

Black Country, White Wilderness: Conservation, Colonialism, and Conflict in Tasmania

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Abstract

In 2015, Tasmania's land management plan for the expansive Wilderness World Heritage Area, covering around a fifth of the entire island of south and central Tasmania, was dramatically revised. The new plan expanded dual management of the area with Aboriginal Tasmanians and the Tasmanian state through the creation of an Aboriginal Cultural Business Unit that would generate financial management opportunities for Aboriginals. However, Aboriginal perspectives on the meaning of land often conflicted with white conservationists' wilderness values of remoteness and isolation. In this article, I argue that the reactions from white conservationists to the new plan are illustrative of a wilderness ideology that attempts to limit interactions with nature and consequently marginalizes Aboriginals. Reflexivity is an important aspect of this paper as these critiques of conservation are also critiques of my own beliefs and identity, and my reactions to what I encountered in this research add a layer that would have been absent otherwise. Through reflexive analysis of interviews and participant observation with individuals from environmental organizations, the Tasmanian government, the timber industry, tourism, and an Aboriginal corporation, along with printed materials and websites connected to the Wilderness World Heritage Area, I show that conservationists in Tasmania perpetuate colonial desires and white privilege at the expense of Tasmanian Aboriginals through the racialized ideology of wilderness.

Keywords:

Tasmania, conservation; wilderness;
Aboriginal; colonialism; Australia.

The Awkward Interview

Thankfully, out of the thirteen interviews I did in Hobart, only one of them had to be done on the phone. Cramped in my hostel room that was slightly larger than a closet, I tried to get comfortable on my bed before I made the phone call that would change the entire course of my project. The person I was calling was Emma Lee, a senior *Palawa* (Tasmanian) woman who has been fighting for Aboriginal rights for most of her life in Tasmania, first at the local level and eventually globally. I was calling to see what she thought about the white conservationist backlash against the newly proposed wilderness management plan for Tasmania that she had helped create. It was a plan my conservationist interviewees had told me was problematic, nefarious, or simply as the Green's Member of Parliament Nick McKim informed me, "shit." I went in with my guard up, ready to hear out the "non-conservationist." Unlike my fellow white conservationists with whom I had empathized, this time it felt different: to me, Emma was the "other."

The interview had a somewhat rocky start, thanks to some amateurish mistakes on my part, but mistakes that speak to the points I make in this paper. Like all of my interviews prior to this one, I began by asking the basic questions on my script: "So, how long have you lived in Tasmania? Were you born here?" I had never before realized how accusatory that question sounded, especially when considering how often Tasmanian Aboriginal authenticity is interrogated by white

Tasmanians. In fact, out of all people I interviewed, Emma was the only Tasmanian Aboriginal who agreed to speak with me. This could have been for any number of reasons, but many others may have refused because throughout Australia there is a legacy of white researchers using Aboriginal words and knowledge for their own benefit. Emma gave me a chance, though, and we soon arrived at the fraught topic of wilderness.

To Emma, the idea of wilderness was a charade, a convoluted term that separates humanity from nature and restricts people's access to it for the sake of maintaining the chimera of pristine wilderness. This was a stance I had learned about from a few articles in a class I had taken the year before. However, when I undertook this research project, the wide range of beliefs and perspectives on nature I had read about evolved from words on sterile pages to a variety of stories and lives of individuals willing to share them with me. Emma was one such person. When I asked her what her personal relationship was like with the land that whites call wilderness, she told me about the Aboriginal concept of Country: "It's more than just a personal connection – it's a kinship connection. It's generational, it's ancestral. That Country is the home to our creation place, for us as *Palawa* people. One of our stories of creation is from there. That has radiated out across 40,000 years from then to now, but beyond that in our time, it is endless." In another Aboriginal researcher's words, "for Australian Indigenous people, culture is

interwoven into country like a network and it has patterns and rhythms that interconnect within the expression of their identity” (Barbour and Schlesinger 2012, 39). Emma’s recounting of this powerful spiritual and generational connection introduced me to this fundamental Indigenous paradigm of Country that sounded and felt quite different from wilderness.

A compelling place to critically examine wilderness in the commonwealth of Australia (of which Tasmania is a state) is Tasmania’s Wilderness World Heritage Area, the legal name for a place that is also part of Country. While wilderness is a conceptual term or a way of categorizing land, a World Heritage area is a place listed specifically by the United Nations for being of cultural or natural significance to humanity at large. Sprawling out across 1,580,000 hectares that cover over a fifth of the entire island state of Tasmania, the TWWHA (Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area, pronounced “twah”) is a significant place to white Tasmanians who treasure it for recreation and rely on it for their livelihood through tourism, to the Indigenous Tasmanians who have been connected to it for millennia, and to the world at large, who flock to it as part of the growing Tasmanian tourism industry (Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service 2015).

The history of human interaction with the land now called the TWWHA begins 40,000 years ago with the ancient Tasmanian Aboriginals (Pardoe 1991). It is a history marked by violence from the moment Europeans set foot on this

island. When the English began to colonize Tasmania in the early 1800’s, conflict with the Aboriginals soon led to an intense period of violence known as the “Black War” (Clements 2014). As white settlers died in the conflict, the governor of Van Diemen’s Land (now called Tasmania), Sir George Arthur, decided that the best way to remove this “Aboriginal problem” once and for all was to declare martial law and allow British soldiers to attack Aboriginals on sight. Furthermore, he encouraged and incentivized civilians to organize into hunting parties to kill Aboriginals (Aboriginal Heritage Tasmania 2015). In effect the British government authorized genocide. In the aftermath, only around one hundred Aboriginals remained out of a population that was once in the thousands (Reynolds 2004). Most of these survivors were then exiled to cultural re-education internment camps on Flinders’ Island, where they were forced to learn European customs and punished for following Aboriginal ones (Reynolds 2004). Many of these people died from disease and poor housing conditions.

The Aboriginal survivors on Flinder’s Island were moved from camp to camp as the years turned to decades, with many Aboriginal women marrying European men during this time and having children who grew up in colonial Tasmanian society. According to British documentation, by 1874 the “last” Tasmanian Aboriginal man and woman had died, despite the very-much-alive descendants of Aboriginals from the Flinder’s Island group that

spread out across Tasmania from then onward (Lawson 2014). The myth of the elimination of Aboriginals that started in 1874 continued throughout the twentieth century, but the efforts of Aboriginal Tasmanian activists gained more attention in the 1970s as they began to challenge this myth of “extinction” they had been living with for the last century (Banks 2013; Lawson 2014). Since Aboriginal women had been married off to European men, some of their contemporary descendants have white British phenotypes such as light skin or blue/green eyes (Banks 2013; Flanagan 2002). This lack of Tasmanian Aboriginals who have no European phenotypes is a foundation for the extinction myth. The *Palawa* are the descendants of these couples, and they are intimately familiar with this myth. They trace their ancestry from the Aboriginals who were moved to the Flinder’s Island camp and the camps that followed it, and thus most have European individuals in their family ancestry. Over a century after the genocide, the dispossession of land, rights, and resources from Aboriginals has created inequity that lasts to this day (Moorcroft and Adams 2014).

After colonization, land in Tasmania was used primarily to extract the valuable timber and minerals in the forests. The birth of the conservation movement in the mid-twentieth century, combined with the growing shift in the Tasmanian economy from resource extraction to tourism, altered perceptions of land for the settlers’ descendants. In the 1970s, the Australian Conservation Foundation

began a campaign to list a large land area in Tasmania that Aboriginals once lived in as a world heritage area due to its outstanding geological heritage, Indigenous heritage, historical heritage, flora, fauna, and recreational value (Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife 2016). In 1982 they succeeded, and this land was given a new name: the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area. Ever since then, the land has been managed by the government of Tasmania through the creation of an extensive policy plan.

Recently, an eclectic team including Tasmanian Aboriginal stakeholders tackled the task of updating the fifteen-year old plan. When it was released for the public to comment on it, several changes elicited rebuttal by white conservationists. Proposals to increase ease of access to “develop” and/or extract resources from the TWWHA have incensed conservationists. They advocate upholding wilderness values at the expense of the preferences of many contemporary Tasmanian Aboriginals who want access to protected areas they hold sacred and the ability to run their own tourism operations. These Indigenous-led programs allow them to share their stories and connection to Country with others, along with offering opportunities to generate income for Aboriginals (Jaeger and Sand 2015, 18; Moorcroft 2016, 609). The focus from conservationists was on wilderness, and they often downplayed or ignored the importance of Aboriginal involvement in the creation and management of this plan along with the social injustice issues

the plan raised. When it comes to land access, rights, and management, conflict between conservationists and Aboriginal people is common in Australia as a whole (Adams 2004; Atchison 1994; Barbour and Schlesinger 2012; Bayet 1994; Moorcroft and Adams 2014; Muller 2003; Rose 2004) and the world at large (Braun 2002; Clapperton 2013; Cronon 1995; Dove 2006; Hathaway 2010; Sundberg 2004; West et al 2006).

In this paper, I will first explain my methods interwoven with my own positionality in this project before delving into my experiences and observations on the construction of wilderness and how it marginalizes Tasmanian Aboriginals, with relevant literature being included throughout. I argue that the prevailing wilderness logic in Tasmania perpetuates colonial paradigms of race and environment; it is constructed by whites in a system of racism that limits or erases Aboriginal people.

Interviews, Observations, And A Brooding Undergraduate

To gather the data that informed my analysis in this ethnography, I used interviews as my primary research method and to a lesser extent participant observation. I conducted interviews with thirteen people from a variety of organizations and backgrounds in Tasmania including people who currently work for (or used to work for) tourism companies, specialty timber companies, universities, government, and non-governmental or-

ganizations. I chose these industries and organizations as my primary method of selecting people to interview because my initial project goal was simply to gather a variety of contrasting opinions about the proposed TWWHA plan. However, things grew more complicated as the people I spoke with challenged my views. I conducted participant observation at a panel on tourism and wilderness at the University of Tasmania, at a weekly volunteer meeting with The Wilderness Society in Hobart, and occasionally even in the hostel I was living in.

My interviews followed a semi-structured script, and I would add or remove questions depending on whom I was speaking with. My main focus was on big changes in the TWWHA plan and the values or ideas behind them. However, after multiple interviews, I started to let myself deviate from the script and let the interviews become more informal and conversational in nature. I did this in order to give the people I spoke with some control of the direction of the interview. All of the people I interviewed lived in Tasmania, with the majority of them having spent most of their lives there. They were all conducted in Hobart during April or May of 2015, with the exception of my second interview with Emma over a year later. Each interview was recorded after the interviewee gave me permission. I use vignettes from interviews to illustrate both the people I worked with and learned from, and my reactions to these people and their stories. The original purpose of my project was to fulfill my

study abroad program's required Independent Study Project (ISP). The program was run by the School for International Training, an American academic organization that offers study abroad programs across the globe for American students. I was enrolled in one of their more popular programs, "Australia: Sustainability and Environmental Action." It was on this program that I first heard of the

is one exchange from an interview with a conservationist that illustrates my acceptance into "the greenies" (slang referring to environmentalists). Senator Christine Milne of the Green Party was one of the people I interviewed. When we met, she gave me a printed photo book collection of shots taken in the TWWHA, published by the national environmental organization, The Wilderness Society. She had

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controversy over the TWWHA plan, and eventually I decided to undertake my ISP there. A year later, back at my home university, I used the data from Tasmania to write my senior ethnographic capstone paper for my Anthropology degree. Most of the names I use in this paper are real because participants gave written consent to their names being used. The exceptions are Bernard, Dave, Michael, Sarah and Will, which are pseudonyms.

My own positionality affected my research and what I was writing about. Most of my interviewees were white conservationists, and they all accepted me as a fellow white conservationist, especially given the nature of my study abroad program. It was an important part of my identity, and this connection facilitated my contact with many of them. I had dinner in some of their homes, I was invited on hiking trips, and one person even tried to help me find housing. I was treated with kindness and respect. There

signed it before I arrived, addressed it to me, and wrote "enjoy our wilderness and work to protect it." I was one of them, a young initiate, part of the clan, and this made me uneasy when writing this paper. At times, it felt like I was betraying many of them, using their words as critiques of an ideology to which many of them have dedicated their lives.

My discomfort with criticizing or possibly insulting them was a symptom of a larger conflict: my own identity as a conservationist was being challenged through the people I listened to and learned from in a way that reading articles could not have done so deeply for me. And the further I got in my project, the more problems with wilderness I encountered. By the time I left Tasmania and turned in my first draft of this paper, a report in which I attempted to take an impartial stance on the TWWHA plan, I felt dissatisfied. In my aim to be 'objective,' I had censored my position in this re-

search project; I had left out my personal stake in what I was discussing. When debating this role of an engaged, involved anthropologist, Nancy Scheper-Hughes asks “what makes anthropology and anthropologists exempt from the human responsibility to take an ethical (and even a political) stand on the working out of historical events as we are privileged to witness them?” (1995, 411). Writing this paper as a reflexive ethnography let me express my own humanity, emphasize the meaningful experiences I had with people like Emma, and ultimately allowed me take a stance against the racism and oppression I encountered in Tasmania. Emma, despite the awkwardness of our initial interview, inspired me with her genuine and passionate words to shift the goal of my paper from a policy analysis to an investigation of the wilderness ideology. I have also written it with accessibility in mind with the hope that it might be useful to the people with whom I worked.

The Ideology of Wilderness

In every day parlance in Tasmania, as much as in the US, “wilderness” is imagined as a concrete, physical place. It is something we can touch, something we can visit, something we can be in. Wilderness is constructed as natural, separate from the world of humanity, civilization, and culture. Yet, scholars rightly note that “wilderness” is better understood as a symbolic, rather than a physical place. The central feature of this symbolic location is its separation from human

presence. (Atchison 1998; Baldwin 2009; Braun 2002; Cronon 1995). Other dimensions of the symbolic meaning of wilderness have shifted over time in Western thought. For example, in 18th century American colonial society, wilderness was seen negatively, as a dangerous domain associated with Satan in a biblical context (Cronon 1995), whereas today it is seen as fragile and in need of protection. “Wilderness” is a dynamic, conceptual framework rather than a static, physical place. Today, arguably, a critical aspect of that framework is its intrinsic colonialism (Thomas 1994).

When I met with Senator Milne, she told me a personal story about why she is a conservationist – a story I empathized with – that illustrated the way wilderness is constructed as a place devoid of human activity. Senator Milne was at this time the leader of the Australian Green party. The party has a strong base in Tasmania, given that some of its founders were Tasmanian conservationists. I knew it was a long shot when I requested an interview with her, but I was pleasantly surprised to find myself in her office a couple of weeks later ready to spend some time learning about how she sees the world.

I was nervous as I began my walk to her office. Here I was, a lowly undergraduate, about to interview one of the most well-known politicians in Tasmania. Usually I never felt the need to dress up for an interview, given that the typical setting was an informal meeting in a coffee shop on an interviewee’s day off. This time though, I had dressed formally

without even thinking twice about it. Her office was in downtown Hobart, on a pier overlooking the Tasman Sea, easily the most visually arresting and probably the most expensive property I had visited in Hobart. This only underscored just how different this interview felt in terms of the wealth and power of the person I was interviewing. I entered her building and, before seeing anything else, was greeted by a huge wall filled with dozens upon dozens of pamphlets from the Green Party, Nature Conservancy, Wilderness Society, and many other conservation organizations: save the reef, save the rainforest, save the TWWHA, save the planet! I spent a few minutes observing the wall before I entered the main room where I spoke with Milne's secretary to check in for my appointment with the Senator.

Her office was spacious, well furnished, and had a huge window offering a beautiful view. Senator Milne exuded an aura of confidence that reflected her position and experience, yet she was also friendly and enthusiastic to speak with me. Unlike for most of the other people I spoke with, interviewing was a regular part of the Senator's career. Her responses to most of my questions were focused less on her personal opinions and more on broader assertions of issues she wanted to discuss, which was unsurprising given her profession. When I got to the question about her own personal connection to the TWWHA, the Senator shifted from our discussion of politics and policy into a rare vignette from her life revolving around a landmark environmental bat-

tle in Tasmania. Until this point she had been speaking in third person as "we, the Green party", but here she switched to the first person:

I have never been to Lake Pedder. I won't go back until we drain it. That'll happen one day, we will restore the lake. In fact, that sand up there in that little bottle is sand from the beach at the lake. That little stone on top is what's called a Pedder penny. The little old lady who collected that, just before the lake was flooded, asked me to take it back when we drained the lake and put it back on the beach, such is the level of faith that the conservation movement will one day secure the restoration of Lake Pedder.

Rosaldo's concept of "imperialist nostalgia" helps to shed light on the emotions that conservationists feel when they think about wilderness: "my concern resides with a particular kind of nostalgia, often found under imperialism, where people mourn the passing of what they themselves have transformed... Imperialist nostalgia revolves around a paradox: A person kills somebody, and then mourns the victim" (Rosaldo 1993, 69). This mourning is a powerful, emotional undercurrent of wilderness that I encountered in multiple interviews. A critical aspect of wilderness is that it is perceived today as faded and weakened when compared to pre-colonial times, and that this is something to be mourned. However, this mourning exists detached from the reality of a post-colonial society: "the flight from history that is very nearly the core of wilderness represents the false hope of an escape from responsibility, the illusion

that we can somehow wipe clean the slate of our past and return to the tabula rasa that supposedly existed before we began to leave our marks on the world” (Cronon 1995, 11). Entertaining fantasies of a Tasmania that was not colonized ironically reinforces the colonial project in that it erases the presence of Indigenous people and the reality they have dealt with since colonization.

Two questions I made sure to ask everyone I spoke with for this project were what they valued in the TWWHA and how they personally defined “wilderness.” The most recurring quality was the “pristineness” and separation from Western civilization the TWWHA supposedly provides. Greg, the owner of a backpacker-oriented tourism company that operates near the TWWHA, provid-

ed a good summary of this idea, when he told me that “we’ve changed the world so much beyond what it was originally, it’s a place that you go and experience it the way people did thousands of years ago.” Green Party Senator Milne described wilderness to me as “remote, wild... removed from modern points of access.” Geoff, a veteran Tasmanian conservationist campaign organizer, defined wilderness as “wild country, which is a reminder of how the world was before humanity started exploiting it and changing the face of the planet.” Michael, who makes a living crafting products from special timbers in Tasmania, described it as “areas untouched by man, and there’s not many left.” Sarah, who as a government employee focused on tourism knew quite a bit about marketing the TWWHA, respond-



ed similarly, telling me that wilderness is: “attractive, unspoiled, natural landscape which is mostly unchanged by the intrusion of human activity.” Murray, a career forestry employee, defined it likewise as “areas with little development, fairly remote from any developed road or access.” MP (Member of Parliament) Nick McKim for the Tasmanian Green party reminisced in our interview that when he used to be a tour guide in the TWWHA, his clients would often get upset at the sight of a helicopter, claiming it diminished the “wilderness experience.”

To all of these interviewees, wilderness can only exist either in the past “before humans” or today without human presence. In either case, it is imagined by these conservationists to be like it was before European colonization. This

is a paradox in that this place they yearn for cannot exist as long as they are there (Braun 2002). Most of the people I interviewed expressed these ideals, yet their perspectives on the importance of wilderness to the TWWHA varied considerably. Bernard, a Tasmanian government employee involved in land management, acknowledged the fluid nature of wilderness when responding with this: “It’s complicated. You can be in parts that don’t feel wild or remote, but there’s no doubt that at its core, the value, what I like about it anyway, is that you can be somewhere and you can look out and not really see anything other than nature.” Michael, the timber crafter, took it a step further, asserting that because in the TWWHA “we have hydro infrastructure, road infrastructure, power poles, water



pipe lines, forestry areas... it's not wilderness." Michael then told me an anecdote about a man who managed to walk across the entire country of Australia but who consistently encountered – even when in the desolate and scorching outback – signs of human habitation. He was trying to make a point to me that wilderness is nearly non-existent because humans have interacted with so much of the planet. Despite the reality of human presence and involvement with land, the construction of wilderness as pristine and devoid of humanity is at the heart of conservationist thinking in Tasmania, as it is in Canada, the United States and elsewhere.

Tasmanian Aboriginal Greg Lehman challenges this notion of a pristine untouched landscape, writing that “it is essential to recognise the reality of our island’s history: that it was not an empty land, but home to an actively managed cultural system” (Lehman 2016). This critique is one reiterated by researchers around the world who study conservation and land ethics (Atchison 1994; Baldwin 2009; Bayet 1994; Braun 2002; Cronon 1995; Muller 2003; Rose 2004). Braun sums it up by asserting that “in the environmental movement, there are only two binary poles: nature spoiled or nature saved” (2002, 237). In order to protect this pristineness, conservationist organizers like Geoff run campaigns to protect the land from activities they perceive as harmful to this pure wild nature, from mining and logging to tourism. As Geoff keenly explained to me, “wilderness is not just something static – it’s not just sit-

ting there for people to enjoy, it’s actually being destroyed.”

To Geoff and Senator Milne, working in conservation was a constant battle against the forces of government and industry in order to protect something sacred. This mentality of “us versus them” between wilderness and industry was iterated by several of my interviewees. MP McKim gave a similarly passionate response to the Senator’s, when he vowed to me that “I will fight for the rest of my life to defend wilderness wherever it exists.” On the other end of this “fight”, Michael vented to me about how frustrated he was at being othered as a “rainforest logger.” Murray expanded on this critique, gruffly telling me that “unfortunately, wilderness has been used here so many times when it suits the conservation movement, wilderness becomes anything they want to protect. Anything they want to block activities in, often ignoring what would really be done or what development would happen there.” Murray and Michael’s description of the “conservation movement” as its own entity (“they”) illustrate the extent to which factions are constructed and very real to those involved. This was also my reasoning when referring to “the conservationists” as a distinct collective.

In exploring why wilderness advocates engage in the fight for a pristine TWWHA, there were also more practical reasons for keeping the TWWHA “remote” and inaccessible: the protection of endangered species and the preservation of Aboriginal heritage sites. A conservationist professor of the University

of Tasmania in *Geography*, Dr. Jamie Kirkpatrick, when discussing critiques of wilderness, explained that “there’s good reasons for not wanting to call things wilderness, but remoteness is critical for conservation and for the things that make the World Heritage area the World Heritage Area... having a distance away from mechanized access is critically important for conserving things that have world heritage value, including the cultural values.” Geoff agreed with him, asserting that “wilderness is also something important to protect cultural heritage. It is the remoteness of some of these Aboriginal sites that has allowed them to persist without being obliterated by road building or damming or logging activities or mining or pilfering or arson or vandalism.” Rather than analyzing the effectiveness of remoteness as a tool for protecting sites, I wanted to focus on why remoteness is both desired as the primary protective measure for both cultural heritage and wilderness. Part of the answer I found was that the value placed on preserving wilderness and pre-colonial Aboriginal heritage is part of a colonial ideology that upholds white power over land while maintaining the nostalgic elements in wilderness and the noble savage stereotype. Cronon wrote that “as we gaze into the mirror [wilderness] holds up for us, we too easily imagine that what we behold is Nature when in fact we see the reflection of our own unexamined longings and desires” (1995, 69). These “unexamined longings”, this “imperialist nostalgia” in Tasmania is for this remoteness,

a separation of humans from the natural world that conservationists yearn for, which stands in contrast to the proposed plan that allows for more construction of low-impact accommodation shelters and more permits for helicopters and jet skis in the TWWHA to make it more accessible and consequently less remote.

Another change in the plan allows for more tourism ventures in the TWWHA, which some of my interviewees who worked in conservationist organizations strongly objected to. This colonial desire for untouched remoteness comes at the cost of accessibility. When I asked Greg, the tourism business owner about accessibility, he said that everyone should be able to visit the TWWHA, not just young backpackers (such as myself) to whom his and many other tourism companies cater. The tourism industry for the TWWHA creates advertisements focused on “getting away”, on visiting an exotic “lost wilderness.” These advertisements appealed to me and countless other mostly white vacationers in Tasmania, and they indicated yet another way I was part of the conservationist clan.

The Marginalizing of Aboriginal Tasmanians

My interviews with white Tasmanians (not just the conservationists) revealed patterns in how Tasmanian Aboriginals were being marginalized by whites and consequently excluded from land management. In multiple ways, the Aboriginals were discredited and ignored by whites across all of the professions I

encountered. The first pattern I noticed was how many of my white interviewees outright rejected the possibility that contemporary Aboriginals exist entirely, in a continuation of the myth that Tasmanian Aboriginals went extinct in the late 1800s. The most detailed manifestation of this idea while I was in Hobart occurred not during an official interview, but rather in a conversation with a friend at the bar of the hostel where I was staying.

It was a late night, probably a Friday, and I was enjoying my time off the ethnographer clock. As was our weekend routine, my friends and I were all gathered around the bar, and my friend Will asked me how my project was going. I had known Will, a British expat, for a couple of weeks by this time. When he asked me this, it was already late into the night, and both he and I had had a couple of beers. Thankfully this memory has not escaped me. I began to tell Will about how my interests had changed from when I first started, and I explained that my original goal of surveying opinions on the new wilderness management plan had transformed into an exploration of the relationships between conservationists, the government, and Tasmanian Aboriginals. At the mention of “Tasmanian Aboriginals”, I saw Will’s face darken.

“Don’t you know? They died off ages ago.” I asked him what he meant, and he began his explanation that went something like this.

They were all killed by whites during colonization. The last real Tasmanian Aboriginal died decades

ago. The ones you’re talking about now are more European than anything else. Their modern culture and language is actually completely based off of what they’ve learned from Western historians, linguists, and archeologists.

I heard parts of this skepticism about “real” Aboriginals repeated several times by white Tasmanians I spoke with. One of my white interviewees who worked in forestry remarked to me that because the last “full-blooded” Aboriginal died a long time ago, contemporary Tasmanian Aboriginals are “as Aboriginal as you or I.” To further his point, he told me a short anecdote about Aboriginals from Tasmania who went to visit Aboriginals on the mainland and how they looked like a van filled with white tourists in comparison to the often darker-skinned, more “traditional” Aboriginals of the mainland. His implication was that mainland Aboriginals were “real” and that Tasmanian ones were not. Paul, a former forestry employee, gave similar responses that emphasized that Tasmanian Aboriginals are only a tiny fraction of the population of Tasmania and asserted that their culture is more European than Aboriginal. Dave, a conservationist who worked in parks and wildlife, told me something comparable to what Will said, that “current Tasmanian Aboriginals have little [sic] aboriginal genes and have lost their connection to their land. It’s different from other parts of Australia where Aboriginals have lived on their own land for the entirety of white occupation; knowledge of Aboriginal history comes from white

archaeologists. So many of them have been totally obliterated.”

This narrative of a defeated people, stripped of their culture, served to marginalize contemporary Tasmanian Aboriginals and it gave white people the power to define Aboriginality and what constitutes a “connection to land.” These statements reflect Tom Lawson’s argument that the genocide of Tasmanian Aboriginals and subsequent mourning of the “extinct” Aboriginal serve to strengthen whiteness and its dominance in Tasmania (2014). When white conservationists and foresters deny the existence of contemporary Aboriginals, they help maintain the current of paradigm of wilderness versus human civilization, or nature versus culture, a paradigm where contemporary Aboriginals do not exist. When I spoke to Emma about this, she sharply condemned the idea, telling me that “they [white conservationists] created this platform using the myth of our extinction. They took that nostalgia, the mourning of those they killed, and used it against us to say that ‘well, you know, given that you cannot speak, we will’. It’s a self-appointed position that doesn’t allow for the multiplicity of voices, and that to me is a power. Where’s the democracy in wilderness?” This particular racialization of Tasmanian Aboriginals that denies Aboriginality to light-skinned, blue-eyed people in Hobart and other cities – despite their ties to Country and their heritage through generations – serves to expand whiteness while marginalizing Aboriginals.

Another pattern that works in tan-

dem with the longing for untouched wilderness, one that is also bound up with colonial thinking and “imperialist nostalgia,” is a focus on the pre-colonial Tasmanian Aboriginal. This idea can be found throughout the conservation arena (Bayet 1994; Braun 2002; Clapperton 2013; Muller 2003). Indigenous peoples are marginalized by being simultaneously restricted to a static, romantic identity of a “native other” that exists separate from civilization (Bayet 1994; Clapperton 2012; Lehman 2016) and excluded from land management (Adams 2004; Barbour and Schlesinger 2012; Muller 2003). In the current management plan for the TWWHA, most of the writing about Tasmanian Aboriginals focuses on their heritage. Discussion of contemporary Aboriginals is limited to allowing them to perform “traditional” activities on protected land, including hunting, gathering, and fishing (Tasmanian Government 1999, 101). The meaning here is clear: Aboriginals must act in these imagined pre-colonial ways in the TWWHA as ecologically noble savages, or else they are not Aboriginal. Baldwin sums up this construction excellently in his article on a similar phenomenon relating to Indigenous people in Canada and the boreal forests: “Racial rule... is no longer about forcibly purifying aboriginal bodies of their primitivism. Rather, it is about purging them of their modernity” (Baldwin 2009, 247). This precolonial focus, which is established in white-dominated spaces, creates and upholds a nostalgic and mournful narrative of colonization

that in reality marginalizes Aboriginals while securing and upholding white power over land. When white conservationists set the rules of what can and cannot be Indigenous, they also establish the idea that being white means being modern and the ultimate controller of the land.

Emma noted that another way whites marginalize Tasmanian Aboriginals is by characterizing her people as “those poor buggers.” In the realm of Tasmanian politics, the government administration worked to “open up” the TWWHA by making the new wilderness management plan allow for more activities, access, and resource extraction. A number of the conservationists I interviewed speculated that the new emphasis on joint management with Aboriginal people was really just an elaborate ruse from the government to use Aboriginals as an excuse to open up the protected areas for development. MP McKim told me that “the government is trying to set up a conflict between the environmental movement and the Aboriginal movement in Tasmania.” Similarly, Senator Milne explained to me that “this is a group of people in parliament who want to now use Aboriginal people and Aboriginal connection to Country as an excuse for destroying the very thing Aboriginal people value.” Dr. Kirkpatrick shared a similar sentiment, speculating that “it was a great opportunity to put a wedge between the indigenous community and the green community.” Sarah, most likely because of her position as a government employee, requested an anonymous interview in or-

der to confess that she, too, thought this was the case.

This story of conflict sounded compelling to me when I first heard it. But when I spoke to Emma, she was incensed at this line of argument. For Emma, the people claiming that Aboriginals are being duped by the government to support the new management plan have a limited and patronizing idea of who Aboriginals are:

Oh, for God’s sake. So our agency and our rights are now reduced to ‘Oh, look at those poor buggers, they don’t even understand.’ How offensive is that in terms of them trying to retain their power, that myself as a PhD student couldn’t have the intelligence to knock together an argument or the networks to actually understand what the plan is. It’s offensive... My goodness, in my family group, we have professors, doctors, a pro-vice-chancellor, we have practitioners and specialists. Not for one moment do I think that they don’t have good grounding and conceptual understanding and are talking with people that are actually putting this plan together to make those decisions.

Here Emma pulls back the shroud of racism behind the idea that Aboriginal Tasmanians could not be active agents in the creation of the management plan, but rather clueless, pitiful pawns of white politicians: “those poor buggers.” By perpetuating this idea, conservationists erased the Aboriginals who helped create the new plan and pushed them into the distant background of the battle between conservation and industry. This echoes findings in Latin America, where only

white people are seen as having the real capacity to rationally manage conservation projects (Sundberg 2004).

The current management plan for the TWWHA itself contains undercurrents of this rhetoric. In the plan, a significant cultural value of the TWWHA was that it served as “an outstanding example of a traditional human settlement which is representative of a culture and which has

in the TWWHA and acknowledgement of past Aboriginal management of it through controlled fire burnings. Tasmania’s Minister for Environment, Parks and Heritage Matthew Groom, who has the power to approve the TWWHA plan itself, agreed with Michael’s sentiment by noting that historically, both major political parties were guilty of ignoring both Aboriginal interests and the cul-

"If Aboriginals appeared at all, they were constructed in very limited ways—either entrapped in the past as ecologically noble savages, or as unsophisticated pawns in white people's political dramas."

become vulnerable under the impact of irreversible change” (Tasmanian Government 1999, 22). While the writers also include an additional paragraph after this sentence that acknowledges the existence of a contemporary Aboriginal community, the sentence quoted above nonetheless underscores the dominant narrative of Tasmanian Aboriginals as “vulnerable” and powerless.

Emma was not the only person I spoke with who was critical of this way of constructing Indigenous Tasmanians. Michael had grown rather sick of this rhetoric that erases them too. When we were talking about his thoughts about the new management plan, he told me that “there’s been a lack of recognition of indigenous ownership and their involvement in the history.” Michael was referring to the lack of both co-management

tural value of places like the TWWHA. Groom supported greater Aboriginal Involvement in the TWWHA, telling me that “one of the things that make [sic] this area extraordinary is the fact that there’s an Aboriginal connection to the area that dates back as much as 40,000 years, and in a global context that is extraordinary.”

In every article, conversation, press release, speech, presentation, interview, campaign goal, public policy, and social media page I encountered, the message of keeping the TWWHA remote and inaccessible so that it could forever be pristine wilderness was consistently repeated by the conservationists. If Aboriginals appeared at all, they were constructed in very limited ways—either entrapped in the past as ecologically noble savages, or as unsophisticated pawns in white people’s political dramas. Each of these

moments, interactions, publications, and websites reinforced whiteness and particular constructions of Aboriginals/wilderness for the conservationists as dominant. They racialized Aboriginals in particular ways, which in turn served to bolster a particular set of associations of whiteness with conservation. Interestingly, conservation scientists from the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) who came to Tasmania to review the state of the World Heritage Area noted this exclusion: “It is widely accepted that the cultural heritage of the TWWHA has been playing second fiddle to the natural heritage at all times since inscription despite status as a mixed World Heritage property” (Jaeger and Sand 2015, 31). Given that this “natural heritage” of wilderness is based on white colonial desires for the pristine, it is white people who benefit from the management of TWWHA while Aboriginal peoples have been historically left out.

When I showed Emma my draft of this paper in our follow-up interview, I asked her to respond to the idea of a power disparity between the conservation movement and Tasmanian Aboriginals. Her reply adds a personal depth to this reality that I, as a non-Indigenous person, could not add:

It speaks to the power of others to have a public media space. If you think of it in terms of a zero sum game, for [the conservationists] to have their space means that we don't have ours. There's a real battle in that there's only so much space and attention to go around. And those with power have it, and those without don't. It's

no accident that I'm here, that I've had to bare knuckle fight my way to be here. It speaks to the silencing of us through wilderness narratives... We are not mute. We are only muted by the powers of others to silence us, and the weapon of their choice is wilderness. There is no place for us in wilderness. They treat our heritage as things, and deny our people the right to participate in conserving those things that are important to us.

Many Tasmanian Aboriginals have resisted the limited identities and ideologies being forced upon them. Emma has consistently been writing opinion editorials that critique conservation for the largest Tasmanian newspaper, *The Mercury*. She and other members of the *melythina tiakana warrana* (Heart of Country) Aboriginal Corporation have participated extensively in the creation of the new TWWHA management plan and have worked with the Tasmanian government to give Aboriginals greater agency in the TWWHA. The Aboriginal Cultural Business unit proposed in the plan aims to give more agency to Tasmanian Aboriginals, bringing them further into the fold of land management as a dynamic group of people. Bernard, the government employee, gave a thorough defense for this approach when I asked him about dual management and Aboriginal involvement in our interview:

I think you can take an approach to wilderness that acknowledges not just that there was occupation but that there should be potential occupation, and certainly greater involvement of Aboriginal people so cultural practices

can continue. That might be a pointy issue in the future, because Aboriginal people would be the ones to decide what they want their culture to evolve into in the future, and it might resemble things that are contrary to what many people would like to see. It might come close to mirroring the developments people are so worried about. Because why should Aboriginal people be able to return to the area, for cultural purposes, and sit under some traditional shelter? Maybe they'd like to stay in something more comfortable, and that's perfectly appropriate in my view because when Europeans came, Aboriginals were very quick to pick up technology they found useful, so they started using glass... that sort of thing. They took on dogs really quickly because they saw the usefulness of them. There's nothing to suggest their culture should remain static.

This move towards co-management is critical for social justice for Tasmanian Aboriginals: "If the right of people to decide for themselves is not fully accepted, then it is not truly collaborative work and the process becomes disempowering, and can undermine Indigenous people's rights to self-determination" (Barbour and Schlesinger 2012, 39). This dual management proposal is following trends in the rest of Australia toward increasing Indigenous involvement and agency in protected land management (Adams 2004, Moorcroft 2016, 591).

However, to insinuate that there is a singular opinion in the Tasmanian Aboriginal community on these issues is problematic (Cameron 2015; Lehman 2015). Firstly, there are Tasmanian Ab-

originals who have adopted the ideals of wilderness and allied with conservationists, such as the *weetaipoona* (The Moon is Risen) Aboriginal corporation and the non-profit Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre, which supports keeping the TWWHA categorized as wilderness. For them, wilderness is essential to protecting their Aboriginal heritage (DPIPWE 2016, 8). Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, by collapsing the variety of voices, viewpoints, and organizations of Tasmanian Aboriginals into a false singularity, Aboriginals are marginalized further by letting white conservationists and politicians pick and choose which Tasmanian Aboriginal group or viewpoint they agree with while ignoring the rest. This was certainly something I saw in my interviews. Supporters of the new management plan that allowed for more accessibility and development would claim they had *the* Aboriginal backing, citing Emma and her organization. Critics of this plan, who advocated for the TWWHA to remain an inaccessible and protected area of wilderness, claimed they had *the* Aboriginal support, citing the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre. In both cases, the multiplicity of Aboriginal voices and people are censored to fit an agenda.

A first step forward in the relationship between conservation, government, and Aboriginals would be for the first two to listen to the major points and ideas from Aboriginals who *do not* agree with them. Tasmanian Aboriginal Aunty Patsy Cameron eloquently describes the importance of this in one of her articles: "What

I hold dear to my heart is the right of all Tasmanian Aboriginal people to have a voice and be engaged in the care of their regional lands. We do not need to agree on all things, as any other group of people, but we do need to know we are heard and our ideas considered, and in a safe environment” (Cameron 2015).

Decolonizing wilderness

In this paper, I have argued that the prevailing wilderness paradigm in Tasmanian conservation perpetuates colonial constructs of race and environment, privileging white settler desires of “imperialist nostalgia” while simultaneously marginalizing Indigenous Tasmanians. White conservationists use multiple techniques to erase or minimize Aboriginals. The paradigm of conservation focuses on the Aboriginals who existed before Europeans arrived, while neglecting contemporary Aboriginals who present an ideological dilemma to conservationists because many of them do not believe in the wilderness paradigm. All of these moves serve to bolster and whiten conservation, while disempowering Aboriginal peoples who might not adhere to the wilderness paradigm.

Tasmanian Aboriginal activists, alongside Indigenous activists around the world, challenge the Western conservationist logic built on a wilderness paradigm that rests on human/nature separation, despite nearly 30 years of ongoing criticism. I asked Emma about this struggle and how she personally dealt with getting rejected or attacked for her views

on wilderness:

I don't have to subscribe to any kind of stereotype anymore. I can care for Country in whichever way it suits me; whichever way that it suits you! And that's the beauty with what we've tried to do with this plan. Everyone cares for it and they do it in their own way, within their own knowledge, within their own experience and their own worldviews. Who are we to deny that? Who are we to cast aside other people's experiences on the basis that it's not ours?

Put in twenty-first century terms, Indigenous activism calls for the decolonizing of the wilderness paradigm; conservation must be thought about in connection to Indigenous social justice (Moorcroft 2016). Decolonization involves a set of processes which identify and challenge the aspects of colonialism that persist in relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians and in the construction of Australia's identity and social institutions (Howitt 1998, 33). In the context of conservation, this means granting greater control to Indigenous peoples over land stolen from them and valuing Indigenous land management philosophy (Muller 2003, 31).

After I finished my independent study project in Hobart, I returned to New South Wales to reunite with my classmates and teachers for our final presentations and completion of the program. As I was eating lunch, my phone started to ring. I looked at the caller ID to see that it Emma who was calling me, and I immediately began to worry. *Did I write something about her she didn't like? Was*

my writing on Tasmanian Aboriginality accurate? What did you mess up, Dan?

As it turned out, Emma called to tell me how thrilled she was with my paper, and that it even brought a tear to her eye. She admitted that “it had been some time since a white fella has surprised me.” I didn’t know what to say, other than “thank you.” Months later, I asked Emma why she had reacted that way to reading my paper, and she gave me a heartfelt answer:

I exist with a tenseness. This holding together of myself against the face of wilderness and conservation arguments... Reading your paper actually let me breathe. It gave me hope that our people’s message for Country as its own active agency is working! For so long, our people, culture, Country, and history have been someone else’s story. It gave me a freedom, democracy, to tell my own story, without qualifications, without asking me to justify that. You let us tell our own story in our own way, and it’s significant because this is a beautiful story, because that story is that you have your place within our Country and we don’t require anything of you. That’s the thing; there is no quid pro quo in having been talking. I never expected anything, let alone to have our voice seen and as legitimate. You gave us a legitimacy that we can’t give ourselves. That we are trying to give ourselves.

If my own paper – which only *begins* to explore the realities lived by contemporary Tasmanian Aboriginals and the role of conservation in their oppression – was such a surprise to Emma, what does that say about the state of Tasma-

nia? What Emma’s own story reveals is that the struggles of contemporary Tasmanian Aboriginals are clearly not being discussed enough. They have endured the combination of being ignored, restricted, and even challenged about their Aboriginal roots, injustices which conservation has unwittingly aided. Stories like Emma’s need to be shared and given the attention they deserve. When discussing the relationship between Indigenous people and conservation, Rose wrote: “Nature for us is history, conquest, and damage; by our own ethical presence Nature may become for us resilience, reconciliation, and love” (2004, 212). Everyone I listened to had a deep connection to the land of Tasmania, despite the many walls they constructed around each other. But it was from Emma that I learned of the oldest and most sacred kinship connection: Country. It was her people and their connection that many conservationists and other non-Indigenous people in Tasmania so often questioned or denied. When non-Indigenous conservationists’ love of nature manifests in the wilderness paradigm, it is a reinforcement of the privileges granted to us by the horrific actions of our colonial ancestors. And if we are to pursue a more just and equitable society in the daunting wake of colonialism, we must be able to change.

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¹ The Aboriginal term "Country" is often capitalized to differentiate it from the noun "country" and to emphasize that it is a significant cultural and spiritual phenomenon, along with being environmental.

² The United Nations defines genocide as "acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group" (1948). Despite this, I often heard white Tasmanians use the word to mean the complete destruction of Tasmanian Aboriginals. I want to iterate that when I write this, I am following this international definition and am not trying to imply that the Tasmanian Aboriginals were eradicated, but rather emphasize the severity of violence inflicted on Aboriginals during the colonization of Tasmania.

³ Nearly two years after conducting this research, in November 2016, the proposed TWWHA plan was put into law. The final plan had changed in several ways from the prototype plan I discuss in this article, including the removal of the "Aboriginal Cultural Business Unit" concept (Tasmanian Government 2016). While I think it would be fascinating for future researchers to examine responses to the new plan or the reasons why the final plan changed, I do not believe their analysis would dramatically change any of my findings or arguments in this paper. The proposed plan was the vehicle I used to explore the racialization of wilderness, and analysis of the reactions and responses to the plan comprise the core of this article.