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Building Bodies in the Australian Periphery: The Enactment of Aboriginality in Tasmania

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Introduction

In January 1931, E.J. Dicks, a sculptor hailing from Melbourne, was hard at work in a studio in Tasmania's capital city of Hobart. The task-at-hand for Mr. Dicks was to build representations of (some would say surrogates for) the "Lost Tasmanian Race." *The Hobart Mercury* of January 17, 1931, reports that

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 Hobart Mercury*, January 17, 1931: 6)

Made possible by a gift of £500, the largest given to the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery (hereafter referred to as TMAG) to that point, the group exhibit¹ sought to give Hobartians a glimpse into the "life and habits of a vanished people" (ibid.). Void of clothing and with jet-black skin, these three figures, designed to represent a natural familial unit, were a visual depiction of a people who had come to represent the lowest and most primitive culture² ever documented (see fig. 1). In this working paper I argue that the 1931 group exhibit at TMAG sought to enact, consecrate, and consolidate one form of Tasmanian Aboriginality by literally building surrogate representations of the "Lost Tasmanian Race" (who one author poetically, and androcentrically, describes as the "Men Who Vanished" [Dunbabin 1935]). Drawing on social evolutionary frameworks of cultural (and/or social) progress, I argue that the three main messages that informed, and were reinforced by, the building of the bodies that comprised the group exhibit, were:

- the Tasmanians as "Paleolithic Man," as culturally arrested and frozen for millennia due in large part to geographical isolation; in a "culture phase" (Balfour 1925) analogous to pre-historic European culture

- the Tasmanians as racially and culturally distinct and different from Aboriginal peoples of mainland Australia
- the Tasmanians as extinct. With the passing of Truganini in 1876, so passed the Tasmanian race

These three messages are interrelated and complementary. They are not mutually exclusive, but reinforce one another in a circular fashion. However, as this enactment of Aboriginality is by its very nature perpetually in process, its attempt to freeze one image/ideology was destined to fail. By focusing on a sequence of newspaper articles from *The Hobart Mercury* that detail the process of the group exhibit's creation, following it from disparate materials of plaster, wiring, and so on, to a specific interpellation of reality, I seek to foreground the inherent incompatibility between this form of Tasmanian Aboriginality and the more heterogeneous and continuous experience of being Aboriginal in the Tasmanian context.

For my discussion of the enactment of difference in the Australian periphery, I take inspiration, if not necessarily methodological guidance, from core members of the school of thought that has become known as Science Technology Studies, Bruno Latour and Annemarie Mol in particular. As Latour writes, "No science can exit from the network of its practice" (Latour 1993: 24). Annemarie Mol's *The Body Multiple: Ontology in Medical Practice* (2002) exemplifies this insight. Mol recounts her time spent at Hospital Z, a nameless teaching hospital in the Netherlands. While at Hospital Z, she focused her attention on atherosclerosis, a disease that leads to the hardening of the arteries in a person's lower leg. By discussing the multiple departments within the hospital and the varying ways atherosclerosis is brought into being, she argues that depending on your methods, be it with a microscope, the leg of a deceased individual, or conversation, an atherosclerosis is brought into being, only it is not necessarily the same atherosclerosis. Arguing against perspectivalism, Mol believes these divergent practices are not merely different ways of getting at the same object; they are all getting at a different object that is given the label "atherosclerosis."

Of great utility to this study is Mol's conceptualization of "enactment." She puts enactment in opposition to terms such as "construction," for the former involves an ongoing process while the latter "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). An emphasis on 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 these 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). It is in light of these insights that we must not forget about skeletal materials, plaster-of-Paris, wiring and paint, and the jobs to which they were entrusted. Specifically, these objects and human remains were used in concert to exclude and dismiss alternative Aboriginalities in the Tasmanian context.³ What is concerning is not that there are different phenomena falling under the same label of *Tasmanian Aboriginal People*, but that the ones given credence historically by the scientific and political world are not the living, breathing human beings, but empty vessels, in the form of skeletal remains and the imagined reality of the group exhibit. The latter two, in collaboration, have been used to help perpetuate specific ideologies of Tasmanian extinction and primitivity at the expense of the Tasmanian Aboriginal people themselves.

Once I have established the geographical and historical context of this topic, I will discuss the theoretical genealogy and background for the three interrelated messages described above. I will then turn my attention to the focus of this paper, namely the creation and unveiling of TMAG’s 1931 group exhibit, paying close attention to newspaper coverage and its relevance within more general discussions of museum dioramas. I conclude with a discussion of contemporary Tasmanian Aboriginal culture, and various responses, both institutional and individual, to the group exhibit and its enduring legacy.

In the Australian Periphery

Within Australia, the common image of Tasmania is that of 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*, Charles Darwin commented, “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” (Darwin 1989 [1839]: 328; see fig. 2). For its roughly 500,000 residents, the 240 kilometers that separate Tasmania from the mainland via the Bass Strait often feels much larger, and this sentiment is frequently expressed in positive terms. 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 states that

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)

As an anthropologist who has conducted research in Tasmania since 2004, I can attest to the presence of these sentiments.⁴

The idea of Tasmania as an afterthought on the periphery of mainland Australia is a relatively recent creation. “Van Diemen’s Land,” as it was first named by Abel Tasman in 1642, was one of the more prominent locales of British Imperialism during the first half of the 19th century. First colonized in 1803, Van Diemen’s Land was Great Britain’s second colonial outpost in Australia, and famously saw nearly 60% of convicts exiled to the continent reach its shores during their lives. In many ways, the story of the Aboriginal peoples of Tasmania parallels that of the island itself; whereas both were once of central importance within broader frameworks, they have both, in many respects, become afterthoughts. Interrogating the 1931 group exhibit sheds light upon the critical position of the original Tasmanians within Victorian anthropology and evolutionary thought. It was the discursive positionality of extinct Paleolithic man that was reinforced and consecrated for mass consumption at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery.

Paleolithic Man, Stasis, and Extinction

The heterogeneous group of individuals that have become known as “social evolutionists” sought to place all human cultural groups along a web or ladder of progress, often presented as a genealogical tree. This placement was wholly comparative, as non-Western groups were commonly described in relation to, and in direct contrast from, European civilization. But, as Stocking writes, “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). George Stocking masterfully demonstrates how this practice of classifying human societies based on purportedly universal measures of progress has an extensive genealogy preceding even 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). In many ways this quest to uncover humanity's origins was a temporal matter, and gained urgency in response to the discovery of Brixham Cave and its implications regarding the long history of humanity. It was also a geographical matter, as remoteness and assumed isolation would come to be synonymous with antiquity and savagery. 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).⁵ As Tasmania's colonial encounter took place at the same time as the Victorian quest to understand (and explain) civilization⁶ in terms of racial, cultural and social progress, the Tasmanians had the unfortunate fate of becoming the prevailing example of remoteness and primordiality. Following their perceived extinction in 1876, they became the iconic anthropological case of savagery extinguished in the name of progress. The 1931 group exhibit at TMAG sought to reinforce and legitimize such ideologies, enacting an image of Aboriginality that erased evidence of Tasmanian Aboriginal existence and heterogeneity.

The three messages being transmitted by the group exhibit, namely: Tasmanians as Paleolithic Man; Tasmanians as racially and culturally distinct from mainland Aboriginal peoples; and Tasmanians as extinct, are all interrelated and mutually reinforcing. They all emerged out of late-19th century social evolutionary frameworks and its foundations of temporality and geographical remoteness. The placement of human groups as the embodiment of earlier forms of European history is the direct ancestor of 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). Comparing their tool technologies with those of pre-historic Europeans, scholars came to perceive the Tasmanians as living "Paleolithic Man," with its twin messages of past-ness and stasis.

Before interrogating the historical materials, it is useful to discuss the manner in which "Paleolithic" is defined in the current context. One recent textbook states:

The stone-tool-making techniques that evolved out of the Oldowan, or pebble tool, tradition and that lasted until about 15,000 years ago are described by the term Paleolithic (from Greek roots meaning

"old" and "stone").... The Lower Paleolithic is roughly associated with *H. erectus*; the Middle Paleolithic with archaic *H. sapiens*, including the Neandertals of Western Europe and the Middle East; and the Upper Paleolithic with anatomically modern humans. (Kottak 2012: 147)

This textbook, written for introductory courses in anthropology at the university level, continues, "The terms *Lower, Middle, and Upper Paleolithic* are applied to stone tools from Europe" (Kottak 2012: 164). I employ this text to provide just one example of the manner in which the label Paleolithic has been inoculated against all associations with social evolutionary comparisons within the history of anthropology. I also seek to foreground how the act of interpellating the Tasmanians as Paleolithic man was inherently comparative in relation to a pre-historic European past; in some cases Tasmanians were described as even preceding anatomically modern humans. Often described as "a-temporal" (see Gough 2001 for one example), I instead argue that the group exhibit under examination had a very specific temporal location, namely circa 10,000 years ago in Europe.

So how did the Tasmanians seemingly maintain a culture akin to that of Paleolithic Europe? Historically speaking, isolation and stasis have been given explanatory power in this regard. In discussing the Tasmanians, Jared Diamond offers the following questions:

[W]hat 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 just 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: 49-50)

This isolation has been used to explain the purported "rudeness" of the Tasmanians at the point of contact with European peoples.

The Tasmanian Aboriginal peoples represented the lowest rung of the social evolutionary ladder for many leading Victorian anthropologists, with Edward Burnett Tylor being but one example. Tylor's *Primitive Culture* (1871) expressed 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. In addressing the problem regarding whether any contemporary tribe could stand as "living representatives of the early Stone

Age,” Tylor “settled on the Tasmanians” (Stocking 1987: 176). This position is explicated in a number of Tylor’s papers, the most relevant being “On the Tasmanians as Representatives of Paleolithic Man” (1894). In the midst of widespread scientific debates between biblical notions of degeneration and Enlightenment-fueled ideals of upward progress, Tylor envisioned the Tasmanians as almost literally frozen in time prior to British invasion, as living examples of Paleolithic man. This conclusion was based on his study of Tasmanian stone tools that, according to his criteria, placed them prior to the already purportedly primordial mainlanders. For Tylor, there was 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.... 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)

The Tasmanians, “Taken as a whole... 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 his discussion of stone tools, Tylor compares those found in Tasmania to more advanced technologies found among mainland Aborigines, noting how “The Tasmanians knew nothing of the bow and arrow, nor the spear-thrower characteristic of Australia” (Tylor 1894: 149). Frederick Wood-Jones, scientist and one of the informants for the 1931 group exhibit, continued this sentiment in a series of 1935 lectures, entitled “Tasmania’s Vanished Race.” 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).

Regarding their anthropological and evolutionary distinctiveness, Tylor wrote in 1890 that:

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, Preface to Roth 1899 [1890]: v)

In 1900, Tylor went on to state, “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).

In discussing Tylor and the evolutionary placement of the indigenous Tasmanians, it is critical to remember that as a people they were geographically cut off from mainland Australia, which served as the main rationale for their supposedly frozen culture. As a result of such isolation, their perceived pre-contact culture-phase, according to Tylor,

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 far back in the earlier formations may continue to live and thrive in modern seas. (Tylor 1894: 150)

For his intellectual descendants, like long-time director of Oxford’s Pitt Rivers Museum Henry Balfour, the study of the Tasmanian Aboriginal peoples “affords an instance, a very striking one, of the past surviving in the present” (Balfour 1925: 1).⁷ It was within such paradigms that the Tasmanians were interpellated as living fossils of a pre-historic European past, of great interest in relation to European science but not necessarily in their own right and with respect to their own historical development. This inherent point of reference within the status of Paleolithic man is central to understanding the specific form of Aboriginality being enacted at the museum in 1931.

There is significant overlap between the message of the Tasmanian as Paleolithic man and the second message of Tasmanian racial distinction and difference. More critically, however, it is only through the combination of scientific discourses of racial difference and cultural stasis that the third message – that of Tasmanian extinction – becomes possible. The main pieces of evidence commonly deployed in support of racial difference were the Tasmanians’ dark skin and woolly hair, which put them in contradistinction to the image of the “Australioid type” as defined in 1870 by Darwin’s Bulldog himself, Thomas Henry Huxley.⁸ For Huxley, the “Australioid type” was “one of the best marked of all types, or principal forms, of mankind,” and had a number of distinctive physical traits, which for males included

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 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. (Huxley 1870: 404)

Additionally, “These characters are common to all inhabitants of Australia proper (excluding Tasmania)” (ibid.). The Tasmanians, on the other hand, exemplified the “Negrito” subtype within the “Negroid type” of humankind. 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 or 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 primordality when he refers to the Tasmanians as a “branch of the Negroid race illustrating the condition of man near his lowest known level of culture” (Tylor, Preface to Roth 1899 [1890]: v).

For the latter part of the 19th and the first half of the 20th centuries there were widespread debates concerning how a racially different Tasmanian population first inhabited its island home. These debates maintained ideologies of the Tasmanians as Paleolithic peoples and provided numerous hypotheses for how they had arrived there with their different racial “stock” intact. Today we have long known that the Tasmanians traveled to the island via a land bridge from mainland Australia. As the sea levels rose at the conclusion of the last Ice Age, between 8-12,000 years ago, this connective body of land was replaced by the Bass Strait. This conclusion was first proffered by A.W. Howitt, who believed 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, the ideologies of extreme primitivity and racial distinction continued to mutually reinforce one another, and in tandem provided the foundational science for the third and final message in our analysis: Tasmanian extinction. In essence, Tasmanian

extinction was contingent upon maintaining a strict separation and disconnection for the Aboriginal peoples on the mainland going back to time immemorial.¹⁰ It follows that if any connections between Tasmanian and Australian Aboriginals, be they cultural or racial, were established and promulgated in the realm of science or museology, then extinction, by its very definition, could not have occurred. Additionally, it is only through the consecration of a particular idea of Tasmanian Aboriginality, one of stasis and difference, that contemporary Tasmanian culture in its many forms was denied legitimacy in both social and political milieus.

Disrupted equilibrium and death-in-the-name-of-progress have been the standard tropes employed in support of the ideology of Tasmanian Aboriginal extinction for over a century. As I have demonstrated, the Tasmanians had come to represent a Paleolithic people inhabiting an arrested culture-phase and a racially distinct population from the mainland. These ideologies were still quite strong through the 1930s and helped inform the group exhibit under discussion. For example, in 1935 Thomas Dunbabin matter-of-factly wrote that “In Tasmania, there was, when the white men arrived, only the one primitive people, differing completely from the Aborigines of Australia” (Dunbabin 1935: 259). After extended periods of frontier conflict (referred to as The Black War, 1824-1832¹¹) following British settlement in 1803, official policy towards Tasmania’s indigenous peoples turned to removing what were believed to be the 123 remaining full-blooded individuals to Flinders Island in the Bass Strait. Darwin, writing in his journal aboard the *Beagle* in February 1836, commented that:

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 island, —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 1989 [1839]: 329)

Led by George Augustus Robinson, the “Conciliator” of the Tasmanian “natives,” this settlement on Flinders Island, known as *Wybalenna* (“Black Man’s House”), was centered on civilizing and Christianizing frameworks directed towards pulling them up and out of their perceived savagery.¹² In 1847 this mission was officially closed, and the remaining forty-seven people, who had survived rampant disease and hardship, were returned to mainland Tasmania to “live out their days” at Oyster Cove, south of Hobart.

Due to their perceived geographic isolation and cultural differentiation, the Tasmanian Aboriginal peoples have historically been viewed as a separate “racial type” from mainland Aboriginal peoples. Believed to be the last full-blooded Tasmanian Aboriginal person, Truganini’s death in 1876 signaled the discursive death of her race, as people of mixed heritage were classified as racially hybrid and therefore separate from both parental groups. People of Aboriginal descent, either on mainland Tasmania or in larger communities on the Bass Strait Islands, with Cape Barren Island and to a lesser extent Flinders Island being central locales,¹³ were governmentally and socially defined as mixed or half-breeds, and thereby denied status as being authentically Tasmanian. This is a crucial point; while public policy on the mainland was fueled by the belief that the Aboriginal people were destined to disappear, in the minds of the public and in the realms of science the Tasmanians already had. Museums were a major forum through which such ideologies of Tasmanian Aboriginality were consecrated and circulated for public consumption. Divergent forms of Aboriginality, ones incompatible with those informed through notions of primitivity, difference, and extinction, were effectively silenced by TMAG’s group exhibit.

TMAG and the 1931 Group Exhibit

Located in downtown Hobart overlooking the Derwent River, TMAG is Australia’s second oldest museum and one of the country’s three remaining museum-and-art galleries. It came into existence as an institution in 1848, serving as the collection of the Royal Society of Tasmania¹⁴ and officially became the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery in 1889 (Hughes et al., 2007: 4). It was at this institution that I completed a three-month internship in 2008 and performed volunteer work 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. I also helped with a large number of education programs led by Aboriginal community members.

While the view that the indigenous peoples of Tasmania were a dying race was far from unique to the government of Tasmania,¹⁵ the important point is that following the passing of Truganini the Tasmanian Aboriginal people were thought to be a dead race. One practice that reinforced the myth of extinction was the collection of Tasmanian Aboriginal remains by cultural institutions, royal societies, and universities, more often than not through illegal means like grave-robbing.¹⁶ Their purported value for science was frequently given as the rationale for 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 as it ended up with the proverbial crown jewel in the form of Truganini’s skeletal remains, which were mounted and put on public display from 1903 to 1947.¹⁷ As described in the opening excerpt of this paper, her remains were at one point displayed in tandem with the group exhibit under discussion. 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 that:

Mr. Wunderly, who was surrounded by 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 Hobart Mercury*, January 14, 1932: 11; see also Wunderly 1938)

Through its collecting practices and curation of both human and non-human cultural materials, TMAG reinforced many of the prevailing ideologies of Tasmanian Aboriginality, with non-existence being the core message. This message was enacted through the use of human remains and additional cultural materials and was consolidated in the materials comprising the group exhibit.

Akin to the Akeley dioramas at the American Museum of Natural History, as expertly deconstructed and historicized by Donna Haraway, the group exhibit “presents itself as a side altar, a stage, an unspoiled garden in nature, a hearth for home and family” (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). In concert with human remains, the group exhibit at TMAG was commissioned with the task of maintaining ideologies of progress and accumulation, and the inherent separation of cultural groups within paradigms of social evolution. An illustrative example of this deft interplay between museum displays and ideas of social evolutionary progress is that of the mummy of Ramses II, as playfully described by Jean Baudrillard. 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 [1981]: 9-10; emphasis added)

Within this context it is important to not only remember that the Tasmanians were described as the rudest culture ever recorded, as the living embodiment of Paleolithic Man, but also that the perceived need for the group exhibit was informed by an essential lack, namely that it was scientifically necessary to provide an image of the Tasmanian Aboriginal people because they no longer existed. As a result, the modeled figures of the group, in collaboration with human remains, formed a “moiety of past life to give reality to a present figment” (*The Hobart Mercury*, January 17, 1931: 6).

The Enactment of Difference at the Museum

We now turn our attention to the group exhibit itself. In following the process of its creation, and the concomitant enactment of a particular version of Tasmanian Aboriginality (one that is informed by and reinforces the messages of Tasmanians as Paleolithic Man; Tasmanians as racially distinct from mainland Aboriginal peoples; and Tasmanians as extinct), it becomes clear that the exhibit was designed to act as a surrogate for the Tasmanian race. By creating a version of “near-reality,” the museum sought to provide an idealized, romantic image of the Tasmanian peoples, one that was fundamentally incompatible with the historical reality.

Returning to Mol (2002), we will follow the ways in which the group exhibit, falling under the label “Tasmanian Aboriginal,” was enacted at TMAG in 1931. In the process, I will focus on three main aspects of the group exhibit: 1) the stated purpose of the exhibit and what, specifically, was to be depicted; 2) the process of its creation, namely the “building of bodies”; and 3) its official unveiling and institutional framing for public consumption.

In contrast to older styles of ethnographic display, the group exhibit sought to be more amenable to what Haraway calls “eye-nature”¹⁸ and in effect, be more truthful. Expressing similar sentiments, *The Hobart Mercury* describes the museum’s rationale for such an approach in the following excerpt: “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 Hobart Mercury*, January 17, 1931: 6). Regarding its thematic focus, it is useful to turn to the work of Lynette Russell, who has conducted research on dioramas and museum displays of Australian Aboriginal peoples. According to Russell, all the Aboriginal dioramas she examined were “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 had a very similar arrangement to those described by Russell. Over a series of articles, *The Hobart Mercury* describes the subject of the exhibit as:

a Tasmanian aboriginal camp, and 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 Hobart Mercury*, January 17, 1931: 6)

The figures of the male, female, and child representatives of the aboriginal inhabitants of Tasmania are grouped on a beach with Mount Wellington and the river as a background, which is carved to give stereoscopic effect. (*The Hobart 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. (ibid.)

When completed, this exhibit would allow later generations to see by a “glance at almost reality, the kind of people who once fished, played, and fought, where now stands Hobart” (ibid.). I argue that it would help later generations understand a certain type of Aboriginality in the Tasmanian context, one that was frozen in time in the realm of science, if not reality. Heavily influenced by social evolutionary thought, this idealized image of the nuclear family, albeit a nuclear family with jet-black skin and without clothing, in effect silenced alternative Tasmanian Aboriginal realities, the very existence of which conveyed the underlying messages of extinction and loss.

In examining the newspaper account of the exhibit’s creation, a number of *leitmotifs* emerge that are woven throughout its description, paradoxically central and peripheral. One such theme is that of a near-reality; a

second theme is one of near-regeneration and cultural (or racial) resuscitation. In concert, these motifs serve to foreground the underlying statement that these figures are life-like surrogates for the Tasmanian Aboriginal people, but that their surrogacy is inherently incomplete. Taken as a whole, this exhibit offers the best and most real image of Tasmanian Aboriginal-ness possible, but the fact that it remains not quite reality reminds the viewer that extinction is complete and irreversible. Returning to Mol (2002), this is far from an “object that subsequently goes out in the world all by itself,” but is instead created and maintained in relation to the discourses and ideologies that informed it. In analyzing its creation, it is critical to pay attention to the work done on the materials themselves, and the tasks to which they are entrusted. Here, several excerpts from the newspaper coverage of the “making of the statues” will be useful.

In the January 22, 1931 edition of *The Hobart Mercury*, there is an exhaustive account of the process of building undertaken by the aforementioned Mr. Dicks. In quoting them to the extent that I do, I seek to foreground not only the presence of the subtle messages and *leitmotifs* mentioned above, but also to foment reflection upon the macabre nature of such work. The article describes a revolving platform on 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 now a reality. (*The Hobart Mercury*, January 22, 1931: 3; emphasis added)

Following the framing and moulding of the figures comes the casting, in 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. (ibid.)

After these steps comes the penultimate stage in which the pieces are combined to form the not quite living representations of the Tasmanian Aboriginal peoples. This task is described in a brief article from February 1931, aptly titled “Building Bodies.” This piece 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 Hobart Mercury*, February 7, 1931: 6; emphasis added)

Having addressed the process of its creation, we shift our attention to its formal unveiling and the manner in which it was framed with respect to both science and museology. Officially opening on Friday, May 22, 1931, the group exhibit was lauded for its perceived accuracy. One newspaper article commented that:

It is all so natural and lifelike that it has almost the effect of a shock to realise that it is only an exhibit, and not living fact. The groupings and setting have been done with such accuracy of 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 Hobart Mercury*, May 23, 1931: 10)¹⁹

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 Lanne²⁰ 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 Hobart Mercury*, May 23, 1931: 10). W.L. Crowther, scientist and collector of Aboriginal remains, remarked at its unveiling that “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 children growing up in the community should realise clearly the nature and habits of the aboriginals of Tasmania” (ibid.). In essence, what this exhibit sought to do was to provide an embodiment of Aboriginal Tasmania, one comprised of plaster, wiring, and paint, rather than flesh and blood. By foregrounding an image of the Tasmanian Aboriginal peoples based on their position within the social evolutionary schema, the museum enacted a Tasmanian Aboriginality that was more myth than reality. Additionally, it enacted a form of Tasmanian Aboriginality that was incompatible with the lived, and living, realities of Aboriginal existence in the Tasmanian context.

Concluding Remarks

Up to this point in this paper, the living Aboriginal peoples themselves have been mostly conspicuous by their absence. This was intentional, as it accurately reflected mainstream ignorance of their continued existence and a concomitant lack of their involvement in any form of cultural representation for mass consumption. Over the past few decades, however, things have shifted dramatically, and with interesting results. Historian Klaus Neumann wrote in 1992 that “Descendants of the original inhabitants and rightful custodians of Tasmania have survived, and so has a distinct culture and history. Against all odds—even though its distinctiveness may lie in the way in which elements of non-Aboriginal culture are appropriated” (Neumann 1992: 291-292). I believe there is some truth to this sentiment in relation to the concrete and concerted efforts of many Tasmanian Aboriginal peoples to (re)articulate their culture, and to what it means to be Aboriginal in the Tasmanian context through material culture production, both re-vitalized and re-energized. One example of note is that of Tasmanian Aboriginal artist, Julie Gough, whose

1997 artwork, *Folklore*, is a direct response to the group exhibit under discussion. Gough writes:

The diorama is 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 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)

Despite being familiar with the critiques offered by Dr. Gough, I can personally attest to the power of the visual, what Haraway has called “eye-nature,” in relation to the group exhibit at TMAG. During my first visit to Hobart in 2004, I made a number of trips to TMAG, and despite my best efforts, the image of the Aboriginal nuclear family was burned into my mind. At that point the Tasmanian Aboriginal gallery had become a conceptual mish-mash, with text from numerous eras, often in direct contrast with one another, occupying the same exhibition space. Despite more recent text discussing the contemporary community, the messages of extinction, primitivity, and fundamental difference embodied in the plaster figures themselves were difficult to ignore. Tony Brown, the Curator of Indigenous Cultures at the museum and an Aboriginal man from Cape Barren Island (as well as someone with whom I have worked with for a number of years) was openly hostile towards the group exhibit, but pessimistic regarding his ability to make any alterations. In a 2004 conversation with this author, he said:

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 overseas, come and look at the diorama and look at those figures, and get their idea of what Aboriginal people looked like.

Since that point, however, there have been major changes at the museum; changes that are indicative of broader shifts in power relations and control over self-representation in the Tasmanian context. In 2007 the old gallery was taken down, group exhibit included, and replaced by Ningenneh Tunapry,²¹ a concerted community effort that exemplified a broader reclamation narrative.²² Ningenneh Tunapry is but one instance of community-based museum design; there have been many exhibitions and programs centered on the revitalization and/or propagation of cultural knowledge and practice within the Aboriginal community, with fiber-work and shell-stringing being but two examples. What is most interesting is the ways in which Tasmanian Aboriginal artists, weavers, designers, and writers (to name but a few) have sought to express their cultural value on their own terms, free from the hierarchical valuing of Victorian-era anthropology. The most exhilarating thing to me, as an anthropologist but also as a person, is to see a community, once declared dead and exhibited as extinct, return to reclaim its history and re-construct its present.²³



Figure 1. Aboriginal Group Exhibit at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery. Permission of the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery. Collection: Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery. (Photo taken by museum)



Figure 2. Hobart and surrounds from Mount Wellington. (Photo taken by author)

Notes

1. While this exhibit is commonly referred to as a diorama, the original newspaper coverage gives it the label of a “group exhibit.” I employ the latter for the purposes of consistency.
2. This usage is reflective of the common currency of this term in 19th and early 20th century anthropology. The views such usage reflects are not shared nor supported by this author.
3. 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).
4. 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).
5. 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 Degerando’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.’” Baudin surveyed Tasmania in 1802.
6. Prior to Franz Boas and his ilk, “culture” and “civilization” were commonly interchangeable for early anthropologists, with both being singular and often capitalized. E.B. Tylor is frequently credited with providing the first consolidated definition of culture (a fact reiterated in many contemporary textbooks used for introductory courses). This notion was problematized a number of decades ago by George Stocking (1968: 69-90).
7. Balfour goes on in the same passage to state that “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.”
8. 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 constantly shifting. 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 [1879]: 203). Huxley himself proposed 4 principal forms of mankind, namely the Australioid, Negroid, Xanthochroic, and Mongoloid types.
9. See also Wood-Jones 1935. For Wood-Jones, “Huxley was one of the first who clearly defined the racial affinities of the Tasmanians. In 1870 he classed them among the Eastern or Melanesian branch of the Negroids and he found their nearest living representatives in the inhabitants of New Caledonia. Garson, Topinard, Flower, Turner and all the great anthropologists of the nineteenth century were in agreement that the Tasmanian was a negroid of some sort or other and that he was quite distinct, in all his racial characters, from the Australian” (Wood-Jones 1935: 5).
10. I thank Rebe Taylor for her conversation on this point.
11. These dates vary from historian to historian, with the declaration of Martial Law in 1828 serving as an alternative starting point.
12. Wybalenna is often positioned as the first mission in Australia. It also predated Richard Henry Pratt’s Indian Boarding School in Carlisle, PA by almost half a century. See Pratt (1892) in Prucha 1973.
13. For a more in-depth and recent historical text on the Islanders, see Patsy Cameron’s *Grease and Ochre: The Blending of Two Cultures at the Colonial Sea Frontier* (2011).
14. The first Royal Society outside of England.

15. As such beliefs were unquestioned *doxa* for the governing bodies of Australia, the United States, and Canada, to name but a few.

16. See Plomley 1961 for a fine overview of Tasmanian human materials in institutional collections.

17. Truganini's remains were repatriated to the Tasmanian Aboriginal people in 1976 and her ashes were laid to rest.

18. Haraway believes that "A diorama is eminently a story, a part of natural history. The story is told in the pages of nature, read by the naked eye. The animals in the habitat groups are captured in a photographer's and sculptor's vision. They are actors in a morality play on the stage of nature, and the eye is the critical organ" (Haraway 1989: 29).

19. *The Hobart Mercury*, May 23, 1931: 10. 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 of the aboriginals, with which the man's hair is plentifully smeared."

20. Historically believed to be the last Tasmanian Aboriginal man. Lanne passed away in 1869.

21. In English, "To Give Knowledge and Understanding."

22. The center-piece of this exhibition was the first Aboriginally-made bark canoe in around 170 years.

23. I thank Andrew Shryock for helping me put these sentiments into words.

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