

Extinction Imaginaries: Species Loss and Revival in a Biotechnological Age

Sarah Bezan

My research project, *Extinction Imaginaries: Species Loss and Revival in a Biotechnological Age*, examines species revivalist representations of the woolly mammoth, dodo, great auk, thylacine, Steller's sea cow, and Pinta island tortoise. Through an assessment of literature, art, and film, I investigate how biotechnologies are imagined to intervene in the mass extinction crisis. This project therefore proceeds from the fundamental claim that an assessment of narrative and aesthetic representation is essential to understanding the role of biotechnological programs that attempt to preserve and revive extinct species in the twenty-first century.

In my assessment of species revivalist representations, I aim to show that de-extinction science, while a hopeful prospect, is ultimately a flawed model for the conservation of critically endangered and extinct species because it does not generally address the factors (such as deforestation, over-hunting, and loss of habitats) that have led to species loss in the first place. Instead, I contend that species revivalist art and literature can incite a powerful cultural and attitudinal shift in public audiences that enables a deeper understanding of the exploitative and unsustainable use of animal forms of life. Contextualizing the visual and literary culture of species revivalism within a history of colonialism and the culture of biotechnocapitalism, this project examines the relationship between species loss and revival in an archive of 20th and 21st century art and texts by British, Australian, and North American artists and authors.

In reading these texts, I utilize an eco-postcolonial framework (Huggan 2009) to focus particularly on the emergence of de-extinction programs and the colonial histories of seven extinct animals: the woolly mammoth, great auk, dodo bird, thylacine, northern white rhino, Steller's sea cow, and Galápagos tortoise (each the subject of a chapter). The abiding presence of these extinct species exemplifies visual/literary critic W.J.T. Mitchell's claim that "the destruction of a species is not necessarily the destruction of its image" (2015). Extending Mitchell's analysis, I ask: In which ways, and to what purpose, do we revive extinct species? Given that we are already at a point of environmental crisis, how does the revival of charismatic extinct species intercede in existing narratives about the human-animal relationship? What does it mean, moreover, to have extinct animals abound on the page, the screen, and the canvas, but disappear from our natural environments?

In responding to this set of research questions, this project has two main objectives. First, *Extinction Imaginaries* sets a new research agenda for extinction studies that communicates the value of the arts in contemplating the limits and potentials of de-extinction science, which is itself a highly variable and creative enterprise. Recognizing this archive as a site for exploring the complicated role of human activity in perpetuating (and potentially reversing) species loss, I aspire to lead a scholarly inquiry that illuminates the bioethical concerns that arise from human mediations designed to revive and prolong extinct species lines. Second, my project evaluates how species revivalist representations attend to the complex histories of knowledge production in institutions like the natural history museum and DNA analysis laboratory. Exploring how texts and images pose a critique of institutional knowledge by showcasing the return of these animals to their natural environments, I show

how this archive challenges our interpretation of romantic or idealized losses of charismatic species in natural scientific institutions. In responding to these forms of knowledge production, I illustrate how extinction representations are, in an era of biotechnological innovation, reframed by “genome time” (Stephanie Turner 2007) that leaves extinct species stories open-ended and subject to alternative temporalities and futures.