*. The practices of making baskets and kelp water carriers had essentially ceased by the turn of the twentieth century, with Fanny Cochrane Smith being the last known weaver prior to the 1990s or thereabouts. As a result, source materials consisted mostly of historical descriptions and objects in institutional collections. The ever-present Plomley comments how

The baskets made by the Tasmanians were small globular or cylindrical openwork containers constructed from the long blade-like leaves of certain grasses and other plants. They were formed of upright lengths of fibrous stem held in place by horizontal double twists of more pliable fibre forming a figure-of-eight weave, and with the horizontal twists set about 5mm apart. These baskets were used not only as containers for shellfish by the women diving to collect them, but also to

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<sup>31</sup> A 2009 *Mercury* article states that: “The impetus for the *tayenebe* project was the desire to reconnect with the cultural crafts of their ancestors” (*The Mercury*, November 17, 2009: 33).

carry small articles such as stone implements and pieces of ochre when the women were on the move (Plomley 1977: 19).<sup>32</sup>

Such information was paired with drawings and paintings from people like Petit and Leseur and the thirty-seven known historical baskets housed in cultural institutions. Of these thirty-seven, seventeen are housed in TMAG, ten of which were “gathered” by Joseph Milligan and donated to the museum in 1851.<sup>33</sup> As was the case with the model canoes cat-scanned for *ningina tunapri*, these nineteenth century baskets served as conduits of connection (being both instructive and inspirational) for the contemporary revival of Tasmanian Aboriginal culture.

In 2008 I had the privilege and opportunity to intern in TMAG’s Indigenous Cultures Department for three months.<sup>34</sup> One of my focal tasks during this period was aiding Julie Gough with researching and planning the *tayenebe* traveling exhibition. My work involved many conversations with Julie and Tony Brown about the exhibit’s narrative. Since the exhibition would feature both historical and contemporary baskets, our work involved joining together objects with different temporalities and meanings. My main concern during this process was finding a way to position the objects in such a manner as to defuse a potential binary between the authentic “old” and the inauthentic “new.” Steeped as I was in literature regarding the art/artifact divide and “authentic primitive art,”<sup>35</sup> I was very concerned (probably overly so) the viewing public would judge the historical objects as the “real thing” at the expense of the contemporary

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<sup>32</sup> A.L. Meston adds: “The women were skilled in making baskets by a simple plaiting method, using a fibre obtained from *Gahnia* or *Dianella* softened while green in front of a fire. They also made water vessels from kelp fastened into shape with wooden skewers” (Meston 1965: 105). See also Roth (1899[1890]: 144-45) for a brief survey of historical descriptions, and Gough 2009 for a detailed discussion of the various colonial inter-cultural encounters and the roles played by baskets.

<sup>33</sup> This number includes the items sent to 1851’s Great Exhibition by Joseph Milligan. The complete list can be found in Gough 2009: 22. This list is based on Alan West’s 1993-1996 unpublished report for TMAG and AIATSIS, *Tasmanian Aboriginal Baskets*.

<sup>34</sup> This practicum internship was part of, and funded by, the Museum Studies Program at the University of Michigan.

<sup>35</sup> Related to both these classificatory systems is the idea of utility as a potential marker of authenticity.

objects (and concomitantly their makers). Interestingly, while the makers acknowledged a disjuncture between past and the present (i.e. a gap), they did not want it to be emphasized in the exhibition. At the time I (wrongly) interpreted the downplaying of the “lost period” as an obfuscation or erasure of loss. Subsequent fieldwork, however, led me to believe the “lost period” is not ignored but is actually bridged in creative ways. In this sense, it truly is “gap-work” through which internal essence is emphasized at the expense of surface disconnections (i.e. phenotypes, etc.).

In shifting to a contemporary exhibit of Tasmanian Aboriginal culture, it is insightful to acknowledge the ways in which, much like the 1931 group exhibit, *tayenebe* was an enactment of a particular idea of Tasmanian Aboriginality. Many of the exhibit’s core messages emerged during a July 24, 2008 planning meeting at TMAG with a dozen or so project participants from all over Tasmania. In preparation for the meeting I was entrusted with placing the 10 “Milligan baskets” on a long and narrow table for the weavers to inspect. Looking back, that day served as a foundation for my understanding of how these women understood revitalization and how ancestral connections (and continuity of tradition) could be *fabricated*, not in the sense of constructing a falsehood, but rather the weaving together of different parts.<sup>36</sup> The women felt strongly that the exhibit should emphasize the *process* of creation and its communal value rather than the aesthetic beauty of the objects themselves (the end-product). With many individuals still new to the practice, this sentiment was partially fueled by anxiety about the perceived (and relative) quality of the works. Additionally, this sentiment reflected their desire that the exhibition should celebrate cultural return and their experiences together during the many workshops. Several of the women expressed how they were motivated to sustain connections to

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<sup>36</sup> The second definition of “fabricate” in the Oxford English Dictionary is the most applicable here: “construct or manufacture (an industrial product), especially from prepared components” (<http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/fabricate?q=fabricate>).

place and people via the act of making. One person commented how *tayenebe* is about collective making, “passing knowledge on and how to make. It is a process of learning and coming together as women. Inspiration comes from that coming together” (meeting notes). Built within this statement is a tacit commentary about access and the rights of Aboriginal people to practice their culture. This is a very real concern, since many prime collection spots for particular types of grass and fibre are on private property. The weavers spoke about how meaningful it was for them to share their experiences and knowledge with one another, and the fact that they did so “on country” during the workshops strengthened their sense of (and connection to) place. As one person said, “It’s about getting together, something happens. It’s joy, jokes, and laughter. It makes you stronger... Aboriginal women together get strength, and then we go off again” (meeting notes).

The meeting’s discussions expressed great symmetry with many of my personal concerns, particularly how the “lost period” would be addressed (if at all). In general, connection in spite of disjuncture and unquestioned loss was discussed in the manner I wrote about in Chapter Four. Rhetoric pivoted around a physiological inheritance of an internal essence that has remained pure despite temporal and biological separation. This type of language reflects a sense of historical danger, for the innate knowledge<sup>37</sup> is positioned as “sleeping” until it is safe to re-emerge. Additionally, it foregrounds the agency of the contemporary women as active conduits of (re)connection. As one participant said, “We have been thinking about it, contemplating it until we were ready. Now we are ready” (meeting notes). Another concern of mine was the variable utility of the new baskets in relation to their nineteenth century counterparts. Unlike shell necklaces, for example, basketry and fibre-work haven’t traditionally been viewed as art,

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<sup>37</sup> During one of the *tayenebe* events in Sydney one of the women referred to this as “innate cultural knowledge.”

and emphasis has instead been placed on their utilitarian value as receptacles and means of transport. This potential binary (often operating with respect to ideas of authenticity) was defused via a telling statement that enacted a continuity of both practice and practitioners. At the meeting Verna Nichols commented that the “baskets are not empty. They are full of makers, their stories, their thoughts while making. The baskets are never empty. All of the thoughts jump out of the baskets and onto all of us” (meeting notes). This statement inspired one of the exhibit’s major themes, and its importance is highlighted by the fact that it was printed on the back cover of the *tayenebe* catalogue (Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery 2009). In light of these comments, the baskets remain metonyms for the culture as a whole, but what they represent has changed. Nineteenth century collectors emphasized object over maker, as indicated by the informational gaps that accompanied their entrance into museum collections. This was particularly true for Milligan, who we can assume knew the identity of the makers during his time at Wybalenna, yet this information was not documented. So not only were the makers anonymous (and disenfranchised), their baskets were frequently displayed as the metaphorical last breath of a dying corpse. Context and meaning are intertwined in museum exhibitions. Positioning the Milligan baskets alongside Truganini’s remains or the 1931 group exhibit means they would also represent loss and extinction. In recent years, however, the same baskets have served as starting/ reference points for the *tayenebe* project, which effectively re-defined both the objects and their creators. It is important to note that the first instantiation of *tayenebe* opened at TMAG on July 4, 2009 and featured a selection of the Milligan baskets as well as baskets made by Fanny Cochrane Smith and Truganini.<sup>38</sup> In orienting them in relation to cultural resurgence and contemporary practice, the very meaning (and presentation) of these historical objects

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<sup>38</sup> For its installation at TMAG this basket was on-loan from the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery in Launceston, Tasmania.

underwent a major shift from the solemn remains of a lost culture to inspirational evidence of contemporary (and ongoing) practice. Additionally, the baskets became emblems of the willpower and defiance of the ancestors in the face of massive cultural disruption and dislocation. With exhibits like *ningina tunapri* and *tayenebe*, the overall tenor at TMAG with regards to the Tasmanian Aboriginal people has undergone a sea-change from a funeral to a celebration.

### *Exchange and Keeping for Oneself*

The title of the exhibition, a Bruny Island word for “exchange,” presented unique challenges to its designers and curator. As with many exhibitions, the title arose in early discussions and became something to be shoehorned into exhibition’s overall narrative. Ultimately, the title became an illuminating vantage point from which to look at various relationships between cultural groups and time periods. In a 2009 *Mercury* article Julie Gough is quoted as saying: “*Tayenebe* means exchange, it’s a story of how things have been exchanged through time... In the beginning it was sometimes more of a taking, now it’s more a gifting and a sharing between the women and the institutions where the exhibits are touring” (*The Mercury*, July 7, 2009: 13). The use of the term “gift” is valuable, for it foregrounds the relationships between giving and taking, not to mention a cornucopia of anthropological literature on the subject. Unlike the tricky business of protocol and control relating to *palawa kani* (as discussed in Chapter Five), *tayenebe* is framed as a gift amongst Tasmanian Aboriginal women but also between the women and the viewing public. However, as with cultural objects or knowledge of great value, some knowledge must be kept private. For example, the women expressed concern over the potential use of photographic images depicting the early stages of basket-construction. One person said that in general photos were ok, just not “of starting a basket and not in

sequence,” while another suggested we “take out close-up photos of techniques” (meeting notes). The desire to maintain this knowledge for themselves was expressed in comments like, “It has become precious and sacred because it has not been part of our everyday,” “we want to protect [it] as ours for the future,” and “we are still trying to own our knowledge. No one has the right to take it away again” (meeting notes). Within the Tasmanian context, these statements themselves reflect the bridging of a gap, and they gesture towards the existence of cultural secrets that must remain as such.

Annette Weiner’s iconic work on inalienable wealth and “keeping while giving” is indispensable in this regard. While she tends to emphasize individual ownership, it is more productive in this context to focus on *communal/group* ownership and the benefits of inalienability as well as the hazards of loss, with respect to historical identity and connections between the past and the present. For Weiner, “keeping things instead of giving them away is essential if one is to retain some measure of one’s social identity in the face of potential loss and the constant need to give away what is most valued” (Weiner 1985: 211). Additionally, “keeping an object defined as inalienable adds to the value of one’s past, making the past a powerful resource for the present and the future” (Weiner 1985: 224). Returning to Bourdieu, maintaining possession of cultural knowledge can be a *consecrating* act for groups/ communities because it potentially sets them apart as distinct and should be valued as such.<sup>39</sup> In effect, the resurgence of Tasmanian Aboriginal women’s fibre-work enacted both a continuity of practice and a claim to the past as embodied by secret knowledge that must not be shared with the general, i.e. white,

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<sup>39</sup> Building on Weiner, Maurice Godelier writes: “Here as elsewhere, there are some things that must be kept and not given. These things that are kept — valuables, talismans, knowledge, rites — affirm deep-seated *identities and their continuity* over time. Furthermore they affirm the existence of *differences of identity* between individuals, between the groups which make up a society or which want to situate themselves respectively within a set of neighboring societies linked by various kinds of exchanges” (Godelier 1999: 33).



public.<sup>40</sup> As Weiner writes, “to lose this claim to the past is to lose part of who one is in the present. In its inalienability, the object must be seen as more than an economic resource and more than an affirmation of social relations” (Weiner 1985: 210). As demonstrated by their comments, there was a palpable recognition amongst the women that this practice, and the knowledge behind it, had been lost before and could be lost again. Accompanying these feelings was a strong sense that they must protect what remains and what has been resurrected (or “awoken”), and it was their responsibility as Tasmanian Aboriginal people to do so. This also marks a valuable point of overlap between the two exhibits under discussion, since the 1931 group exhibit was an effort by the Tasmanian populace to “revive” something that was theirs that they had lost (i.e. its indigenous population). The group exhibit’s enactment of a uniquely Tasmanian aboriginality set Tasmania apart from the rest of Australia, which helps explain its long-lasting presence and level of interest at the museum.

### ***Tayenebe on Display***

*It shows a new level of empowerment to be able to reach across the water and share with people interstate what we are achieving in Tasmania.*

*-Julie Gough (as quoted in The Mercury, March 31, 2010: 55)*

*Tayenebe* was a major exhibition for the Tasmanian Aboriginal community because it reflected and disseminated certain ideas of cultural stability and vitality and, as a traveling exhibition, circulated these ideas to an interstate audience for consecration and legitimation.<sup>41</sup>

While I was unable to see *tayenebe* as it was installed at TMAG, I fortunately saw it in Canberra and Sydney in 2010 and 2011.<sup>42</sup> Viewing *tayenebe* “in the flesh” allowed me the opportunity to

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<sup>40</sup> At the *tayenebe* planning meeting one woman said matter-of-factly that she “would not show any white person a traditional basket” (meeting notes).

<sup>41</sup> “Curator Julie Gough said it was the most comprehensive exhibition of Tasmanian Aboriginal craft ever to visit mainland Australia” (*The Mercury*, March 31, 2010: 55).

<sup>42</sup> After TMAG, *tayenebe* was at the National Museum of Australia, Canberra (March 25-July 25 2010), the Queensland Museum, Brisbane (August 21-November 21 2010), the Australian National Maritime Museum, Sydney (March 26-May 5 2011), Koorie Heritage Trust, Melbourne (August 30-October 23

see the connections between our many conversations from 2008 and the final product. In both places the organization and arrangement of the display panels were nearly identical. The desire to avoid a direct comparison of the baskets from different eras (i.e. with the old baskets at the start and the new baskets towards the end) was reflected in the spatial organization of the cases themselves. At the NMA in Canberra the exhibit curved in a semi-circle, with cases and text panels on both sides, thereby requiring viewers to walk around the cases themselves.

Additionally, viewers had the choice to enter from either side. Without a clear “start” or “finish” led to the overall effect being cumulative rather than teleological. For the most part, the baskets were joined together rather than segregated based on age, which effectively foregrounded the equivalences between the baskets and between their makers.

The various labels and text panels reflected many of the women’s concerns from the 2008 meeting, as was evident in the prevalence of their own words on full display. Unlike the 1931 group exhibit, the actual Tasmanian Aboriginal people were front-and-centre, with the cases adorned with their insights and opinions. The makers were no longer anonymous and were actively shaping their public narrative. The case’s labels reflected many of the underlying points of the exhibit, such as the connections between past and present and between the community and the land (“being home—people, place and plants”; unique island/ unique people<sup>43</sup>), the symbolic utility of baskets (“carrying culture—the land and sea are one”) and inherent cultural essence and the enactment of continuity (“not lost, just sleeping”). One case of note focused on how the women had toyed with materials and styles (“innovating with the inheritance”). For example, Verna Nichols had made a basket out of bull kelp, river reed, and echidna quills, in

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2011), and Flinders University City Gallery, Adelaide (December 16-February 19 2012). See the *tayenebe* website for more information: <http://static.tmag.tas.gov.au/tayenebe/tayenebe.html>. Accessed March 28, 2014.

<sup>43</sup> Tasmanian Aboriginal basketry utilizes an s-stitch rather than a z-twist, making it unique within the context of Australia.

effect using traditional Tasmanian Aboriginal materials in new and compelling ways.<sup>44</sup> Another example is *Yolla... a tribute to the strength to survive in the face of adversity*, made by Vicki Matson-Green, which combines a traditional white flag iris basket with muttonbird feathers.<sup>45</sup> Finally, a number of the women wove maireener shells into the baskets themselves, further combining traditional materials in non-traditional ways. Viewed as a whole, these new styles are evidence of a vibrant culture and a community confident enough to take their practices in new directions.<sup>46</sup> This acknowledgment (and celebration) of diversity can be viewed as a subtle commentary on past representations of static (and singular) Tasmanian Aboriginal culture at cultural institutions like TMAG.

Visible and active presence of Tasmanian Aboriginal people was a core component of the *tayenebe* travelling exhibit, with each stop featuring gallery talks from curator Julie Gough and demonstrations by project participants. My wife and I were able to take part in the programs at the Australian National Maritime Museum in Sydney in April 2011. The weavers participating in these events were Vicki Matson-Green and Patsy Cameron; two strong elders from Flinders Island that now live in northern mainland Tasmania. Following a Curator Gallery Talk in the morning by Julie Gough, I had a bit to eat with the weavers and we talked about many community issues and topics. Then the real fun began. Since the demonstrations required actual materials from Tasmania, Patsy and Vicki had flown from Tasmania with recently-gathered plant

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<sup>44</sup> This basket, along with some of Verna's other works, can be viewed at: <http://static.tmag.tas.gov.au/tayenebe/makers/VernaNichols/index.html>. Accessed March 28, 2014.

<sup>45</sup> This basket, along with some of Vicki's other works, can be viewed at: <http://static.tmag.tas.gov.au/tayenebe/makers/VickiMatson-Green/index.html>. Accessed March 28, 2014.

<sup>46</sup> Julie Gough addresses these points in the introduction to the *tayenebe* exhibit catalogue, writing: "The *tayenebe* workshops and exhibition... have been much more about processes than outcomes. Tasmanian Aboriginal women today are learning and sharing fibre skills and knowledge. Some are immersed in recreating the style of the traditional baskets, others are more experimental—the outcomes are determined by how the plants behave, what plants are available and what inspires the maker on the day" (Gough 2009: 32).

fibres and kelp. It was a pleasure to help prepare for the afternoon's demonstration, which involved a whirlwind of activity between various areas of the museum. As we walked throughout the building with arms full of kelp and plant fibres Vicki Matson-Green said, with a bit of a wink, "we Tasmanian women have trodded on a few toes since we've been here." My fondest memory is from the kitchen area adjoining a meeting/ public space, where we worked to rehydrate the massive pieces of bull kelp. As the materiality of the kelp shifted from that of a dry wetsuit to a vibrant and malleable hunter green, the grass fibres were submerged in a tub of water to make them more pliable. Tables were set up near the museum's entrance and covered with kelp and sample fibres for visitors to "have a go" at twining (See Figures 6.2 and 6.3). The women were open and kind, and the value of their presence was quite powerful.

The day's events concluded with an "after hours" gallery talk and exhibition walkthrough that involved drinks and nibbles. The weavers, along with Julie Gough, talked about the project and the value these revitalized practice had for the community. As with the exhibition itself, these talks stressed return rather than loss. Viewed through a certain lens, indigenous people were on-display in the manner criticized by people like Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña (with the air of the "real" that dioramas and group exhibits sought to depict), albeit with one major difference. In this context the community "on display" had more control over the content and meaning of such a performance. The overall impact of the various events is difficult to gauge, but interest and enthusiasm was palpable. At one point I overheard an older gentleman commenting on the supposed stone-age level of the Tasmanians, saying how he had "always been told that they were a stone-age peoples, because they didn't make pottery, but these [the baskets] are incredibly skillful." At the very least, such comments indicate how *tayenebe* has prompted critical reflection.



Figures 6.2 and 6.3. Patsy Cameron and Vicki Matson-Green (left), my wife (right) at *tayenebe* demonstration. (Photos taken by author)

### ***Concluding Thoughts: Aboriginal Futures***

To return to my opening comments, the two exhibitions addressed in this chapter represent very different approaches (and motivations) towards enacting Tasmanian Aboriginal culture for public consumption. Additionally, when viewed in concert they exemplify a broader shift in perspective from *primitive pasts* to *indigenous (or Aboriginal) futures*. As I have demonstrated in this dissertation, the Tasmanian Aboriginal peoples have historically been defined (more so than most) by what their ancestors represented within social evolutionary frameworks and, as a result, their corresponding value for cultural institutions (not to mention anthropology) has been the proposed light their Paleolithic past can shed onto our (European) cultural history. The tangible results of such a backwards-looking perspective have been exhibits like the 1931 group exhibit, which sought to provide Tasmania's residents a "near-reality" of "their" Aboriginal peoples. Moreover, extensive disjuncture and cultural dislocation has essentially forced contemporary community members to utilize historical records, accounts, and

objects in service of revitalizing “lost” practices of material culture production (baskets, canoes, kelp water carriers) and language (*palawa kani*). In essence, the community has had to look backwards in order to even have the opportunity to look forwards.

*Tayenebe*’s focus on the present and the future was (and continues to be) exhilarating. I first became aware of this sentiment at the *tayenebe* planning meeting in 2008, during which one prominent Tasmanian Aboriginal elder kindly told Julie Gough that she often gets sidetracked by her fascination with the past, saying that “this exhibition is about now.” On a similar point, another participant said we must “stop looking at old history. Listen to what people are saying together today. Learn about now again” (meeting notes). This perspective focuses on what I call *indigenous/ Aboriginal futures* and is quite prevalent in recent intercultural as well as community-controlled displays and museum exhibits. In the case of Tasmania, it indicates the presence of a vital (and revitalized) cultural practice that is no longer reliant on historical evidence and reinforcement and can “stand on its own two feet.” Presenting culture in such a manner, plus showcasing the ways in which new innovative styles and designs are emerging, is a strong statement to make to both Tasmanian and wider Australian audiences.

## Chapter Seven

### Cultural Landscapes and the (In) Formation of Consensus: A Discussion of Heritage in Tasmania

#### *Introduction*

Around noon on September 2, 2010 I left my volunteer work at TMAG and made the short walk across the street to the Town Hall Building for a public meeting. This event, entitled “Ancient Life at the Brighton Levee,” had been the focus of a public notice in the previous week’s *Mercury* encouraging the public to come and hear “archaeologists explain the international significance of the area” (*The Mercury*, August 28, 2010: 71). The “Brighton Bypass,” a new highway project slightly north of Hobart,<sup>1</sup> was the most prominent public issue for the Tasmanian Aboriginal people during my fieldwork. August 2009 and February 2010 archaeological surveys along the proposed route had uncovered Aboriginal artifacts at the Jordan River Levee consisting almost exclusively of stone tools dating as far back as 42,000 years. The site was potentially one of the most important discoveries in years based on this date and its status as “undisturbed.” The State Government proposed building a bridge over the site’s northern section, a proposition the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre (TAC) found insufficient. What

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<sup>1</sup> Federal Stimulus in response to 2008’s Global Financial Crisis funded the new highway. A 2010 Interim Report of the excavation describes the Brighton Bypass project as a “key component in the Southern Tasmania National Transport Network Investment Program 2007-2015. The proposed Brighton Bypass will become part of the Midland Highway (and Auslink network), connecting the city of Hobart with population centres in the north of the State. Under the project, the towns of Brighton and Pontville will be bypassed, forming a new highway offering a higher level of service” (Cultural Heritage Management Australia 2010: 4).

followed were extensive public events, campaigns, and protests, often couched in the language of universal value.

The public meeting at the Town Hall was one such event. Along with roughly 250 people, I sat and listened to a number of speakers, including a Hobart alderman and two archaeologists, address the controversial Brighton Bypass project and the Jordan River Levee archaeological site that lay in its way. The majority of speakers made emotional appeals to save this site of “international significance.” Archaeologist Robert Paton said the site “contained an estimated 2.5 million artefacts that possibly go back 42,000 years” (*The Mercury*, September 3, 2010: 13). In the following day’s paper Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre chief executive Heather Sculthorpe commented how the community’s campaign to alter the bypass’s route had been fruitful, saying, “Editorials and the preponderance of letters in the newspapers seem to be in our favour... We can’t win this on our own. The fact so many white people are coming to support it is gratifying... The age of the site is significant not just to Aborigines but humankind” (*The Mercury*, September 3, 2010: 13). Despite Ms. Sculthorpe’s expectations that the campaign “would receive considerable support from the international archaeological community” (*The Mercury*, September 3, 2010: 13), the Jordan River levee was only added to the National Heritage List after construction had begun on the bridge over the archaeological site.

Heritage, in its various forms, is a major source of Tasmania’s social identity and (inter)national worth. Tasmania values its heritage so much that 45% of the island is protected land,<sup>2</sup> consisting of UNESCO sites of World Heritage (including the massive “Tasmanian

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<sup>2</sup> The Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service website states the “**terrestrial reserved area is 3,064,500 hectares, or 45.0%** of the area of Tasmania” (<http://www.parks.tas.gov.au/index.aspx?base=5710>). As of early 2013, Tasmania had 19 National Parks, 65 State Reserves, 86 Nature Reserves, 12 Game Reserves, 337 Conservation Areas, 26 Nature Recreation Areas, 25 Regional Reserves, and 30 Historic Sites (<http://www.parks.tas.gov.au/index.aspx?base=28758>). Accessed March 30, 2014.



Wilderness,” which covers the majority of Southwestern Tasmania<sup>3</sup>), Australia’s premier convict sites, a slew of National Parks, and extensive colonial architecture. Heritage is the epicenter of Tasmania’s tourist industry,<sup>4</sup> which is of no small importance for a state with a chronically anemic economy. The sheer amount of colonial architecture in Tasmania (significantly larger than anywhere else in the country), combined with its natural environment, is a source of pride and identity for its populace and sets the small island apart from the rest of the nation-state. It is a tall order to walk the streets of Hobart, not to mention the state’s countless small towns and hamlets, and not be surrounded by nineteenth century history in the form of churches, statues, and placards. The past, in its various forms, is valued, maintained, and ever-present. Not all pasts are recognized equally, however. Aboriginal heritage has historically failed to garner the same level of support as general “Tasmanian” (or unmarked “white”) heritage, a fact that, upon examination, potentially sheds light on the broader dynamics of heritage (both local and global) and its professed universal value (and valuation).

That Tasmanian heritage is divided into different ethnic/racial categories was made abundantly clear to me during my fieldwork. In the midst of the Brighton campaign, for example, it was announced that five Tasmanian convict sites had been added to UNESCO’s World Heritage List. This was a major development because they were “the first Tasmanian buildings listed and are only the third in Australia behind the Royal Exhibition Building in Melbourne and Sydney Opera House, which were added in 2004 and 2007 respectively” (*The Mercury*, August 2, 2010: 5). The consecration of these sites by a major international organization was met with

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<sup>3</sup> “Covering an area of over 1 million hectares, the Tasmanian Wilderness constitutes one of the last expanses of temperate rainforest in the world. It comprises a contiguous network of reserved lands that extends over much of south-western Tasmania including several coastal islands” (<http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/181/>). Accessed March 30, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> There has been a recent shift towards the arts as a major draw for interstate and international visitors, exemplified by David Walsh’s Museum of Old and New Art (MONA) and TMAG’s redevelopment and expansion.

near-universal fanfare, apart from those who recognized the irony that such recognition overlapped with the battle to protect an Aboriginal site of deep antiquity and potential importance. Simply put, Aboriginal heritage is not on even-footing in Tasmania, and not just because it is formally segregated as a result of the Aboriginal Relics Act of 1975.<sup>5</sup> A more parochial and uniquely Tasmanian “controversy” is instructive in this regard. In early 2011 the owners of an old bank building at 26 Murray Street in Hobart had the audacity to install red awnings over its windows. As a heritage listed building, it was subject to a litany of constraints regarding its appearance, with the Tasmanian Heritage Council eventually ruling against their presence on the grounds that they were “inconsistent with the historic and architectural character of this historically significant intact section of heritage-listed places in Murray St” and “impact on the ability to appreciate this and adjacent heritage-listed places” (*The Mercury*, May 7, 2011: 26). The public response to this decision was shockingly large, with an editorial in the newspaper stating that there “have been more letters to the editor and postings on this newspaper’s website about the red awnings this week than any other topic, including the [recent] killing of Osama bin Laden and the looming federal and state budgets” (*The Mercury*, May 7, 2011: 26). This was a major event by Tasmanian standards, and the public attention it received and the passion it aroused were conspicuous by their relative absence in the case of the Brighton Bypass. I was moved enough by the willful operation of this heritage binary to write a letter to the paper, stating how “It’s sad that many more Tasmanians appear to oppose the red awnings on Murray St than the bridge through the Jordan River Aboriginal site and potentially through reconciliation”

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<sup>5</sup> One of the main points of contention in this Act is found in its stated qualifications for what will, and what won’t, be treated as Aboriginal Relics. The most telling section reads: “No object made or created after the year 1876 shall for the purposes of this Act be treated as a relic, and no activity taking place after that year shall for those purposes be regarded as being capable of giving rise to such a relic” (Aboriginal Relics Act 1975). The Act in its entirety can be found at: [http://www.thelaw.tas.gov.au/tocview/index.w3p;cond=;doc\\_id=81%2B%2B1975%2BAT%40EN%2B20140216000000;histon=;prompt=;rec=;term=](http://www.thelaw.tas.gov.au/tocview/index.w3p;cond=;doc_id=81%2B%2B1975%2BAT%40EN%2B20140216000000;histon=;prompt=;rec=;term=). Accessed November 19, 2013.

(*The Mercury*, March 15, 2011: 15). At the time this did not feel like hyperbole, for the battle was shaping up to be a referendum on how the Aboriginal community was valued by the state and commonwealth governments. In hindsight (and even at the time) it was clear part of the Tasmanian public's general apathy about Aboriginal politics was due to the TAC's style of campaigning, which had historically alienated non-Aboriginal people. With this in mind, the Brighton campaign was marked by a shift towards a more inclusive politic, one tethered to idealizations of heritage and what heritage is. In practical terms, the task at hand for the TAC was to not only show how the site was valuable to them (and therefore worthy of protection) but how it was valuable for *all*.

World heritage is predicated upon contradictory discourses of diversity and universality and involves the legitimation of people, places, and things (tangible and intangible). Regarding world heritage, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett perceives a "fundamental contradiction... between the celebration of diversity, on the one hand, and the application of a universal standard for determining which cultural expressions will be designated masterpieces of the heritage of humanity, on the other" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2006: 186). In short, "Not everything makes the heritage cut" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2006: 186). With these sentiments in mind, this chapter tells two stories of Tasmanian Aboriginal heritage. The first story begins in the 1930s with the re-discovery of, and various reactions to (governmental, institutional, social), extensive petroglyphs. The second is the aforementioned controversy over the Brighton Bypass project. The first is based on extensive archival and institutional research and offers an historical case of heritage legitimation while the second provides a counterpoint whose ultimate fate is still unfolding. Both stories share similar trajectories from discovery, to valuation, to possible consecration and protection. Viewed in concert, they highlight the central role of consensus in

the anointment of world (or national) heritage status. As a result, heritage is a unique sociocultural phenomenon in contradistinction to the elements of culture I have addressed up to this point. So far I have dedicated extensive real estate to explicating the relationship between Tasmanian Aboriginal culture (revitalized and otherwise) and identity formation in the face of severe, and in some cases, irreparable, cultural disruption. In doing so I have emphasized the importance such connections have for the Tasmanian Aboriginal people. Heritage, on the other hand, draws its value from its importance for *all* humanity, and therefore involves a consecration of a different sort. Again drawing insight from Bourdieu, this consecration as *valuable for all* relies on the formation of a specific form of consensus informed and authorized by particular standards and structures. In both stories being told, the heritage formula is needed to make things happen.

### ***“Evidence of Skill”: Petroglyphs, Protection, and Paradigm-Shifts***

One of my central tasks as a volunteer at TMAG was to gather, consolidate, and organize all the information I could find on Tasmanian Aboriginal rock art. The project’s end goal was the repatriation of museum-held petroglyphs to the Tasmanian Aboriginal Land and Sea Council (TALSC). TALSC is a community organization that manages a number of Aboriginal sites on the island, including Preminghana.<sup>6</sup> Preminghana, also known by its older name Mount Cameron West, is “situated at the northern end of a long exposed beach, some three kilometres north of the basaltic bluff which forms the 160 metre high spine of Mount Cameron West on the west coast of Tasmania” (Jones 1981: 7.89). It is comprised of multiple groups of carvings, with the “main motif everywhere [being] the circle, which varies from a few centimeters in diameter to more

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<sup>6</sup> TALSC’s description and current responsibilities with respect Preminghana are found at: <http://www.talsc.net.au/preminghana.htm>. Accessed March 30, 2014.

than 1 metre across” (Flood 2004[1983]: 164-165). In addressing its value, Rhys Jones views Preminghana as

by far the most complex art site in Tasmania... The Tasmanians carried with them to their island an artistic tradition as old as the cave art of the Magdalenian hunters of Europe. In isolation they maintained this style unaffected by the many artistic developments on the adjacent mainland – such as polychrome painting and the depiction of figurative motifs of men, animals, artefacts, etc. Mount Cameron West is internationally recognized as one of the most interesting art sites ever created by a hunting and gathering society (Jones 1981: 7.90).

It is also of great historical significance in that its discovery (or more accurately, re-discovery) helped lead to a Kuhnian scientific revolution with respect to how the Tasmanian Aboriginal people had been understood.<sup>7</sup> Much space has been dedicated to the socio-evolutionary Paleolithic prison that entrapped (and in some ways continues to entrap) the Tasmanian Aboriginal peoples, but it is worth re-stating that prior to the 1930s there were strong doubts whether they possessed artistic sensibilities, not to mention abstract thought and religious cosmologies. The unearthing of Preminghana (amongst other Tasmanian rock art sites) created a major shift in understandings (and valuations) of the pre-historic Tasmanians. In presenting the story of the Preminghana petroglyphs, many patterns emerge regarding how heritage operates on national and international scales.

In a letter published in *Walkabout*,<sup>8</sup> Rosamond McCulloch provides an informative summary of Tasmanian petroglyphs. McCulloch, then a teacher at Hobart’s Technical College, recounts how prior to 1930 “it was generally assumed that no form of pictorial art had been achieved by the extinct Tasmanians. No remains existed, as far as was known, and such first-hand references as can be found were made over a century ago by untrained observers in

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1996[1962]) is good to think with in this instance. Although his focus is on shifts in scientific paradigms, Kuhn’s insights into the relationships between paradigms, crisis, and consensus are valuable in relation to Preminghana and the “anomaly” it represented with respect to the “Tasmanians as Paleolithic Man” paradigm.

<sup>8</sup> *Walkabout* is Australia’s answer to *National Geographic*.

circumstances where Mainland or European influences are equally suspect” (McCulloch 1952: 48).<sup>9</sup> McCulloch had more than a passing interest in the topic, as she was a friend and colleague of A.L. Meston, the person most responsible for the re-discovery and dissemination of information regarding Tasmanian Aboriginal petroglyphs.<sup>10</sup> The first rock art location Meston addressed was at Devonport’s Mersey Bluff on Tasmania’s Northern coast. He first commented on its existence at a February 1931 meeting of the Royal Society of Tasmania. A brief *Notes of the Day* blurb in *The Mercury* recounts how Meston had been investigating rock carvings in Devonport and “was convinced [they] were of aboriginal origin.” Additionally, his discovery was “a most interesting one, as hitherto no rock carvings of aboriginal origin have been found in Tasmania, and his promised paper on the subject should prove of considerable interest” (*The Mercury*, February 20, 1931: 6). Meston delivered on this promise by presenting a paper, *Aboriginal Rock-Carvings of the North-West Coast of Tasmania*, to the Royal Society on July 13, 1931 (Meston 1932).<sup>11</sup> Therein Meston notes the “rock of which the Bluff is composed is diabase, and it is in this hard, refractory material that the engravings are made. All are cut on horizontal faces of rock and are distributed over the whole area of the promontory” (Meston 1932: 14). The carvings, seventy-five in total, “seem to fall into two classes, one depicting natural objects, the other signs and patterns,” and “occasionally, the artist has made use of a

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<sup>9</sup> After surveying the historical sources, H. Ling Roth concluded “The whole question of the existence of drawings by aborigines before European advent is practically an open one” (Roth 1899[1890]: 138). Rhys Jones provides a similar argument as McCulloch, stating prior to the 1930’s there was “considerable debate as to whether or not Tasmanian Aborigines had practised art at all. Not only did [the discovery of the Preminghana site] dispel such misconceptions, but the site stands today as the greatest surviving example of Tasmanian Aboriginal artistic expression” (Jones 1981: 7 89).

<sup>10</sup> Not to mention an individual whose extensive publications on topics of Tasmanian Aboriginal culture, primarily in *The Papers and Proceedings of the Royal Society of Tasmania*, have been cited liberally in this dissertation. During his life Meston served as Headmaster of the State High School at West Devonport followed by the same position in Launceston.

<sup>11</sup> An interesting companion to this paper is one Meston published in October 1931, in *The Victorian Naturalist*. This paper, *Rock Carvings in Tasmania* (Meston 1931), is essentially a truncated version of Meston 1932, with fewer plates and images of the Devonport carvings. The Royal Society Paper is also summarized in *The Mercury*, April 21, 1931: 10.

natural unevenness in the rock to make his design stand out the more, but cracks in the rock have not been used” (Meston 1932: 14). Additionally, Meston argues the notable depth of the Devonport carvings is “in striking contrast with carvings found on the mainland of Australia, which are for the greater part cut in soft limestone, slate, or sandstone, and are not very deep” (Meston 1932: 15).

The local scientific and institutional communities met Meston’s paper with a healthy skepticism. In a paper presented at the next meeting of the Royal Society, E.O.G. Scott, Assistant Curator at Launceston’s Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, argues the Devonport “carvings” were more likely the result of natural rather than human forces (Scott 1932). In his paper, playfully and subversively titled *Preliminary Note on the Supposed Aboriginal Rock-Carvings at Mersey Bluff, Devonport*, Scott concludes the carvings were “very probably not of human, but of natural origin” (Scott 1932: 112). If humans did not make the carvings, then what did? According to Scott they were probably due to lichens.<sup>12</sup> Even though it is now part of *Tiagarra*, a Tasmanian Aboriginal cultural center (an “enterprise of the Six Rivers Aboriginal Corporation,” aka Dalrymple Briggs’ “mob”),<sup>13</sup> there remains no clear consensus regarding the provenance of the Mersey Bluff “carvings.” Fortunately for Meston (not to mention the Tasmanian Aboriginal community), a number of rock art sites of unquestioned human creation

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<sup>12</sup> Scott’s paper was also the subject of an extensive article in *The Mercury*. Under the headline, *ABORIGINAL CARVINGS. Discoveries at Devonport. Human Theory Discounted. Probably Due to Lichens*, the author notes how “Concentric circles engraved in the rock on the south coast of England, and long thought to be of human workmanship, had been shown to be almost certainly due to lichen action, and certain rock markings in Australia also had been attributed to the same causes... Lichens were known to be able to eat into glass, and the diabase at Devonport contained 46 per cent of silica, or natural glass” (*The Mercury*, September 22, 1931: 8).

<sup>13</sup> More information can be found at:

<http://www.discovertasmania.com/attraction/tiagarraaboriginalculturecentreandmuseum>. Accessed March 30, 2014.

were subsequently uncovered in Tasmania.<sup>14</sup> If additional sites had never been found the pre-historic Tasmanians would certainly still be viewed as severely lacking in the arena of cultural expression.

Meston presented a second paper on Aboriginal rock art to the Royal Society on October 10<sup>th</sup>, 1932, and this time his discovery would be met with uniform acceptance. Appropriately titled *Aboriginal Rock Carvings in Tasmania. Part II*, Meston's paper describes another set of carvings he had found the previous December at Mount Cameron West "on the West Coast, 90 miles, as the crow flies, from those at Devonport" (Meston 1933: 1).<sup>15</sup> Perhaps stinging a bit from Scott's refutation of his previous findings, Meston draws attention to how "These carvings are not only intensely interesting in themselves, but are important, in that they provide further evidence of aboriginal art" (Meston 1933: 1).<sup>16</sup> At that time the Van Diemen's Land Company still owned the land on which the petroglyph site was found, and some of their stockmen had known about them for years. That being said, Meston deserves credit for publicizing their existence and appearance. Meston's descriptions of the location and the art itself were

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<sup>14</sup> While there have been more recent discoveries since it was published, Sims 1977 remains a valuable summary of Tasmanian petroglyphs.

<sup>15</sup> *The Mercury* summarized Meston's paper at-length in the following day's newspaper (see *The Mercury*, October 11, 1932: 10). Large portions of both Royal Society papers were recycled for a 1934 article in *Antiquity*, which would have provided Meston's findings a broader and wider audience outside of Tasmania (See Meston 1934).

<sup>16</sup> As with the response to the Mersey Bluff carvings, there were efforts to deny authorship of the Preparinghana/ Mount Cameron West petroglyphs to the Tasmanian Aboriginal people. In a 1955 paper in the *Papers and Proceedings of the Tasmanian Historical Research Association (THRA)*, W.H. MacFarlane reflected on his "long residence in Torres Strait and Thursday Island," and how he "frequently heard Japanese claims that certain islands north of Australia, and even Australia itself, should rightly belong to Japan, by reason of their prior discovery" (MacFarlane 1955: 15). A Mr. Odo informed him of a Japanese legend regarding an "expedition which had left Japan about the Fifteenth Century and had reached Tasmania after sailing down the east coast of Australia. Several members of the expedition had died, and were buried on the coast. As a permanent record of their visit, the expedition had left hieroglyphics on large rocks, several of which were said to be on the west or north-west coast of Tasmania, and also on the mainland" (MacFarlane 1955: 15). While such papers had minimal impact, they do gesture to a wider effort to disassociate these petroglyphs from their Tasmanian Aboriginal creation.



foundational to the discussion and discursive representation of rock art in Tasmania and therefore will be quoted at length.

Twelve miles south of Cape Grim there projects into the sea a massive diabase headland, which, although only more than 500 feet high, rising, as it does, out of a country of low elevation, is so prominent a feature that it is called Mount Cameron West. Two miles north of this landmark are two outcrops of friable calcareous sandstone, 150 yards apart, small in area, and of low elevation, on which the carvings are found. The rock is soft and easily worked, but hardens on contact with the air. In consequence of its friable nature many of the carvings are badly weathered, and all show marks of erosion. The circle, a common form at Devonport, is here the motif of most of the designs. Here, however, are found features absent from the Devonport carvings, namely, groups of three straight lines roughly parallel with one another, and rows of indentations (Meston 1933: 1-2).

At the southern outcrop “the natives have made use, not of the main mass, but of two detached blocks lying at its foot... Indentations or punch-marks are first made close together, apparently with a quartzite burin or punch, driven by a stone used as a hammer; then a continuous line is made by connecting up the holes so formed” (Meston 1933: 2). The northern outcrop, however, has since become the most iconic example of Tasmanian Aboriginal rock art, mostly because it

is just a mass of carvings. The cliff face and detached slabs, no matter at what angle they lie, provided there is a smooth surface, have provided a medium for the artist. In the main mass there is a shallow cavern, upon the roof of which, quite out of reach of one standing below, two circles have been carved... One mass of approximately 12 feet square, tilted at an angle of about 60 degrees, is entirely covered with circles and concentric circles, some badly weathered, others in a good state of preservation (Meston 1933: 2).

Meston later positioned the petroglyphs, alongside Tasmanian Aboriginal canoes, baskets, and potentially houses, as evidence that the pre-historic Tasmanians did, in fact, have “culture.” In work that involves historical sources, titles can be illuminating. In this respect, spending extensive amounts of time with Tasmanian newspapers has been one of this project’s minor pleasures. One great title, *TASMANIAN BLACKS. Lack of Culture Denied. Evidence of Skill* (*The Mercury*, March 15, 1934: 7), belongs to a 1934 *Mercury* article that describes one of Meston’s

many public talks. That cultural possession was still being debated in 1934 is telling, and foregrounds the value and impact of Meston's petroglyph work. During a luncheon at the Launceston Rotary Club at the Brisbane Hotel on March 14, 1934, Meston "adduced interesting evidence showing that the aborigines of this State had considerable skill in making certain devices, boats and houses, and in carving designs on rocks." Viewed in concert, these "things went to show that the Tasmanian aborigines had culture" (*The Mercury*, March 15, 1934: 7). Interrogated through a particular lens, the discovery of the petroglyphs played a central role in helping "raise up" the pre-historic Tasmanians by serving as proof of "culture" in both the plural Boasian sense and the singular sense endemic in social-evolutionary thought. The repercussions of this sea-change are still felt to this day, as indicated by my previous discussions of material culture revival and community-formation in Tasmania.

The acknowledgement of Tasmanian Aboriginal authorship of the petroglyphs (and the artistic capabilities they represented) was not without its limitations. The Tasmanians remained situated in Trouillot's Savage Slot, with progressives like Meston framing the petroglyphs in relation to a Durkheimian "collective mind" through which cultural expression was transmitted and propagated. Meston and his contemporaries employed a functionalist approach (some would say Malinowskian) to explain the petroglyphs' potential purpose and, by claiming that they served to control the uncontrollable, they explicitly refuted the artist's individuality and creativity.<sup>17</sup> Meston writes, "It is generally recognised that art for art's sake is not known to primitive peoples. All art was utilitarian, and took its rise from a belief in magic. This is true of

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<sup>17</sup> Not to mention denying them aesthetic appreciation and enjoyment. As Franz Boas writes, "No people known to us, however hard their lives may be, spend all their time, all their energies in the acquisition of food and shelter, nor do those who live under more favorable conditions and who are free to devote to other pursuits the time not needed for securing their sustenance occupy themselves with purely industrial work that gives to them esthetic pleasure, and those whom a bountiful nature or a greater wealth of inventions has granted freedom from care, devote much of their energy to the creation of works of beauty" (Boas 1955: 9).

the prehistoric paintings of the caves of Altamira, of the drawings and sculptures in the caverns of the Cantabrian Pyrenees, of the Haute Garonne, and of the Dordogne” (Meston 1932: 15).<sup>18</sup> Meston proposed the petroglyphs had a purpose similar to sympathetic magic as described by armchair anthropologists like James Frazer (1945[1922]), namely as way to influence the natural environment by depicting a particular thing (to prevent, or make it, rain, for example). An additional explanation is drawn from Bishop Codrington’s writings about Melanesia with respect to Mana.<sup>19</sup> As Codrington writes (and is quoted, mostly accurately, in Meston 1934: 184),

There is a belief in a force altogether distinct from physical power, which acts in all kinds of ways for good and evil, and which it is of the greatest advantage to possess or control. This is Mana... It is a power or influence, not physical, and in a way supernatural; but it shews itself in physical force, or in any kind of power or excellence which a man possesses... and it essentially belongs to personal beings to originate it, though it may act through the medium of water, or a stone, or a bone. All Melanesian religion consists, in fact, in getting this Mana for one’s self, or getting it used for one’s benefit (Codrington 1891: 118-119).

And, as was the case for Codrington’s Melanesians, it seemed probable that “the Tasmanians possessed some such outlook, and art to them was a means of encountering and overcoming the Great Unknown” (Meston 1934: 184).<sup>20</sup> This excerpt brings to mind Malinowski’s intrepid Trobriand Islander sailors using magic to control unwieldy (and unpredictable) currents, tides, and winds (Malinowski 1984[1922]), which clearly influenced Meston. Interestingly, couching such explanations in the language of a Durkheimian collective and openly dismissing the possibility of “art for art’s sake” are elements of standard heritage formulas as described by

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<sup>18</sup> In a later piece Meston writes: “And what, we ask, was the purpose of the carvings? Were they made at the whim of the artist to pass away an idle hour, was he seeking a means of self expression, or had they a greater significance? Art for art’s sake, it seems to me, will not explain them. I see in them something strictly utilitarian, something arising out of a belief in magic” (Meston 1934: 183).

<sup>19</sup> It bears repeating that during this period a Melanesian origin for the Tasmanians was still accepted, which directly motivated Meston’s usage of comparative data from Melanesia.

<sup>20</sup> *The Mercury* stated “Mr. Meston expressed the opinion that the carvings were connected in some way with the magic or religious rites of the blacks. They had been known to bear such significance in other countries” (*The Mercury*, February 5, 1934: 5).

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, the protocols of which “speak of collective creation. Performers are ‘carriers,’ ‘transmitters,’ and ‘bearers of traditions,’ terms that connote a passive medium, conduit, or vessel, without volition, intention, or subjectivity” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2006: 179). From a contemporary perspective it is fascinating how, from the very start, the Tasmanian petroglyphs were positioned as world heritage and valued in such terms.

The symbols’ possible meanings have commonly been described in relation to similar designs from other parts of the world. Alongside motivation/purpose, such singularization (and standardization) is a major facet of the heritage process. The symbols themselves are quite common, with Plomley noting that the “motif of the circle is common in ancient petroglyphs the world over, so that the circles inscribed by the ancient dwellers of Scotland are little different from those found in Tasmania” (Plomley 1977: 41). On the national level they served as evidence of continuity and connection with mainland Aboriginal populations, with TMAG Archaeologist Harry Lourandos contending in 1969 that

there were similarities between [the Mt. Cameron West carvings] and those found in other parts of Australia... They showed exactly the same symbols, such as circles, straight lines, footprints, animal and bird tracks, etc, although at least 12,000 years separated them from the continental group... He said Mt Cameron was one more link in establishing the modern theory, backed up by much archaeological work, to show that Tasmanians were Australian aboriginals stranded on the new forming island of Tasmania, and not, as previously thought, a lost race that got here by some mysterious means (*The Mercury*, March 22, 1969: 10).<sup>21</sup>

The co-occurrence of similar (if not same) artistic forms, both nationally and internationally, had (and continues to have) a validating effect on the Tasmanian Aboriginal people. Attempts to ascribe or deduce the meaning of the Tasmanian carvings commonly import meanings from mainland Australia. This itself is crucial in the consecration of heritage as such, particularly in cases where the comparative evidence comes from locations of accepted and noteworthy value.

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<sup>21</sup> Remember the debates between the “voyagers” and “overlanders” described in Chapter Two.

Despite fringe positives in the cultural sphere, it is important to be cautious in presuming that similar, or same, designs or forms share the same meanings cross-culturally. Over a century ago Franz Boas problematized the relationship between form and meaning, specifically in *The Decorative Art of North American Indians* (Boas 1982).<sup>22</sup> In describing a “type of moccasin used by the Shoshone, Sioux and Arapaho,” Boas concludes certain “types of designs are so much alike that they might belong to one tribe as well as to another” (Boas 1982: 555). While “This design is so complex that evidently it must have had a single origin. It is of great importance to note that nevertheless the explanations given by the various tribes are quite different” (Boas 1982: 555). Boas’s novel conclusion is that, at least in this case, it is probable *form preceded meaning*, with the same design traveling to different cultural groups who subsequently ascribed their own meaning to it. If the “ideas conveyed by this design to the makers” differs cross-culturally, “it is clear that they must have developed after the invention or introduction of the design ; that the design is primary, the idea secondary, and that the idea has nothing to do with the historical development of the design itself” (Boas 1982: 555).<sup>23</sup> A more local (or local-ish) example of the indeterminacy of meanings is sandpainting in Australia’s Western Desert, particularly those of the Walpiri. Anthropologists have spent many years attempting to deduce the meanings (and potential totemic beliefs) informing such works, with the work of Nancy Munn (1962) and Eric Michaels (1994b) being the most insightful. Building upon Munn’s conclusions that the meanings themselves are fluid and contextual based the viewer and in relation to the designs around them, Michaels argues cultural meanings are privileged knowledge, regardless of form, and the “ability to interpret these paintings is inseparable from the right or obligation to paint them: their sources are in a participatory ritual where there is no

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<sup>22</sup> This article was originally published in *The Popular Science Monthly* in October 1903.

<sup>23</sup> In other words, “Different tribes may interpret the same style by distinct groups of ideas” (Boas 1982: 562).

proscenium, and no passive, distanced observer” (Michaels 1994b: 51). Furthermore, each “Walpiri sandpainting tells a story, but it does not tell it unassisted. These are not self-contained texts. In a way reminiscent of Neo-Expressionism, the observer is encouraged to perceive meaningfulness, but not the meaning itself” (Michaels 1994b: 57). The heritage industry, however, is fueled by uniformity and comparison, which work in tandem to enact universal standards of value through which tangible and intangible culture are gauged and evaluated as important and therefore worthy of protection. Perhaps because of this, such nuanced insights fail to impact the heritage-making process.

Early efforts to promote the protection and conservation of Tasmanian rock art focused on its comparative value, with Bellerive art collector Mr. G. H. Garnett commenting in 1933 that “Mersey Bluff is as important to Tasmanian history as Stonehenge (Wilts) is to England, and should be regarded as a national asset worthy of preservation” (*The Mercury*, August 16, 1933: 5). Comparison with accepted locales of universal (and national) heritage is part and parcel of heritage-ization and, as later discussion of the Brighton Bypass shows, Stonehenge is a frequent vector of evaluation. Garnett commissioned plaster casts of the Mersey Bluff carvings which were then sent to “the British Museum, London, the Metropolitan Museum, New York, and the Field Museum, Chicago,” stating that rock carvings “found in any country always arouse deep interest, but those left as records by an extinct race doubly so” (*The Mercury*, August 16, 1933: 5). While the Devonport carvings were subsequently protected, the case of the Preminghana petroglyphs proved more complicated for two core reasons: accessibility and rate of deterioration. As already covered, Preminghana was discovered on the property of the Van Diemen’s Land Company, land which was severely overgrown and without roads. Second, they were carved into extremely friable sandstone that, upon uncovering, is extremely susceptible to

deterioration at the hands of the strong westward winds and rain that routinely slam Tasmania's west coast. By 1936 the Royal Society had expressed concerns "regarding the deterioration of these rock carvings, due to weathering and other causes, and it was suggested that steps should be taken either (a) to remove samples of the carvings to a safe place, or (b) to have casts made which could be placed in the Tasmanian Museum and other museums" (Royal Society of Tasmania 1937: 96). They were following the advice of Norman Tindale, the ethnologist at the Museum of South Australia, who they had brought in to provide his "expert" opinion on the petroglyphs.<sup>24</sup> Tindale visited Preminghana with Meston in April 1936, after which writing the "desirability of immediately making an exhaustive record of these carvings should be stressed; as they are in soft rock they are likely to deteriorate, and now that they have been located the danger of vandalism must be reckoned with" (*The Circular Head Chronicle*, June 12, 1935: 2). Based on the urgency of these concerns, it is interesting that there is a notable gap in coverage of the Tasmanian petroglyphs until the early 1950s (probably due in part to the Second World War) when Leo and Jessie Luckman, a stonemason and musician, respectively, led a group to Preminghana.<sup>25</sup> After clearing the area of scrub and sand, the Luckmans and their companions discovered that the overall system (at Meston's "northern outcropping") was far more extensive than Meston had ever imagined. Jessie Luckman recounts how upon their arrival "the only carvings visible were those on the overhanging cliff and about twelve blocks belong [sic.]. After removing a large quantity of shrubs and creepers and some tons of sand we uncovered fourteen more blocks, the total number of carved surfaces now visible being fifty-one" (J. Luckman 1951: 31). In addition to yielding an organized key and diagram of the carvings (as shown in L. Luckman 1951: 26), this excursion is the first known instance of carvings being removed from *in*

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<sup>24</sup> See Tindale 1937: 34 and *The Circular Head Chronicle*, April 24, 1935: 3.

<sup>25</sup> See J. Luckman 1951; Luckman and Luckman 1963; L. Luckman 1951; and *The Mercury*, September 15, 1953: 10-11.

*situ* in order to be housed and protected in institutional collections. The petroglyphs in question were two parts of the major carving at Meston's "southern outcropping" (as shown in Meston 1933: Plate IV and Meston 1934: Plate III), which had broken into three pieces.<sup>26</sup> The Luckmans removed these carvings and presented them to Launceston's Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery. TMAG responded by commissioning the acquisition of their own petroglyphs and, with the permission of the Van Diemen's Land Company, obtained two "engraved slabs" in 1962.<sup>27</sup> One of these slabs, 18A in Luckman's numbering system,<sup>28</sup> is commonly referred to as "the big petroglyph." The removal of petroglyphs from *in situ* presents a complicated moral dilemma. It is easy, with considerable hindsight, to be critical of institutions like TMAG for collecting Aboriginal carvings. On the other hand, it is difficult to overstate the tenuous status of the Preminghana petroglyphs. The question at hand is whether it is better to have some carvings protected within institutional walls or risk further deterioration in their place of creation. The collection of the "big petroglyph" in 1962, for example, required it be sawed off the rock-face and down the middle for easier transportation. The act of transportation presumably caused further damage. Meaning must also be taken into consideration in some form or fashion, namely

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<sup>26</sup> "Owing to the fact that this particular carving was showing signs of rapid erosion, we later removed it for safety to the Queen Victoria Museum, Launceston, where it will shortly be on view to visitors" (J. Luckman 1951: 31).

<sup>27</sup> The Luckmans recounted their experiences in a 1963 article in *The Tasmanian Tramp*, a publication for bushwalking enthusiasts. They write: "In 1949, our small party of interested people, most of them members of the Hobart Walking Club, visited the carvings and were so concerned at the obvious speed with which the stones were being fretted away by the weather, as well as being mutilated by unintelligent passers-by, that we decided to return the following year. With the permission of the Van Diemen's Land Co., which owns the area, we uncovered about fifty more carvings and removed one of the more interesting and fragile blocks to the Queen Victoria Museum at Launceston, where it now stands in pride of place in the aboriginal collection. Because of the size of many of the stones—some slabs, for instance, are over six feet high—it is quite a task to move them. Moreover, wind and rain continue to take their toll, and, in March 1962, the Tasmanian Museum at Hobart sent out a party to bring in another large block. We can only hope that further funds will be made available to rescue the remaining carvings before it is too late" (Luckman and Luckman 1963: 12).

<sup>28</sup> The system itself was arranged and organized by "Vanny" Jackson, who alongside her husband, W. D. Jackson, had joined the Luckmans on the 1950 trip. W.D. Jackson was then a Lecturer in Botany at the University of Tasmania.



whether removing a petroglyph from its system (like Walpiri sandpaintings, for example) also removes it from its context of meaning. These concerns were quite prevalent in the middle of the twentieth century, with the ethnologist of the National Museum commenting on how the “Mt Cameron carvings do exhibit an appreciation of the available surface. It is possible that adjacent carvings have a meaning relative to one another” (J. Luckman 1951: 33). Furthermore, improved roads led to increased accessibility to the site, with Rosamond McCulloch noting in 1952 how “during the twenty years in which these objects have been under investigation easy road transport has brought many previously inaccessible places within reach of walking enthusiasts and field naturalists... Photographs and accurate measurements are valuable, but any object removed from its context becomes useless as evidence for ever after” (McCulloch 1952: 48). So seemingly from the very start there has been strong tension between protection via destruction (in terms of meaning) and destruction via protection (in terms of the deterioration of the carvings *in situ*).

The debate surrounding how to protect the Preminghana petroglyphs was eventually settled via the intervention of outside “experts.” The petroglyphs had received wider attention by the 1960s, and the newly-formed Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (now AIATSIS) sent archaeologist D.J. Mulvaney (then at the Australian National University in Canberra) to inspect the site in 1962. Upon inspection, this outside “expert”

deplored the damage and favoured protection *in situ*. The Institute, with the agreement of the Van Diemen’s Land Company and the Scenery Preservation Board, approached the Tasmanian Government to have the site declared a national monument, but without success. Also, a Tasmanian Committee of the Institute was set up in 1963 to prevent further damage to the site and to promote archaeological research on scientific lines in Tasmania (Tasmanian Year Book No. 5 (1971): 80).

These efforts resulted in a 1969 TMAG-AIATSIS project to survey and document the Preminghana petroglyphs. This project was led by Frederick McCarthy, then at the University of Sydney and principal of the Australian Institute for Aboriginal Studies, and featured a zoologist, photographer, three field assistants, and two archaeologists, namely Rhys Jones and the



Figure 7.1. Preminghana petroglyphs. From Jones 1981: 7.89.

aforementioned Harry Lourandos (for a description of the project see McCarthy 1969).

Newspaper coverage of the project was extensive, with all three local papers dedicating space to it.<sup>29</sup> The project's work involved "clearing a sand dune which is covering most of the carvings.

When this is done the men will record the carvings on film, draw and take plaster casts which will be exhibited in the Tasmanian Museum" (*The Examiner*, February 20, 1969: 2). The project's value was frequently framed in relation to national heritage, with the Tasmanians tacitly

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<sup>29</sup> See *The Advocate*, February 19, 1969: 7; *The Examiner*, February 19, 1969: 3, February 20, 1969: 2; and *The Mercury*, February 15, 1969: 9).

remaining in the position of cultural predecessor. A *Mercury* article addressed the project's goals:

It is hoped that the expedition's work will shed light on the origins of original art in Tasmania and indeed, the origins of ancient carvings on the Australian Mainland... The Mt Cameron carvings, with their engraved circles, rows of dots, lattices and, most important, bird tracks, show outstanding similarity to carvings discovered in the remote deserts of central Australia... There is little doubt that the rock art of these two areas are somehow related, thus the work at Mt Cameron may unravel some of the mysteries of the dawn of art on the Australian continent (*The Mercury*, March 5, 1969: 4).

The project successfully uncovered and documented additional petroglyphs and provided details of the risks of further deterioration. They suggested two courses of action, *in situ* protection in the form of a massive excavation and the construction of a building around the site, or full-scale removal (*The Weekender*, June 21, 1969: 9). The participants, like Mulvaney before them, favored on-site protection, which would require national and state-level support. Newspaper coverage emphasized the site's value and the need for more concrete (social and financial) backing, stating that its "preservation for scientific and historical reasons, and because it demonstrates that Tasmanian Aborigines had a higher artistic ability than previously thought, imposes a great responsibility on everybody concerned with conservation in Tasmania" (*The Weekender*, June 21, 1969: 9).

A strong argument can be made that 1969 was the last time Tasmanian petroglyphs garnered widespread coverage and urgent calls for protection. This is not to say support has dried up or disappeared, far from it. What is clear, however, is the 1969 expedition was the last major institutional effort to study and preserve the Preminghana petroglyphs. As should be clear by this point, it is unfortunately quite common in Tasmania for topics like the protection of Aboriginal petroglyphs to be placed in the "too-hard bin." This is due in large part to Tasmania's poor local economy and lack of discretionary funds, but it may also reflect the operation of a deeper binary

within the very category of heritage. Following some minor preservation and protection projects by the Parks and Wildlife Department, Preminghana was ultimately returned to the Tasmanian Aboriginal community, with little to no financial support, in 1995 (as discussed in Chapter Four). Eventually, after years of agitation, Preminghana was declared an “Indigenous Protected Area” in 1999. While Preminghana has been protected, it is the only property managed by TALSC to have on-site personnel, other Tasmanian petroglyph sites have been subjected to numerous acts of vandalism and destruction over the past twenty years.

***“You Wouldn’t Build a Bridge Over the Vatican”:  
The Brighton Bypass Controversy and the Enactment of Value***

During my dissertation fieldwork there was no bigger issue in Aboriginal Tasmania than the Brighton Bypass. It was regularly covered in *The Mercury* and other Tasmanian newspapers, discussed on the news and the radio, and was a common topic of conversation with my Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal friends and interlocutors. The “battle,” frequently framed as a fight between the Aboriginal community and the Tasmanian government, was incendiary and often served as a forum through which to highlight other community concerns. That Brighton campaign was mainly run by the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre (TAC) is of great importance in understanding why the Brighton battle unfolded the way it did. Brighton marked the TAC’s largest involvement in matters of culture and heritage for a number of years. Apart from the repatriation of parcels of lands starting in the 1990s, their other major involvement in such matters was in the early 1980s when they opposed the flooding of the Franklin River in southwest Tasmania in order to build a hydroelectric dam because it would presumably destroy the recently discovered Kutikina and Deena Reeva caves, both sites of Aboriginal cave paintings (see Ryan 1996[1981]: 267). Outside these major exceptions, however, the TAC tends to stay out

of the Tasmanian Aboriginal cultural sphere, with minimal involvement in the many processes of revitalization (outside of *palawa kani*, of course) discussed in this dissertation. They have historically had a hostile relationship with TMAG and other cultural institutions, not to mention community members who work for/in governmental posts. The Brighton campaign also marked a potential paradigm shift for the TAC, as indicated by their efforts to adapt their strategies and practices to an ever-changing social climate. Historically, the TAC has been incredibly successful in gaining recognition of Tasmanian Aboriginal existence. Major strategies in the 1970s and onwards emphasized a politics of separation (between white and black, governmental and “community” Aboriginals, science and culture, etc.) that stressed their existence as a distinct cultural and racial group. Such strategies were exceptionally successful in garnering federal and state funding as well as repatriation of land and human remains. In Tasmania today, however, the matter of existence has been formally settled and, apart from some backroom jibes and doubts concerning their “authenticity,” the larger context has changed and strategies need to change with it. As a result, the Brighton Bypass campaign is insightful due to the ways in which the TAC attempted to gather public support and ferment the requisite consensus needed to gain consecration and subsequent protection of their heritage. Overall, the task at hand was to create value and link it up with larger heritage discourses. In general, the TAC failed to fully meet the standards of evidence required to make heritage-ization happen, due in large part to their inability to tell a coherent (and digestible) story.

In telling the story of the Brighton Bypass I seek to foreground the Aboriginal community’s efforts to sway public opinion and garner support for their cause. In doing so I spend little time discussing the bureaucratic and governmental goings-on (including court cases, ministerial and portfolio shifts, and a litany of permits). This is not to disregard or devalue their

importance (or their problems) but rather to direct attention to the broader dynamics of cultural heritage (and formal consecration as such) and the tensions between universality and particularity in the concretization of significance/ value. This is a tricky topic, and one that is difficult to summarize in strictly chronological terms. Instead I weave between different moments of importance and pinpoint the development of certain trends, in the process building to broader conclusions about heritage in Tasmania.

Within weeks of starting dissertation fieldwork in late February 2010, various media outlets disseminated the initial archaeological survey results from the Jordan River Levee site. *The Mercury* was front and center from the start, as were principles of heritage consecration such as deep antiquity and comparison. Journalist Damien Brown quotes the project's principle archaeologist Rob Paton as saying that "if the ages for the site prove to be correct, this is the oldest site in Tasmania and among the oldest in Australia." Moreover,

it would be the oldest most southern site on the planet, giving us a glimpse into an unknown part of world history and the spread of homo sapiens across the Earth... Our readings of the sediments also seem to be telling us that the part of the levee that contains the archaeological material is most undisturbed... This is almost unheard of from an open-air site, anywhere in the world... Our work so far certainly indicates this is a scientifically important and exciting site. It will be an important place for interpreting the deep history of Tasmania, but also of archaeology on a worldwide scale (*The Mercury*, March 10, 2010: 6).

The proposed date of 40,000 years placed the settlement of the Jordan River Levee area "at about the same time of Mungo Man... who brought about a complete rethink on mainstream evolutionary theory, referred to as the 'Out of Africa' theory—that all humans were descended from modern homo sapiens who left Africa about 100,000 years ago" (*The Mercury*, March 10, 2010: 6). The thinking here is foggy, and the general public interpreted this statement to mean the site was potentially the earliest southernmost evidence of the Homo Sapiens species. Brown expressed this point with added clarity (if not added accuracy) in the following day's paper,

writing that Mungo Man is commonly viewed as “the oldest human remains ever found in the Southern Hemisphere and the second oldest in the world,” and “Tasmanian archaeologists are beginning to realise they are dealing with a similar depth of history in the backyards of the small rural community of Brighton” (*The Mercury*, March 11, 2010: 18). Aaron Everett, Aboriginal Heritage Officer and one of the main figures behind the TAC’s Brighton campaign, “said it was sad knowing that the descendants of the tribes who inhabited the Brighton lands were the same people that had conflict with the Europeans in Risdon Cove in 1804,” with Brown quoting him as saying “Hopefully (we can) ensure Tasmanians as a whole are able to learn about what is in their backyard and that it is of such worldwide historical significance” (*The Mercury*, March 11, 2010: 19). TMAG curator Tony Brown also commented on the potential importance of the site:

This is going to rewrite the history books... This is significant in terms of Aboriginal culture in Tasmania but also in Australia and the world and it is right in front of us... It is hard to quantify the time periods we are talking about here... it could very well be our version of the Italian ruins of Pompeii, except that in the scheme of things Pompeii and even the Egyptian pyramids are quite new in comparison... There is renewed interest out there about the Tasmanian Aboriginal people and the message is getting out there that Truganini was not the last Tasmanian aborigine... The people are still out there and the culture is still thriving and in practice (*The Mercury*, March 11, 2010: 19).

Although testing confirmed the site to be up to 40,000 years old in April 2010,<sup>30</sup> the archaeological evidence has since been found to be incomplete at best. With recognition as national/international heritage clearly one of its end goals, it is difficult not to fault the TAC for blocking further archaeological work at the site. In talking to prominent Tasmanian archaeologists it became clear that the evidence supporting these preliminary conclusions was inconclusive. Relying on OSL dating and conjoin analysis, the conclusions that the site was

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<sup>30</sup> “Artefacts found in the path of the planned Brighton bypass have been confirmed as being 40,000 years old—making them some of the oldest in the world. The results of tests on food scraps, bone fragments, and stone tools found along the site of the \$176 million bypass, north of Hobart, were released yesterday after more than a month of extensive examination interstate” (*The Mercury*, April 27, 2010: 3).

40,000 years old and undisturbed were based on three dates. One specialist told me that the TAC had “emasculated the digs” by not allowing further work to be done.<sup>31</sup> More critically, this decision undercut the narrative they were trying to tell, since in his words, “three dates do not tell a story.” Heritage standards require more concrete evidence, and a coherent story is crucial in forming larger consensus. The restricted sampling and dating failed to meet the disciplinary standard of evidence, which may be one of the reasons why the international archaeological community never fully got behind the campaign to divert the proposed highway. The Department of Primary Industries, Parks, Water and Environment hired Jim Allen, archaeology professor emeritus of La Trobe University and one of the country’s premier archaeologists, to review Paton’s work. Allen found his conclusions provincial and problematic. In general, Allen found “some of the data ‘confusing’, ‘misleading’, and ‘unprepossessing’,” and said Paton’s claim that “the site was among the oldest in Australia should be put ‘into a more precise context’ with 20 Aboriginal sites in Australia dated older” (*The Mercury*, December 21, 2010: 7). Allen also took issue with Paton comparing the site to Dolni Vestonice,<sup>32</sup> a “27,000-year-old swamp site in the Czech Republic where the remains of three Upper Paleolithic teenagers were discovered,” which was in his words “equivalent to comparing me as a tennis player to Roger Federer” (*The Mercury*, December 21, 2010: 7).

The reliance on the 40,000 years date can partially be explained in relation to the actual contents of the site. Not only did the Aboriginal “content” consist almost exclusively of “food

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<sup>31</sup> This culminated in a December 2010 embargo on further cooperation with heritage work. “‘A total ban on any heritage research work in Tasmania until there is a decent heritage legislation in Tasmania that protects Aboriginal heritage,’ Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre legal director Michael Mansell said. ‘This means projects that require study to determine if Aboriginal heritage exists will be stalled’” (*The Mercury*, December 23, 2010: 25).

<sup>32</sup> “For such an old, open site, to have the potential to contain intact cultural deposits makes it very important. Similar old sites in Europe, such as for instance Dolni Vestonice in the Czech Republic, have been the centre of major international research for decades” (Paton 2010: 19).



scraps, stone carvings, implements, and tools” (*The Mercury*, March 11, 2010: 18), they were almost all underground and out of sight. When viewed in tandem, these facts made the selling of the site as invaluable human heritage a difficult one. Unlike heritage like the Preminghana petroglyphs where the value is more visible and concrete, the value of the Jordan River Levee site is far more abstract and reliant on outside modifiers. Moreover, segments of the general public were skeptical of the evidence presented before them. A sampling of letters to the editor of *The Mercury* reflect this fact, with the following being the most telling examples:

**Not Convinced**

The Aboriginal community wants a halt to the Brighton bypass project. Thursday’s *Mercury* shows Aboriginal heritage officer Aaron Everett holding what he describes as an artefact, claiming this to be a flint scraper. I have seen thousands of these across Tasmania. I call them rocks... (*The Mercury*, March 13, 2010: 23).

**Artefacts uninspiring**

Let’s face it, archaeologists excavating ancient Aboriginal sites are never going to find pottery shards, beautiful gold or silver jewellery, bronze chalices, fascinating manuscripts or a wheel are they? I’m afraid dirty old bits of rock just don’t excite me at all (*The Mercury*, August 19, 2010: 17).

**No Lost City**

All the people involved in protesting at the Jordan River sacred site should build a bridge and get over it. You won’t find the lost golden city there, just a stone they stubbed their toe on (*The Mercury*, April 23, 2011: 25).

While a small sampling, these letters are indicative of a broader skepticism that is quite palpable within the general Tasmanian populace, the genealogy of which builds upon pre-existing dismissals of Aboriginal middens as rubbish tips or trash heaps. In short, such sites failed to pass the proverbial “eye test.” Potentially making matters worse was the discursive strategy, employed by the Aboriginal community and its supporters, of comparing the site to recognized locations of world heritage. Drawing again from a multitude of examples, one letter, entitled *Common sense bypassed*, states that “Building a bridge over a site that contains Aboriginal

artefacts that date back 40,000 years could be compared to constructing a bridge over Stonehenge or the Great Pyramid of Cheops. It bypasses common sense. Diverting the bypass must surely be the only archaeologically and culturally sensitive option” (*The Mercury*, October 15, 2010: 43). Amongst other examples from the heritage grab bag (such as the Egyptian Pyramids, Stonehenge, or Angkor Wat) was my persona favorite, the Vatican. In a letter with the apt title, *like a bridge over the Vatican*, one Tasmanian resident contends, “The State Government’s pursuit of a bridge over this area is akin to erecting a similar structure over St Peter’s in the Vatican” (*The Mercury*, April 16, 2011: 26). With a sizeable portion of the general public seemingly not impressed by the evidence presented before them, such global comparisons in terms of antiquity and value had the potential to backfire, and on some occasions clearly did. Such comparisons, rather than elevate the Brighton site, effectively lowered it even further in some people’s opinions. This unfortunately makes sense when faced with the direct comparison of a handful of trenches full of stone tools to some of the greatest engineering feats in human history. Letters, and many conversations I had, reflected this. One letter, also possessing an apt title, *Hardly the pyramids*, states that the pyramids “are admired for the skill and design that went into their construction. The work that went into the dump at Brighton was nil. It seems that if you dig anywhere in Tasmania, the Aborigines will declare it to be a site of importance to them” (*The Mercury*, December 31, 2010: 23).

The physical appearance and content of the site, joined with strong doubts regarding its age and status (as undisturbed), could have dealt the campaign a deathblow. The site, when viewed in a vacuum, was underwhelming, and to “qualify as a masterpiece of the heritage of humanity, a cultural expression [in this case, a location] must be not only *distinctive* but also *distinguished*. It must meet a universal standard, even as the world heritage enterprise attempts to

make the lists more inclusive and representative” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2006: 186). It is here that the Tasmanian Aboriginal community partially broke from the pre-existing procedures of heritage-ization and did what they do best and make the most out of non-ideal situations.

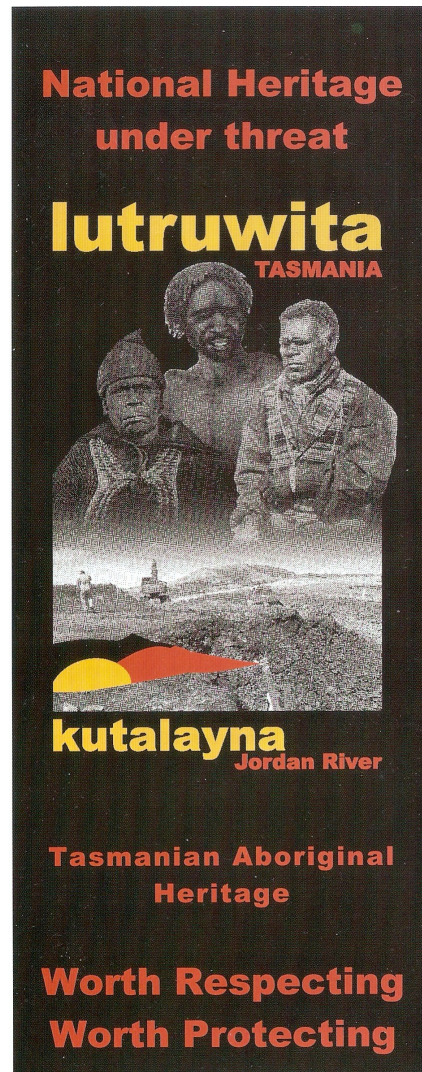


Figure 7.2. Cover of TAC pamphlet.

Through a number of different strategies they enacted and implanted cultural value and significance to the Jordan River Levee site. This was not an easy task in light of the fact that the entire world was unaware of its deep Aboriginal value until relatively recently. One of the major ways in which meaning was injected into the site was, to return to Bourdieu, the bestowal of a name, in this case a Tasmanian Aboriginal one. My understanding is that in mid-2010 the TAC

asked Theresa Sainty, one of, if not the, architect behind *palawa kani*, to find a name through which the community could put their stamp on the site. Theresa spent time with her resources and returned with *kutalayna*, an Aboriginal word for the Jordan River Levee (See Figure 7.2). From that point forward *Kutalayna*, and its association with the Mumirimina people, became commonplace in community descriptions of the site. An additional strategy, and one that playfully challenged and reconfigured the processes and standards of the heritage machinery, was the utilization of cultural landscapes as a source of community value. This strategy, to move away from dates and content towards an abstract sense of place and cultural connection, effectively re-framed the entire debate. In April 2011 I asked community elder Patsy Cameron what her views were about the Brighton situation. She said that for too long the focus had been on looking for stone tools on the ground, and digging beneath it, rather than on the larger cultural landscape and its importance for Aboriginal people (personal communication). This approach was also central to outdoor education programs I attended with Sharnie Everett in November 2010. We met groups of schoolchildren at the Carlton River/ Steele's Island area near Hobart, which was covered with stone tools and a massive shell midden. Sharnie's "yarns" to the children were organized around the ways in which Aboriginal people used the environment. Specifically, she talked about how a midden was a "living place" to which people would return to gather, eat, and be together over the course of many years. This value was enacted in isolation from any formal archaeological surveys or dating methods.

The implantation of cultural meaning and connection to the Brighton site was expedited through the erection of an Aboriginal camp, consisting of a number of tents of various sizes, starting December 18, 2010. While The *Kutalayna* camp/ "occupation" was overtly political and designed to delay work at the site, it also fermented and concretized a contemporary connection

to it. This fact was front and center during the “Open House” day described at the start of Chapter Three. This event, taking place on March 5, 2011, epitomized the TAC’s revised political strategies, as it highlighted a newfound openness to outsiders, i.e. whitefellas, and a



Figure 7.3. Open House Day. (Photo taken by author)

focus on positivity. This new direction was evident upon our arrival, with one of the organizers telling me how it was so good to see so much support from whitefellas, and that it made her feel really good. The turnout was a solid, estimated at 500 people over the course of the day (*The Sunday Tasmanian*, March 6, 2011: 5), and there were a number of events demarcating cultural attachment and value in nonexclusive terms. In addition to walking tours of the site, there was a barbeque featuring burgers and ever-oily muttonbirds against the backdrop of music, and a PowerPoint presentation. There was also a dance performance featuring a young man and a young boy, covered in ochre, performing the “kangaroo dance” with the aid of clap sticks. It was

a mostly positive experience, and one that certainly went a long way to helping mobilize broader support.



Figure 7.4. Dancers at Open House. (Photo taken by author)

The day was not without its shortcomings, however. As stated by Aaron Everett, the March 5<sup>th</sup> date “was chosen for the open day because on that date in 1828, 17 of the local Mumurimina people were killed at the site by soldiers and settlers” (*The Sunday Tasmanian*, March 6, 2011: 5). This statement, along with similar comments during the event itself, ultimately damaged the campaign for a few central reasons. First, it took a positive experience and framed it in terms of black/white conflict, the very type of politicking that had previously promoted public apathy towards Aboriginal issues in Tasmania. Second, these statements were made in March 2011, months after the bridge’s construction had become an inevitability. This gave this particular gesture, rightly or wrongly, the appearance of a desperate last-minute ploy. The recourse to colonial violence shifted focus away from contemporary cultural connection and returned it to the tired “History Wars” debates of the mid-2000s. Even controversial right-wing

author and gadfly Keith Windschuttle joined the debate, stating that there is no evidence of a massacre at that site and that “The Tasmanian Aboriginal Council (sic.) has a long history of telling lies about Tasmania’s history for personal gain. They want land, privilege and stature in Tasmanian society, and so far they’ve won it on the basis of claims that don’t stand up in any way, shape, or form on the pages of history” (*Sunday Tasmanian*, March 13, 2011: 7). Whether one agrees or disagrees with Windschuttle is not what is important here. What is important is the public perception regarding the massacre claims, and how “it throws into the Jordan River levee dispute an unnecessary and quite smelly red herring” (*Sunday Tasmanian*, March 20, 2011: 52). The controversial massacre claims led to a number of debates via letters to the newspapers, all of which further moved attention away from the Brighton site. Even though the bridge was essentially a done deal by this point, such tactics reeking of desperation did not help the overall cause.

In April 2011, with construction set to commence and the campsite still occupied, a clash was imminent. The Department of Infrastructure, Energy and Resources erected a fenced-in temporary visitors area for peaceful protest, a gesture Aaron Everett compared to “being put in a cage and being forced to watch as somebody tears down your home” (*The Mercury*, April 13, 2011: 9). Work commenced on April 14, with many community members on-site chanting and protesting the development (*The Mercury*, April 15, 2011: 7). While peaceful on that occasion, there were a number of arrests the following day when protestors “scaled the fence, some jumping into muddy pits and others climbing onto the excavator in a bid to halt works for as long as they could” (*The Koori Mail*, April 20, 2011: 7; see also *The Examiner*, April 16, 2011: 4 and *The Mercury on a Saturday*, April 16, 2011: 4-5). A total of 21 people were arrested, and the footage of which led the evening news. To the cynical observer, the endgame of Aboriginal

people in handcuffs was the TAC's goal. It provided ample egg on the face of a state government that had made a number of concessions, including spending millions of extra dollars on the bridge over the site. It is not my aim, however, to excuse the government of any culpability or responsibility for how things unfolded. Both sides deserve shares of the blame, despite my sympathies and support residing with the Tasmanian Aboriginal community. In spite of some missteps, the TAC's Brighton campaign was encouraging in that it reflected a movement towards a more inclusive, rather than oppositional and divisive, approach to Aboriginal issues in Tasmania.

### ***Concluding Thoughts***

On December 23, 2011 the community achieved a partial victory when the Jordan River Levee was added to the National Heritage List. Despite Michael Mansell's disappointment that the ruling came "far too late to protect such a unique and valuable place" (*The Mercury*, December 24, 2011: 13), the basis for the ruling reflects a compelling shift in the broader politics (and processes) of heritage-making in Tasmania. While world (or national) heritage consecration is commonly based on universal standards of value, the Jordan River Levee site was consecrated as national heritage for very local reasons and because of its value for one group rather than for all. The official value of the site in the Australian Heritage Database reads:

After a century of being denied their identity, Tasmanian Aboriginal people reassert their Aboriginality through their cultural places that have indigenous heritage value. The Jordan River [*Kutalayna*] Levee site is important to Tasmanian Aboriginal people as the place and its stone artefacts provide a connection to their collective ancestors, to their way of living and to their traditional cultural practices that can be handed on to succeeding generations. The place is of outstanding heritage value to the nation because of its special cultural association with Tasmanian Aboriginal people and its exceptional symbolic importance arising from their collective defence of their identity in the face of the threats to their heritage ([http://www.environment.gov.au/cgi-bin/ahdb/search.pl?mode=place\\_detail;place\\_id=106168](http://www.environment.gov.au/cgi-bin/ahdb/search.pl?mode=place_detail;place_id=106168)).



Despite perhaps coming too late, such consecration validates the Jordan River Levee site and can be read as further formal national validation of Tasmanian Aboriginality itself. The site's value, as written in the Heritage Database entry, applies to many of the topics and cultural projects I have described in this dissertation. In both instances the interplay between the past and the present is formative. Additionally, in both cases emphasis is on the "now," which is further able to stand on its own without the constraints of history. In contradistinction to historical debates about the value of sites like Preminghana, the rationale for this heritage-listing is illuminating in that it consecrates the contemporary Tasmanian Aboriginal people rather than their ancestors. This is in-line with the general trend of recognition in Tasmania.

## Chapter Eight

### Gaps and Counter-Narratives

I have argued contemporary Tasmanian Aboriginality involves active and concerted efforts to form connections in spite of conspicuous gaps and separations. This “gap-work” highlights the continuity between the ancestors and today’s community. This continuity consists of tangible elements like material culture practices and language use, and intangible elements like internal (and previously dormant) essences. These connections are compensatory; they compensate for gaps that cannot be closed. All this work, through revitalization programs and other avenues, is informed by post-settlement identities shaped on the Bass Strait Islands and Tasmania proper. The present and the past connect and interact in compelling ways, defining contemporary Tasmanian Aboriginality in a dialectical manner.

The ever-present extinction narrative remains the central challenge to such processes. This narrative has traveled great distances and has circulated across many decades. The extinction narrative’s historical success is tethered to romantic stereotypes of the noble savage, in which indigenous peoples are imagined as possessing a lifestyle incommensurable with modernity and progress. The success of films like *Avatar* (2009) and *Dances with Wolves* (1990) indicates just how much their recycled stories continue to speak to publics the world over.<sup>1</sup> In the

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<sup>1</sup> As of 2014 *Avatar* is the highest grossing film ever, having made \$760 million domestically and \$2.7 billion worldwide. It was also nominated for nine Academy Awards (<http://boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=avatar.htm>). Accessed April 7, 2014.

Tasmanian case, such stereotypes join ideologies of extreme primitivity to interpellate a Tasmanian Aboriginality that is wholly irreconcilable with present-day reality.

The extinction narrative continues to linger in Tasmania. Every Tasmanian citizen up to a certain age grew up being told the Tasmanian Aboriginal people no longer exist. In many cases they were taught that their ancestors were responsible. Every public display of Tasmanian Aboriginality is directly or indirectly positioned in opposition to extinction. One direct strategy to overcome such a narrative is the formation and perpetuation of a counter-narrative, one that preaches continuity and connection. In my estimation, this was one of the core messages of the various education programs I assisted with during fieldwork. These community-led programs held at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery were built around core elements of Aboriginal culture, including red ochre, stone tools, and shell-stringing. These programs represent what Kirshenblatt-Gimblett calls “value-added” heritage, a conceptual term that recognizes how the very act of presentation

produces something new. Its instruments are a key to this process. Dance teams, heritage performers, craft cooperatives, cultural centers, art festivals, museums, exhibitions, recordings, archives, indigenous media, and cultural curricula are not only evidence of heritage, its continuity, and its vitality in the present. They are also instruments for adding value to the cultural forms they perform, teach, exhibit, circulate, and market (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995: 373-4).

As “hearts and minds” work, these programs represent an idealized depiction of Tasmanian Aboriginal culture. They are also an acknowledgement that many aspects are still in the process of being (re) learned or are lost. As a whole, these programs ultimately strive to provide young children and teenagers with a counter-narrative that directly challenges one of extinction.

The TMAG programs were run by an Aboriginal organization, the Palawa Education Corporation, with the help of museum staff and often with Sarah Lackey, the Aboriginal liaison

officer for the Catholic schools.<sup>2</sup> Both programs took their titles from *palawa kani* words. The first, *ballawinne*, translates into red ochre and focused on its importance to Aboriginal people, and the second, *emita melaythenner*, roughly translates into “coast country” and involved stone tools and shell-stringing. The programs usually ran once a week during the school year, with teachers bringing their classes to TMAG for a morning or afternoon session. Catholic schools in Tasmania have significant Aboriginal enrollment, and the TMAG programs were primarily geared to Aboriginal students. As a result, the majority of the school groups came from Catholic schools.<sup>3</sup> A sizeable majority of the 43 sessions were for elementary school ages (years 3 and 4 were the most prevalent). *Ballawinne* and *emita melaythenner* were the respective programs for the 2010 and 2011 school years, and additional *ballawinne* programs ran for public schools in October 2010 and early 2011. Both of these programs combined many of the disparate components of Tasmanian Aboriginal culture described in this dissertation, and therefore serve as a meaningful end point. Since three-quarters of the programs I worked were *ballawinne*,<sup>4</sup> it will receive the majority of attention.

The *ballawinne* program followed a strict script and by its conclusion we were all well-regimented in terms of time allotment and personal responsibilities. Since this was a community-led program I was happy to be in the background and lend a hand in any way I could. Every program began with what became known as “the talk,” which was a powerpoint presentation introducing *ballawinne* and the value it has for Tasmanian Aboriginal people. “The talk” was followed by a quick trip to the *ningina tunapri* gallery space, during which students were instructed to count the number of *ballawinne* they could find. The gallery visit culminated in a search for miniature Tasmanian fibre baskets. These baskets held *ballawinne* and were hidden

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<sup>2</sup> Sarah is not an Aboriginal person.

<sup>3</sup> 31/43 (72%) of the programs I took part in were for Catholic school groups.

<sup>4</sup> Also 31/43 (72%).

near images or items that had been shown in “the talk.” Back at the workspace students sat at tables and, with the aid of grinding stones, ground pieces of ochre in powder. We would then gather the various powders and combine them with water to create paint. As we did so the students would watch a short video of a “*ballawinne* dreaming,” as narrated by Jim Everett. The animated story involved a father and his daughter, both Tasmanian Aboriginal people with green eyes and relatively fair skin, with the former telling the latter the story of how red ochre had spread throughout Tasmania. The program’s next segment divided the boys from the girls, with the girls going with the female leaders and the boys with the male leaders. The girls put ochre in their hair and on their faces, while the boys made hand-prints and hand stencils, with the aid of a sponge and a plate of paint, onto a makeshift “cave wall.” The groups then switched. Once both groups were finished, students spent the remaining time finger-painting petroglyph symbols and patterns with ochre paint.



Figure 8.1. *ballawinne* program. Photo taken by author.

“The talk” set the stage for the entire program and is where the counter-narrative was enacted. A member of Palawa, usually Verna Nichols, her grandsons Jamie Langdon or Dayne Langdon, or Sharnie Everett, gave this talk. The talk utilized images from the French explorers and contemporary photographs of Aboriginal people. The importance, and usage, of red ochre was emphasized in a few telling ways. First, the presenter often highlighted how red ochre, combined with grease, had historically served as bodily covering for Tasmanian Aboriginal peoples. This point is of great importance, as it defuses the stereotype of the naked Tasmanian Aboriginal. It also shows cultural ingenuity. The presenter would regularly ask the students whether there were boomerangs in Tasmania. Some schools were better educated on Aboriginal history than others, and many knew the correct answer. Either way, the lack of boomerangs was framed as a cultural adaptation to the extensive trees in pre-colonial Tasmania. Second, there was always a slide showing Verna and her daughter collecting yellow ochre. The presenter always made the point that these locations were privileged knowledge that was passed down within familial groups and usually along gender lines. Third, the presentation shifted between the past and present in an attempt to flatten the differences between time periods. Finally, there was no mention of loss and extinction, with emphasis placed on continuity and strength of community.

There were many telling moments during which the programs’ underlying messages ran into common public perceptions and ideologies of difference. For example, despite efforts to present tribal Aboriginals as culturally savvy, students sometimes still positioned them as primitive and other. During one of my first programs Verna Nichols had brought in a mannequin head that she had “aboriginalized” by covering its face and hair with ochre and by placing a shell necklace and kangaroo skin around its neck. Verna asked the students what they wanted to name him. In response a bunch yelled out “Chaka,” a clear reference to the 2009 *Land of the Lost* film

starring Will Ferrell.<sup>5</sup> This was instructive, as Chaka, who is quite ape or chimp-like in both behavior and appearance, is imagined to be the “missing link.” Verna, to her credit, was diplomatic and simply said “I’m not sure I’m happy about that.” In other cases such comparisons were self-inflicted. For example, in one program one of the presenters was trying to remember the word for waddie and asked the students “what do cavemen use?” Race and appearance were also constant points of discussion, as exemplified by the coffee metaphor discussed in Chapter Three. This topic usually arose when the powerpoint shifted from nineteenth century portraits and sketches to recent photographs of Tasmanian Aboriginal people with *ballawinne* on their bodies. One group of students was quite vocal, with a student saying, “They don’t look Aboriginal.” As the presenter, Verna asked what they meant by this. In general they were responding to the fact that their skin wasn’t dark, in the process relying upon discourses of “half” or “part.” These discourses even colored the interpretation of the historical images, with one student saying that they looked “half Aboriginal and half human.” This moment gains added value because the majority of this particular group identified as Aboriginal. Verna was exceptionally good at exploiting the pedagogical value of such moments, on one occasion telling the students, “the colour of your skin doesn’t matter.” She then pointed to her chest and said, “it’s what’s in here, what you were born with, what you believe in.”

While not without their shortcomings, these programs have been very successful on a few different levels. On a basic level, any positive experience with the Aboriginal community can be of great value, particularly in light of oppositional rhetoric from groups like the TAC. Richard Hale, a TMAG employee who worked the programs, said that it is good to get some non-Aboriginal kids in and for them to have a positive experience with Aboriginal people, a

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<sup>5</sup> Since these were K-6 students, this is a much more likely referent than the Sid and Marty Krofft television program.

sentiment shared by many teachers I talked to. Additionally, Sarah Lackey commented how lots of Aboriginal people were learning about their culture through their kids.

The school programs are emblematic of just how much progress the community has made in recent decades. Not only are people making baskets, canoes, and kelp water carriers again, they are teaching their community's youth how to do so in programs like those at TMAG. The overall narrative has been irrevocably altered. Such triumphalism, however, masks the darkness that remains. Gap-work has its limits, and many cultural elements are lost and never to return. Cultural practitioners are not ignorant of this fact. The extinction narrative, despite the damage and hurt it has caused, was an essential component of Tasmanian Aboriginal identity for many years. It was something to challenge and unite against. Only time will tell how a group so defined by loss and disjuncture will react to a political and social climate in which they are valued equally for who they *were* and who they *are*.



Figure 8.2. "Always Was, Always Will Be." Sign at Brighton Open House Day. (Photo taken by author)



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