Negotiating Nostalgia: The Rhetoricity of Thylacine Representation in Tasmanian Tourism

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Abstract
The recently extinct thylacine, endemic to Australia, has become a potent cultural icon in the state of Tasmania, with implications for Australian ecotourism and Tasmanian conservation strategies. While the thylacine's iconicity has been analyzed by naturalists and cultural historians, its significance in Tasmanian tourism has yet to be examined. Thylacine representations in tourism-related writings and images, because of their high degree of ambivalence, function as a rich site of conflicting values regarding national identity and native species protection. Drawing on cultural studies of the thylacine and constructivist theories of tourism, this study identifies and documents three polarities in thylacine representation: the thylacine as wild yet domesticated, present yet absent, and an Australian national—yet distinctly regional—subject. A close reading of contradictory textual and visual elements in tourist guides, travel writing, specialized maps, and museum exhibits illuminates ongoing debates about Australian econationalism in the global tourism economy.

Keywords
thylacine, tourism, Tasmanian conservation, econationalism

Among Tasmania’s singular features, the ambiguous thylacine prevails. Though thought to be extinct, its image abounds in the government and commercial sectors, functioning in effect as Tasmania’s brand logo. In tourism-related materials, the “Tassie tiger” is often described in a language of loss, implying an ongoing quest, suggesting that the missing marsupial, once the island’s top predator, may still exist. The possibility of spotting a thylacine, or merely exploring some of the places it once roamed, is a heady attraction for Tasmanian visitors. The description in the Tasmania guidebook from the popular Lonely Planet series exemplifies this lost-and-found rhetoric. There, the thylacine is represented as having a story with at least two different endings and possibly a third: in one version, the thylacine was “hunted to extinction by European settlers”; in another, the animal “continue[s] a furtive existence deep...
in the "Tasmanian wilderness" (Smitz, 2002, p. 36). The third version, which would have "add[ed] a new twist to the tiger's tale" (Smitz, 2002, p. 36) of loss and rediscovery, was the Australian Museum's ambitious yet ultimately ill-fated effort to recreate the animal altogether by replicating its DNA and synthesizing artificial thylacine chromosomes.1 The Lonely Planet description portrays the thylacine as more than simply an extinct niche animal. In this and other touristic representations of the thylacine, the animal functions as a site of competing cultural and scientific rhetorics of national identity and conservation that draw strength from the unique postcolonial nostalgia resulting from the anthropogenic extinction of charismatic fauna.

Competing accounts of the thylacine not only stir the tourist imagination; they also point to the Tasmanian tourism industry as an important contact zone where questions about Australian nativism, the legacy of colonial European settlement, and postcolonial Tasmanian policies toward species management and land use are negotiated by different groups for different purposes. Tourist sites, according to John Urry (2002, p. 94), are contradictory by nature, involving tensions in issues of authenticity, history, and what constitutes the "tourist gaze" itself—that is, whether tourists experience places and their inhabitants as distinct entities or a collective. An important factor in any examination of tourism is the tourist demographic. Most tourists visiting Tasmania are domestic, rather than international—that is, Australians from the mainland visiting the island or locals getting out and exploring their state— an increasing trend (Tourism Tasmania, 2007).2 The question of who can properly "claim" the thylacine as their indigene is of some importance here: although its range once included the mainland, most recently Tasmania was its exclusive habitat and Tasmanian settlement the cause of its extinction. Similarly, the question of who can properly claim to have "authentic" knowledge of the thylacine is also problematic, given the animal's wide range of representations in scientific accounts, oral histories, reported sightings, and regional promotional materials. These issues raise the rhetorical stakes for species image management and Australian conservation in general.

Underlying these tensions is the inherently nostalgic aspect of tourism. Characterized by a longing for some remarkable experience in a special place and memorable encounters with its inhabitants, tourism is uniquely driven by representations of that place and those inhabitants that have been deemed authentic, typical, and above all, worth recording for posterity. To be a tourist is to have already heard of, or read about, or seen pictures of this place and its inhabitants—in effect, to have already consumed them (Frow, 1991, p. 125).3 To the extent that the tourist experience is thus both preconceived and consequential, it proceeds from manufactured memory. Yet tourism is also perfor-
mative, involving deliberate decisions about what to see, how to interact with it, and how to record it, decisions that are not only scripted in part by the representations that the tourist has already consumed, but that also create new encounters that are then absorbed into the ecology of tourism mediation.

Obviously domestic tourists in Tasmania experience a different sort of nostalgia for the thylacine than do international tourists. Adrian Franklin’s (2003) redefinition of tourism is helpful here. Rather than an effort to find pleasure in experiencing the unfamiliar, tourism, according to Franklin, is a “self-making” phenomenon that “is infused into the everyday,” an interactive “performance” of place through which contemporary people “orientate themselves” in a globalized world (p. 2). For Australians, this self-making has involved a radical revision of the colonialist view of Australian fauna as inferior, and with it, a postcolonial regret over the colonial project to “Britainize” Australia through the introduction of nonnative animals and the eradication of natives. Describing this postcolonial attitude toward native species as “econationalism” (2006, p. 19 and p. 25) and its enactment a kind of “Australianization” (2006, p. 113), Franklin effectively links Australian nativism to the longing for the ever-elusive authenticity that Urry describes. Urry notes in his analysis of the globalization of tourism, that, as tourism has become more international, tourist sites have become more specialized, providing the tourist with “particular kinds of objects to be gazed upon” (2002, p. 45). Significantly, from the standpoint of endangered, rare, and extinct fauna, these particular kinds of objects include mere traces of the object, such as taxidermies and DNA, as well as sites of its dwindling or former existence. As an international tourist destination, remote Tasmania, with its extensive protected wilderness areas and its cadre of believers in the thylacine’s continuing existence, offers the visitor a potent site on which to perform a sympathetic memorial to the thylacine, and the abundant pictorial and textual representations of its former top predator provide much for tourists to consume in anticipation.

Paul Smitz, the author of the Lonely Planet guidebook on Tasmania, seems well aware of the Tasmanian tourism industry’s role in negotiating nostalgia through managing species image. He comments that, “Even [the Tasmanian tourist industry] has invested in the myth, implying on its Web site that the thylacine is likely still alive, and offering tips on how to spot one” (2002, p. 36). Indeed, Discover Tasmania (2006) resists describing extinction as an absolute state—a rhetorical ambivalence that is typical of the enigma associated with recently lost species like the thylacine. Beginning with a recitation of the familiar first version of the animal’s demise (which for many Tasmanians might invoke the famous image of the doomed “Benjamin,” alone in her pen and soon to die), the passage states that “[t]he last known Tasmanian
Tiger died in Beaumaris Zoo, Hobart in 1936 and is officially classified as extinct,” Tourism Tasmania immediately qualifies this explanation: “Technically,” the text continues, “this means that it has not been officially sighted in the wild or captivity for 50 years. However, there are still unsubstantiated sightings” (Discover Tasmania, 2006, para. 2, emphasis added). This qualified explanation, the “technicality” of the thylacine’s extinct status, shifts the account to version two, suggesting the tantalizing possibility that extinction might only mean “furtive existence.” Returning to version one, the Web site delivers the rest of the details—the animal’s disappearance from the mainland, the assumption among European settlers on the island that the animal was preying on their sheep, the bounties, the captures, and the kills.

The tug of version two seems irresistible, though, as the Tourism Tasmania account shifts once again, repeating and embellishing the idea of potential sightings: “There have been many reported sightings since 1936, most commonly until the 1960s, and some people still believe that the tiger survives in Tasmania.” Finally, invoking version three, the resurrection story, the passage ends: “Scientists, however, say that the gene pool would be too small today to maintain a viable population” (Discover Tasmania, 2006, para. 8). Despite this attempt to cast doubt on the two open-ended versions of the extinction story, however, and thanks to the widespread publicity of the Australian Museum’s thylacine DNA project, most readers know that even a small gene pool is just another “technicality” in species conservation; cloning, after all, requires only one viable cell, and chromosomes can be synthesized. As with any other extinct creature whose DNA remains on some relic, the thylacine can, at least theoretically, be returned to the Tasmanian landscape.

These and other accounts of the thylacine in tourism and travel materials—rich sites of contradictory language and images—provide important insight into the econationalist elements of postcolonial Australian tourism, of which the thylacine is a key part. Much scholarship on thylacine representation has already been undertaken. Robert Paddle’s (2002) exacting historical research on the animal definitively challenges the colonial insistence on its predatory nature, revealing the thylacine as a scapegoat for a faltering 19th-century sheepherding economy and indicting the colonial scientific community for failing to intervene in its obvious decline. Paddle’s description of the “post-extinction blues” (p. 197) following the loss of the thylacine is especially relevant to an examination of the nostalgia of tourism-related accounts, as the wistful longing to maintain the thylacine in the Tasmanian landscape hinges on what Paddle observes is a willing suspension of disbelief among Tasmanian naturalists and scientists seeking oral accounts of thylacines from a diminishing population of people old enough to have had some contact with them (pp. 197-198).
In Carol Freeman’s analyses of thylacine images, from colonial renderings to contemporary photographs, she shows how European representations of the thylacine have been used both to bring about its extermination (2007b) and to encourage its repatriation—for example, in its appearance on the Tasmanian coat of arms and other official documents of the state (2006). Most recently, theorizing on the intertextuality of republished and recontextualized photographs of captive thylacines, Freeman (2007a) comments on the role of photography as presumably authentic representation in the erasure of the species. And finally, Amy Lynn Fletcher’s (2008) examination of the now-defunct cloning project suggests how ambivalence over an experimental conservation technology taps into a deeper ambivalence over the extinction of the thylacine itself. Taken together, the work of these scholars, with its emphasis on the complexities of Australian cultural and natural history, national identity, and conservation values, underscores the importance of focusing on thylacine representation in Tasmanian tourism.

My questions about thylacine representation in Tasmanian tourism materials center on three observable polarities: the thylacine as wild yet domesticated, present yet absent, an Australian national subject yet uniquely Tasmanian. How do domestic and international tourists’ expectations of these representations influence their circulation in the tourist ecology? And how do these expectations, which both authenticate and sentimentalize the animal, reflect econationalist values of Australian natural and cultural heritage? Proceeding from the premise that opposing accounts of thylacine representation in tourism materials reflect ongoing debates about Australian nativism and conservation strategies, I examine here examples of tourism-related writings and images that illuminate some ways that tourism is an essential cultural site in understanding the values shaping conservation efforts.

The Wild Yet Domesticated Thylacine

The omnipresence of Tassie tiger images owes a great deal to governmentsponsored tourism in Tasmania. Tasmania’s recently updated official slogan and logo, “Tasmania: Explore the Possibilities,” depicts the head of a thylacine emerging from the grasses along a shoreline to get a drink of water. Viewers infer that the creature in this stylized image is a thylacine from the two stripes that form its back, though the shape of the head and slant of the eyes—familiar from colonial artist Henry C. Richter’s rendering in John Gould’s 1851 book The Mammals of Australia—reinforce this interpretation. Although Richter’s lithograph does not clearly depict the water or the stripes, it could easily have served as a model for Tourism Tasmania’s logos. The animal depicted in the
previous “Tasmania: Discover Your Natural State” logo, less stylized than the current design, is more recognizably a thylacine. It appears as more threatening, as well, for it seems more interested in returning the viewer’s gaze than in drinking the water. Despite the slight “taming” of the thylacine in the updated logo, both logos seem to draw from colonial representations of the thylacine that Freeman (2006) has argued were intended to make the animal look more menacing than it might actually have been—a visual rhetorical strategy that supported the colonial extermination effort.

While it seems illogical—even perverse, given Tasmania’s postcolonial regret over the colonial bounty scheme—an investment in maintaining a representation of the thylacine as threatening persists. Many images of the thylacine, for example, emphasize the animal’s huge jaws. Perhaps the most famous of these is David Fleay’s photograph of a thylacine in the midst of a threat yawn, from the collection of the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery. This image and another from the same collection showing the thylacine’s wide jaws, which have been reproduced widely, are often cropped to eliminate the background details showing that the animal was captive.7 Illustrations following this pattern, from an Australian postage stamp issued from 1959-1962, to the logo for National Thylacine Day in 1996, to New York City artist Alexis Rockman’s cover art for the adventure travel book Carnivorous Nights: On the Trail of the Tasmanian Tiger (Mittelbach and Crewdson, 2005), continue to characterize the thylacine as wild and fearsome.

As Paddle (2002) observes, colonial descriptions of the thylacine as a “blood-sucking vampire” lingered throughout the twentieth century in both the popular and the scientific imagination (pp. 29-31). Similarly, Freeman (2005) comments on how photographs of the thylacine reflect a “dominant narrative of threat” (p. 1), and, like Paddle, she points out that the inaccuracies in the reproduction and recontextualization of these images may challenge scientists for some time (p. 13).8 In oral histories taken from trappers and others who claim to have had some contact with the thylacine, “man’s best friend” has also been described as “petrified” of the tiger (Mittelbach and Crewdson, 2005, p. 123; see also Bailey, 2001, p. 26 and Paddle, 2002, p. 21).

Concurrent with characterizations of the thylacine as “threatening” are descriptions of it as “elusive.”9 According to the Tasmania Parks and Wildlife Service, “The thylacine was shy and secretive and always avoided contact with humans” (“Mammals,” 2007, para. 4). This anthropomorphic language—a cliché often associated with endangered and threatened species—is repeated on a number of other Australian tourism Web sites.10 Thylacine Expeditions, a now-defunct tour organizing company that, engaging the nostalgic rhetoric of tourism, promised “unique wildlife” and “unforgettable experiences” on its
Nocturnal Adventure Tours, also capitalized on the related ideas of the thylacine's ferocity and elusiveness. On its thylacine tour, the tourist could “[s]earch for the worlds [sic] most elusive marsupial carnivore in some of the most remote wilderness locations on earth” (Thylacine Expeditions, 2007, para. 5). But the tourist had better hope not to encounter one, if the slash marks across the company's advertisement are any indication of how that encounter might turn out.

Similarly, one version of the Pure Tasmania’s Cradle Mountain Night Spot-light Tour Web site playfully indulged the tourist's interest in a potential thylacine sighting, describing the tour as a “fun and informative way to find out about the abundant Tasmanian wildlife […], which often includes the Brush-Tailed possum, Bennett’s wallaby, the common wombat and occasionally a Tasmanian devil or Eastern quoll. Who knows, you may even spot a Tasmanian tiger!” (Pure Tasmania, 2007). A more pensive nostalgia for the thylacine as an elusive creature occurs in travel writer Keith Millar’s account of a trek through the Western Tiers in the Bradt travel guide:

I have stopped somewhere on the Western Tiers, drawn by an ancient thylacine report, in a deserted layby etched from the mist-ridden forest. I believe in destiny. So I search for an animal thought long-extinct but which still tantalises, with fragments of proof to question [sic] its untimely end. Glancing up the track, I wish for a thylacine. (Brace, 2002, p. 74)

Characterizations of the thylacine as threatening—a legacy of its colonial vilification—serve a postcolonial function as well, however. Conflicting descriptions of the thylacine as both threatening and elusive establish a protective zone around the animal. Alleged thylacine sightings have supposedly been denied or covered up to keep people away from the animal's habitat. Even as far back as the early 1900s, a thylacine sighting could prompt secrecy, as Col Bailey describes in one account (2001, pp. 69-70). David Owen (2003) notes that people are hesitant to report a sighting for a number of reasons: fear of ridicule, fear of endangering the animal by publicizing its location, and fear of losing access to (and use of) the land where the animal was identified (pp. 189-90). The possibility, however remote, that a live thylacine could be found and commercially appropriated preys on the popular imagination, as dramatized in such narratives as Julia Leigh’s novel The Hunter (2001), Terry Domico’s thriller The Last Thylacine (2005), and the children’s books Infamous by Justin D’Ath (2003) and I Saw Nothing by Gary Crew and Mark Wilson (2003). Whereas recreational land use by local hunters and industrial/entrepreneurial interests are promoted in these examples of the secrecy surrounding
alleged thylacine sightings, ecotourism and conservation interests are also served by this secrecy, which, for tourists, adds to the mystique of the Tasmanian wilderness and, for conservationists, serves as a plank in their arguments against development.

Although Owen dismisses the fears as merely part of the thylacine’s mythos (2005), the reality for would-be thylacine sighters (or hunters) is that this protective zone does have some official sanction. In *Carnivorous Nights*, Margaret Mittelbach and Michael Crewdson (2005) note the Tasmania Parks and Wildlife Service’s cool response to alleged thylacine sightings:

> Although the Parks and Wildlife Service maintained they were protecting the privacy of people who made the sightings [by designating the sightings exempt from Freedom of Information requests], the refusal to release any information about the locations and types of sighting for many years made tiger enthusiasts suspicious. As [local thylacine expert] James [Malley] put it, “The authorities in the Parks and Wildlife Service, they’ll tell you they’re extinct, but they know damn well they’re not.” (p. 136)

Malley’s remark is not without precedent. The official response to Hans Naarding’s purported thylacine sighting in 1982 best demonstrates the apparent ambivalence on the part of the authorities. In Scott Weidensaul’s (2002) description of this “canonical moment” in the thylacine survival tale, Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife personnel responded quietly, launching a secret two-year investigation “so as not to attract hordes of thrill seekers or, God forbid, someone who might want to shoot a tiger” (p. 272; see also Mittelbach and Crewdson, 2005, pp. 72-73; and Bailey, 2001, p. 47). Further, as the controversy surrounding *The Bulletin*’s modern-day “bounty” of 1.25 million dollars for the “live, uninjured” capture of a thylacine made clear (Steger, 2005), no contemporary would-be thylacine trapper would be given a permit to hunt one; thus the capture of one would be illegal. Given the limited official response to alleged sightings, then, the tourist quest to find a thylacine is confined to nostalgic means such as buying a thylacine postcard or novelty from a souvenir shop.

Perhaps as a cultural response to the official sanctions surrounding the thylacine, many contemporary thylacine representations, in contrast to those that characterize it as fearsome, seek to domesticate it. Such characterizations range from reverence to trivialization. On the reverence end of the spectrum, Michael McWilliams’ painting *Up on a Pedestal* monumentalizes the thylacine by placing it atop a stone platform in a forest clearing. Peter Schouten’s painting of a thylacine for his and Tim Flannery’s book, *A Gap in Nature* (2001), tames the revered animal by rendering it doe-eyed and docile, looking back and up at the viewer much like the family dog. While Schouten’s image is reminiscent of
Richter’s lithographs—it resembles a rendering “from life” that shows even the individual hairs on the animal’s coat—unlike Richter’s menacing thylacine, the animal depicted here is mild. A tourist might have seen this and Schouten’s other life-sized paintings of recently extinct animals from around the world on exhibit at the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery at Royal Park in Launceston, Tasmania, in 2002. In contrast to the dislocating and ultimately nullifying effect on thylacine vitality that Freeman (2007a) observes resulting from recontextualized photographs of captive thylacines, artistic renderings such as McWilliams’ and Schouten’s relocate the animal, restoring it to the life of the popular imagination.

At the trivialization end of the thylacine domestication spectrum are Ben Stephenson’s digital image *Tiger Walkies*, Kirsty Pilkinton’s greeting card image “Janie and Thylacine,” and a bike tour advertisement from the Tasmanian travel magazine *Leatherwood Online*. This set of images renders the thylacine commonplace, respectively showing a thylacine being walked on a lead in a freshly mown field, sitting nose-to-nose with a dog wearing a thylacine T-shirt, and prowling across the open grassland through which recreational bicyclists pass. These three images exemplify Steve Baker’s (2001) description of the “disnification” of animal images—a “specifically visual” (p. 174) phenomenon in which animal images “incline towards the stereotypical and the stupid” (p. 175). Baker’s description of the “trivialization and belittlement” of the animal reflects popular culture’s sometimes disparaging use of the Disney name. Disnification, Baker explains, is a result of images supplanting text to create easily understood meanings that draw on received knowledge. In disnification, “[W]e find a world constructed in the image of popular culture’s preconceptions, a photographic mirroring of a desired reality” (p. 181). Images of extinct animals, particularly charismatic megafauna like the thylacine, are especially subject to disnification, because of the saturated signification of these animals; it is as if enough about them can never be said, so imagistic representation takes over in an incomplete effort to reveal their meanings. The risk that thylacine disnification poses for Tasmanian tourism, then, is to decontextualize the animal from Tasmanian history, in effect stripping it of its collective, endemic significance in the tourist’s narrower view of what a thylacine “should look like.” Returning to Keith Millar’s nostalgic trek through the Western Tiers, it is clear how such a gaze seems to “order up,” à la carte-style, the desired details: “Glancing up the track, I wish for a thylacine the szie [sic] of a small dog, black stripes running down its back, a stiffly erect, bare tail and a knowing look of survival chiselled into his non-dog-like face. It might come even now, trotting openly toward me” (Brace, 2002, p. 74). The slippage from impersonal to personal pronoun and back again in this passage, while perhaps
merely the result of bad editing, can be read rhetorically as the travel writer’s uncertainty over whether the thylacine would, in fact, be familiar (“his non-dog-like face”), should the strange creature—an “it”—actually appear (“it might come even now”).

**The Present Yet Absent Thylacine**

The nostalgia of depictions of a tame thylacine arises from the sense of a lost opportunity to get to know the animal better. Conservationist Chris Wemmer (2002) uses just such terms in his commentary on the unrealized potential of zoos to intervene in the global biodiversity crisis. Feeling a “nostalgic longing” when contemplating the fate of the thylacine, he laments: “What did we learn from the thylacines that lived in zoos? Almost nothing” (p. 2). The domestic tourist in Tasmania experiences this loss collectively and concretely, as a tragic historical fact shared by all Tasmanians, though one that has had—Wemmer’s concerns notwithstanding—positive consequences for Tasmanian land and wildlife management. The international tourist, on the other hand, experiences the loss more poignantly for never having had this opportunity in the first place—if only vicariously—as a descendant of a native or a European settler. This more poignant sense of loss is evident in Mittelbach and Crewdson’s (2005) account of their trek through Tasmania in search of anything and everything to do with the thylacine. Inspired by the thylacine taxidermy at the American Museum of Natural History in New York, for which they began to feel affection, “as if it were a long-lost pet” (p. 3), the two naturalists also begin to wonder, somewhat ambivalently, “if Tasmania was as unlikely and exotic as the tiger itself” (p. 4). Petlike yet exotic, the thylacine taxidermy moved them to tour Tasmania, then write about their experience.

*Carnivorous Nights*, Mittelbach and Crewdson’s sympathetic, if droll, memorial to the thylacine, with Alexis Rockman providing the artwork, speaks to the reader in part through the presence/absence polarity through which tourists come to know the lost animal and, by association, the real Tasmanian landscape that remains, marking its absence. In Rockman’s images of Tasmanian flora and fauna, for example, he uses local soils and vegetable matter, in homage to his “relationship to the history, geography, or direct interaction” he has with the “particular organisms” endemic to the island (Mittelbach and Crewdson, 2005, p. 117). The 11 thylacine images included in the book are made from soil from the Naarding site, the Beaumaris Zoo, Adamsfield, Kings Run, and Clear Hill Road near Lake Gordon. According to the authors,
Alexis had the right idea painting the thylacine with soil, leaves, bark, and seaweed. These organic materials held traces of the tiger, making their way through the island’s circulatory system. Tigers were in Tasmania’s trees. In the water we drank from the Styx. Even in the wombat and devil scat we had carried with us for weeks. (p. 306)

Neither exactly reverential nor quite trivializing, though perhaps an ironic bit of both, Rockman’s renderings effectively resurrect the extinct thylacine by reassembling it from the very soil of its habitat, thus working as an organic antidote to the mechanistic means of its demise (Freeman, 2007a). Nevertheless, a certain absence prevails. Ruth Padel (2006), in her review of the travel adventure for *The Guardian*, sums up the book as being “about the presence of an absence” (para. 4), and this absence, as Mittelbach and Crewdson intuit, permeates the Tasmanian landscape, drawing them there as it has others.

Much thylacine representation—and indeed, much of the ecotourist experience in general—transpires in the tension of a seemingly empty landscape. Urry’s (2002) comment that “in some cases the object of the [tourist] gaze is merely the marker that indicates some event or experience which previously happened in that spot” (p. 10) is relevant here. The “Tasmanian Tiger Trail” signs posted along the highway in the northwestern part of the state marking thylacine sightings and captures are one such example (Weidensaul, 2002, p. 266; see also “Tiger Tales for Tourists,” 1999). In most examples, however, the marker is more abstract: it could be a picture of a former lair, such as Paddle reproduces in his book (2002, p. 61), photos of landscapes where the thylacine is thought to have dwelled, no fewer than eight of which Bailey (2001) reproduces in his book (out of a total of 32), or maps of thylacine sightings.

Maps—indispensable to tourists’ navigation of a landscape, as well as to their imagination of what it might hold—play an important role in the presence/absence polarity of thylacine representation. Buck and Joan Emberg’s (n.d.) map of thylacine sightings, for example, documents 269 from mainland Australia and another 360 from Tasmania, though the analysis that they include with the map focuses on sightings in Northeast Tasmania during the years 1970-1990. Significant to the presence/absence polarity is the Embergs’ emphasis on the cult of silence surrounding purported thylacine sightings, both among those who think they have seen a thylacine and among the authorities to whom they report the sightings. The thylacine is cast here as Tasmania’s open secret, but should anyone having spotted one care to share that information on the Embergs’ Web site, they should be prepared to have their sighting rigorously evaluated by reliability criteria that the Embergs have borrowed from the Australian Park Service’s Steven Smith. While they
claim to be doing impartial documentation, ultimately, the Embergs’ objective in gathering this information is to discourage logging in this area by getting the thylacine reclassified as endangered or rare. The benefits to ecotourism in the area would thus be secondary.

On the other hand, the Google Earth interactive map available at the cryptozoology Web site Where Light Meets Dark (n.d.), which documents approximately 50 thylacine sightings on both the mainland and Tasmania, functions primarily as a virtual travel adventure guide. For each sighting, the viewer can click on the thylacine icon to get more information, including directions to the site. On the mainland map, which indicates far fewer sightings, the viewer can click on an icon that says, “[T]hank you for coming on the tour! Be sure to check back as the list of sightings grows!” As with most representational images of thylacines, maps of alleged thylacine sightings—relevant to tourists and others interested in the thylacine’s former habitat—trigger the imagination by signifying well in excess of their actual content, whether that signification be references to conservation, local lore, or historical events. This saturated signification is evident in Wendy Jennings’ painting Thylacine Mania (Figure 1) depicting a thylacine overlaid on a badly worn map of Tasmania, which itself covers a proliferation of Tasmanian newspaper clippings. Jennings’ painting suggests that we can only read the map of Tasmania, only understand the landscape that it signifies, through the body of the thylacine.

The National Yet Regional Thylacine

The maps of thylacine sightings developed by the Embergs and Where Light Meets Dark include those reported on the mainland, challenging the thylacine’s tourist iconicity as a uniquely Tasmanian animal. According to the Tasmania Parks and Wildlife Service, “just as many sightings of equally good quality are reported from mainland Australia” (2007, para. 17), yet as Bailey

Figure 1. Wendy Jennings, Thylacine Mania, 1999
(2001) notes, writing from the Tasmanian point of view, despite these mainland sightings, “there remains a staunchly parochial view that the Tasmanian tiger is ours and ours alone” (p. 153). The different reasons for the thylacine’s extinction on the mainland and on the island account for this view, with thylacine extinction on the mainland less easily connected to anthropogenic causes than its extinction in Tasmania. Nonetheless, the thylacine was very much a part of mainland Australia’s animal heritage, as demonstrated by the numerous aboriginal rock carvings depicting it.

Tasmanian tourists also encounter this third polarity—that of the thylacine as an Australian national subject yet uniquely Tasmanian—through museum exhibits that attempt to repatriate the thylacine and in travel writing that links its extinction to the demise of Tasmanian aborigines. One notable repatriation effort on the mainland involved the National Museum of Australia’s 2004 display of a rare mummified thylacine head discovered in a cave in Nullarbor as part of the museum’s ambitious “Tangled Destinies” environmental history exhibit. In a strongly nativist news release titled “Mummified Head Has National Message,” curator Pip McNaught comments that the display of the head should “help … to dispel the myth that thylacines—or Tasmanian tigers—were found only in Tasmania” (National Museum, 2004, para. 3). While the national versus regional conflict in this statement might be lost on the international tourist, the exhibit did well by showing visitors the complicated relationship that has evolved between Australian peoples and their environment (Walliss, 2004).

Similar nativist sentiments pervaded that ultimate thylacine domestication project, the Australian Museum’s highly publicized cloning effort. As Amy Lynn Fletcher (2008) observes in her analysis of the lively public discussion of the ethics of the project, while it was difficult for some critics to take it seriously, for others it was difficult to take it seriously enough: “Ancient DNA as a legitimate scientific tool became inextricably tangled in the cultural categories and imaginaries that the memory of the Tasmanian tiger evokes in Australia” (p. 200). Whether the project reflected the historical lack of respect for the animal among Tasmanian colonials or an attempt at restorative justice among contemporary Australian conservationists was never resolved in the mass media. Nevertheless, the project had the potential to bridge the ideological “ownership” gap between the mainland and Tasmania, with Maria Island—a designated sanctuary for threatened Australian fauna—both a literal and an idealized neutral zone in this polarity. An uninhabited island off the eastern coast of Tasmania, Maria Island was set aside by the Tasmanian Fauna Board (now the Tasmania Parks and Wildlife Service) in 1967 to serve as protected habitat for any rediscovered thylacines.
Perhaps the most compelling set of examples of the national/regional polarity occurs in the frequent pairing of thylacines and Tasmanian aborigines as sharing the same fate: anthropogenic extinction. In contrast to aboriginal populations on the mainland, Tasmania’s indigenous peoples were symbolically extinguished via the infamous “Black Line” in 1830 and systematically exterminated via their removal to Flinders Island in 1833, where most of them perished (Owen, 2003, pp. 78 and 208; Mittelbach and Crewdson, 2005, pp. 216-220). Owen establishes the human/thylacine alliance by linking the population of aborigines on the island at the time of first contact with that of thylacines, estimating it to be comparable in number (see Shakespeare, 2005, p. 311). Nicholas Shakespeare, in his part-history, part-travel adventure book *In Tasmania*, inserts himself into this alliance, noting that “Moulting Lagoon behind my house was the site not only of an alleged Aboriginal massacre but of a slaughter of thylacines” (2005, p. 312). Matthew Power (2002), writing for the travel magazine *Blue*, also makes a connection between the vanished aborigines and the lost thylacine in Tasmania. Contemplating the tourist’s nostalgia for authentic experience, he reconciles that yearning with the conservation agenda underpinning much Tasmanian tourism:

The question I face is this: If this remotest of places, with so little imprint of civilization, can’t be called wilderness, what truly can? See how the place has changed in two centuries. Its native people? Gone. Its greatest predator? Gone. (Power, 2002, para. 26)

Power’s closing comment in this passage points to the continuing symbolic significance of the thylacine in the overlapping interests of ecotourism, conservation, and Australian national identity: “What is preserved is wild as long as people fight to make it so” (Power, 2002, para. 26).

**Conclusion**

The nostalgia under negotiation in Tasmanian travel and tourism materials involves often competing rhetorics—rhetorics of local folk knowledge competing with universal scientific facts, of indigenous ideals competing with postcolonial realities, and of the value of tourism—in particular, ecotourism—as a considerable force in Australian conservation. For Tasmania’s tourists, these competing knowledge and ownership claims over the thylacine, though at times obscuring the animal’s significance in natural history, intensify its significance in cultural history. Incomplete knowledge of the thylacine, together with its role as Tasmania’s unique and recently extinct megafauna, provoke a felt need among promoters of the island and its visitors to recreate
this animal in the cultural imaginary. While Susan Stewart describes the nostalgic elements of such an effort as a kind of sadness over a “past [that] continually threatens to reproduce itself as a felt lack,” her observation that “nostalgia wears a distinctly utopian face, a face that turns toward a future-past” suggests some optimistic outcomes for thylacine nostalgia in Tasmanian tourism (qtd. in Frow, 1991, p. 136). As evidenced by the variety of sympathetic memorials to the thylacine that the tourism industry continues to create, and that tourists eagerly perform, Tasmanian tourism exploits the thylacine’s many meanings, serving as an impetus to improve the documentation of Australian natural history, promote Australian species and habitat management, and nurture postcolonial Australian ecom nationalism in the global community.

Notes

1. Although the Australian Museum’s thylacine DNA research was unsuccessful, collaborators in Houston and Melbourne managed to “resurrect” thylacine genetic material in vivo, splicing a section of a thylacine gene into a laboratory mouse (Pask, Behringer, & Renfree, 2008).

2. According to the Web site Tourism Tasmania, tourism on the island comprises approximately 7% of the Gross State Product, more than any other Australian state (T21 Highlights). Between 2003 and 2006, the number of international visitors to Tasmania, including Europe, Asia, and North America, remained relatively steady, whereas Australian visitors increased from 573,900 to 698,400 (Tourism Tasmania, 2007, Table 1, Origin of Visitors).

3. According to Frow (1991), “What the traveler sees is what is already given by the pattern” (p. 125). Frow (1991) distinguishes between a Baudrillardian melancholy in the sense of loss with regard to stable referents and the Deleuzean a-nostalgic appreciation for the endless play of difference and repetition, in which authenticity or originality no longer matter (pp. 126-27). In Frow’s view, the nostalgia of tourism in postmodernity is more a longing for the sense of nostalgia itself, the modernist melancholy that Baudrillard describes, than a longing for authenticity.

4. For example, regarding the possibility of spotting an ivory-billed woodpecker in Arkansas’ Big Woods, the Arkansas Department of Parks and Tourism advises would-be tourists to concentrate more on enjoying the bird’s “remarkable habitat” than on sighting it (Taylor, 2005, para. 9).

5. The mistaken sex of the thylacine commonly known as “Benjamin” has been well documented; see, for example, Paddle, 2002, pp. 198-99.


7. The side view of the thylacine threat-yawning, image number Q8150 from the collection of the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, is reproduced cropped in Bailey, vii, and on the front covers of Paddle’s The Last Tasmanian Tiger (2002) and Julia Leigh’s The Hunter (2000, 2001). It is reproduced with the cage background on the cover of Philip and Mary Blake’s Secret Tasmania (2002).


11. The cachet of claiming vicarious contact with the thylacine by virtue of having colonial ancestors who had firsthand contact is recorded in Nicholas Shakespeare’s history, *In Tasmania* (2005). His ancestor Anthony Fenn Kemp was “[o]ne of the first Europeans to touch a Tasmanian tiger,” which, Shakespeare suggests, is a more intimate contact than merely being the first European to sight one. This experience is attributed to Abel Tasman (p. 310).

12. Freeman’s (2007a) emphasis on the “manipulation” involved in photographic representation (p. 243)—whether through the overt alteration of images or the subtle alteration of their “truth” through recontextualization—is in direct contrast to aesthetic notions that artistic works lead to, rather than proceed from, some sort of “truth.”

13. The parochial view of the thylacine as belonging exclusively to Tasmania may account for the chilly critical response among Tasmanians to non-Tasmanian Leigh’s novel *The Hunter*; see, for example, Owen, 2003, para. 18; and “Tiger by the tales.”

14. Paddle (2002) describes the anthropogenic extinction of the thylacine on the mainland as a complex combination of “ecological contingencies” that included “[h]uman destruction of the environment” and human predation of thylacine prey (p. 21).

References


