

Contesting wilderness in a ‘bush walk’: Unsettling stories of the land in indigenous tourism

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In Australia, there is a persistent stereotypical image on which many touristic cultural experiences rely that entwines Aboriginal people as members of ‘one of the oldest living cultures in the world’ into a timeless, ‘untouched’ wild country. In this paper Australian ‘wilderness’ will be examined as contested property, in the double meaning of the word, in the cross-cultural setting of indigenous cultural tourism. I discuss a recurring event drawn from my ethnographic fieldwork in North Australia in which this touristic imaginary is, albeit quietly, challenged. I describe the practice of one Aboriginal tour guide who, during the so-called ‘bush walk’, would share his personal story at the overgrown remnants of a pastoralist stone oven, thus revealing the multiple layers of colonial history that are deeply ingrained into the land. Through the gentle narrating of his experiences of loss and hurt, the enduring ‘wild’ not only emerged as a meaningful indigenous place, it also bound tourists to its heritage of colonization and appropriation. Sometimes with shock, his tourist listeners saw the timeless other and their own life histories merge into an intercultural, shared past that would no longer enable a guileless chronicle of self and other as living at opposite sides of civilization, i.e. in cultured places on the one hand and wild spaces on the other.

Bio

Anke Tonnaer holds a PhD in anthropology (2008), from Aarhus University, Denmark. At present she is a lecturer at Radboud University, the Netherlands. Her research focuses on indigenous tourism, intercultural encounters, performance, and heritage, with a regional focus on Indigenous Australia. Other current work involves tourism and ‘new nature’ and ‘rewilding’ projects in Europe.