

# ***Tranny Trivia : The Question of Identity In A Postmodern World.***

Natasha Greenwood

*Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Technology Sydney*

The theorisation of 'identity' in wealthy, western societies has developed according to shifting paradigms throughout history. Drawing on cultural theorist Stuart Hall's (2000, p.19) essay, *Who Needs 'Identity'?*, the term 'identity' is understood as the point of suture between the discourses which contextually position an individual and the cognitive processes which produce subjectivities. With the rise of modernity, tradition has been displaced as the main source of shared identity. As a result, the modern individual's existence is dictated by an insistence towards self-discovery, self-expression and self-actualisation. However, postmodern thinkers reject the grand narratives of modernity which claim that each person has a core, perceptible identity. Postmodernism asserts that the idea of 'self' is only perceptible when considered relative to 'other' (Hall, 1996. P.17). Evidently, tradition, modernity and postmodernity have had a distinct impact upon the theorisation of 'self' in wealthy, Western societies. This evolution may be observed through a critical analysis of Kinselas hotel, a heritage listed site located in the heart of Sydney's gay, lesbian, bisexual and transsexual (GLBT) community.

Kinselas Hotel is an ideal departure point for a critical analysis of the impact of tradition, modernity and post modernity on society's perception of 'identity.' Originally constructed in 1932, the site features a chapel which was built to serve the purpose of a funeral parlour. This provides an opportunity to consider how religion contributes to a traditional sense of shared identity. Despite this heritage, Kinselas Hotel is now a popular bar which hosts drag shows and events such as 'Tranny Trivia.' In this way, it embraces diversity and places an emphasis on the expression of authentic identity through lifestyle and consumption. However, this extreme juxtaposition creates a hyperrealistic experience which causes one to question the concept of identity. Undoubtedly, Kinselas Hotel, much like society's understanding of identity, has been shaped and reshaped by shifts in ideas throughout history.

In the pre-modern era, society gained a sense of shared identity through the comforting stability provided by religious tradition. In *The Past in Ruins: Tradition and the Critique of Modernity*, David Gross (1992, p20) argues that tradition was vital to individual and communal life because it fortified community ties and ensured a sense of belonging. Tradition refers to 'a set of practices, a constellation of beliefs or a mode of thinking that exists in the present, but was inherited from the past' (1992, p8). Prior to the rise of modernity in the wealthy, western world, religion constituted the dominant traditional authority. This established commonality amongst individuals in a community, providing a shared sense of identity and relieving individuals of the burden of self-discovery. The ability of religious tradition to provide a collective sense of identity is evidenced by Kinselas Hotel's original use as a Christian chapel. Entering a chapel serves to confirm one's affiliation with the community. This is visibly reinforced through the communal seating provided by pews. As a result, the individual is not required to pursue an understanding of 'self' separate to the shared identity provided by tradition. Evidently, the communal ties and shared beliefs provided by

religious tradition ensured a collective sense of identity, as demonstrated through the Kinselas Hotel chapel.

In addition to strengthening communal ties, religious traditions provided individuals with the moral framework through which the world could be understood. Tradition dictated how individuals perceived the world around them, thereby ensuring uniformity of thought within communities. Through this, Gross (1992, p20) argues that, “tradition helped to foster certain mental dispositions which then served to strengthen tradition’s hold on the thought and practice of individuals.” Rather than pursue a sense of individual identity in order to make sense of the world, individuals derived their subjectivities from the communal unit. As expressed by Edward Shils (1971, p129), tradition “fuses individual minds into something closer to a single entity.” In *Modernity, Self-Identity and the Sequestration of Death*, Philip Mellor and Chris Shilling (1993, p414) argue that traditional societies were better equipped to cope with their individual mortality. The death of an individual was seen as a communal event for the social body and therefore it produced a collective response. Death brought the community together in a series of ritual actions which contained death by making it subject to religious and social control. Mellor and Shilling (1993, p415) propose that individual deaths were treated largely as problems for the existing groups, “when death occurred, its significance denoted a disruption to the *social body* more than it did the passing of an *individual body*.” The individual was able to cope with their own mortality through the knowledge that their sense of ‘self’ and ‘identity’ was contained within the group. This understanding of identity as derived from, and secured within, the collective identity of a community is evidenced by the public nature of the Christian funeral. The Kinselas chapel was originally constructed to serve the purpose of a funeral parlour. It has an elevated platform to publicly display the coffin bearing the body of the deceased. In this way, death was literally granted centre stage in traditional society. According to Mellor and Shilling (1993, p415), the public nature of death assured the bereaved that death was ‘meaningful’ to the identity of the community. Undoubtedly, shared identity provided individuals with set categories through which to interpret the world, thereby ensuring that individuals were equipped to confront the finiteness of the ‘self.’

As well as providing shared identity through communal ties and a collective understanding of the world, tradition ensured shared identity through a connection to the past. Traditional societies viewed the past with reverence, asserting that one must look backward to find the source of all value. Through this, identity was shown to be imbedded deep within society. In order to gain access to one’s identity, the individual was encouraged to strictly abide to the traditions of the past. Kinselas Hotel’s original use as a funeral parlour demonstrates the importance of tradition as a source of shared identity. The sacred rituals surrounding death aim to make symbolic contact with the ancient beginnings. As Gross (1993, p10) confirms, “upon receiving a tradition, one feels part of something continuous, as if one were a link in a chain stretching back in time.” This emphasis on a connection with the past is evident in the architecture of the Kinselas Hotel chapel. The use of high ceilings, stained glass windows and upward beams of light ensures the chapel conforms to the historic precedent of a Christian place of worship. Through this, individuals are able to feel as though their presence in the Kinselas chapel binds them to some distant origin, thereby providing their lives with value. Unquestionably, tradition linked individuals to an imagined, plentiful past which endowed their life with a rich sense of shared identity.

The rise of modernity led to the secularist idea of a ‘self’ separate from one’s community, thereby necessitating the individual pursuit of identity. Modernity refers to the ideological

shift away from tradition, toward a focus on progress. Emerging from the enlightenment, modern secularism was corrosive of tradition and the concept of shared identity. Gross (1992, p29) asserts that modernity gave rise to the idea of “a ‘self’ that could define its interests entirely apart from the surrounding community or the legacy of historical traditions.” In Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age, Anthony Giddens (1991, p3) argues that society has been stripped of the comfort of a shared identity derived from tradition. He proposes that, “modernity is a post-traditional order, but not one in which the sureties of tradition and habit have been replaced by the certitude of rational knowledge.” The modern empiricist insists that all logic is mere hypotheses, and must be verifiable by observation or experience. Self-identity becomes a reflexively organised endeavour which requires the sustaining of coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narratives. According to Giddens (1991, p6), lifestyle choices are vital to the construction of these biographical narratives. Kinselas Hotel is located in Taylor Square, the heart of the Sydney’s GLBT community. The establishment of Taylor Square as a hub for GLBT cultural expression demonstrates the significance of lifestyle choices in establishing identity. Through definitive lifestyle choices such as gay nightclubbing, exhibition of the GLBT rainbow flag or dressing in drag, individuals are able to reflexively construct the biographical narratives which form their identity. In this way, modernity has played an emancipatory role in allowing certain minority groups in wealthy, Western societies to construct culturally relevant identities. Where tradition favored conformity through shared identities, modernity encourages each individual to discover their inner ‘self’ and, in doing so, prizes differentiation. Evidently, the rise of modern values has made it necessary for individuals to construct identities through lifestyle choices.

While the modern era has allowed for the construction of a diverse range of individual identities, it has also cultivated a culture of consumerism and commodification. The capitalist notions of individual property rights, sale for profit and capital accumulation are products of the modern paradigm. As such, the market-governed freedom of individual choice has become the basis for self-expression. Individuals establish a lifestyle through the consumption of goods and services, thereby expressing a sense of identity. Giddens (1991, p107) warns that “modernity opens up the project of the self, but under conditions strongly influenced by the standardising effects of commodity capitalism.” In addition, modernity places importance on the need to construct unique, original identities through market consumption. As expressed by Giddens (1991, p203), “an individual who has to be ‘different’ from all others has no chance of reflexively developing a coherent self-identity. Excessive individuation has connections to conceptions of grandiosity.” This emphasis on the construction of original identities through the consumption of market goods is exemplified through the self-indulgent glamour of Kinselas Hotel drag shows. Men adorn themselves in lavish women’s clothing, ostentatious jewellery, soaring high-heels and bright, long wigs. Their faces are highly made up with garish cosmetics in an extreme demonstration of femininity. In this way, the drag queens of Kinselas Hotel act as a physical representation of the construction of ‘self’ through consumption of market goods. As Zygmunt Bauman (1989, p189) identifies in Legislators and Interpreters, “the individual needs of personal autonomy, self-definition, authentic life or personal perfection are all translated into the need to possess, and consume, market-offered goods.” Unquestionably, the pursuit of a unique identity in the modern, capitalist age manifests itself in the consumption of goods and services in order to express lifestyle choices.

As well as leading to the rise of the secularist ‘self’ and encouraging the construction of identity through consumption, modern thought has instigated a privatisation of death. Traditional communities were able to contain the idea of death by subjecting it to religious

control. Death was comprehensible as the identity of the individual was preserved in the community. However, the modern desacralisation of social life has left individuals alone with the task of establishing values and making sense of their daily lives. As a result of the privatisation of experiences of death, modern individuals are less equipped than their traditional counterparts to comprehend the finiteness of existence. In Modernity, Self-Identity and the Sequestration of Death, Philip Mellor and Chris Shilling (1993, p413) argue that modern individuals place more importance on the body as constitutive of self. This manifests itself in a rigorous strategy of self care, with modernity prizing fit, youthful bodies as emblematic of self-actualisation. Mellor and Shilling (1993, p414) contend that "the more people prioritise issues relating to self-identity and the body, the more difficult it will be for them to cope with the idea of the self ceasing to exist." This is evident in the materialism which has grown rampant in modern society. In particular, this egoism has become prolific in the culture of inner-city nightlife. Kinselas Hotel's metamorphosis from a morbid site of death to a vibrant, eclectic social hub is emblematic of this modern emphasis on self care. The privatisation of death and increased focus on the body is a result of the modern orientation towards the future. While tradition cherishes the past, modernity strives for increased progress. As a result, Mellor and Shilling (1993, p420) suggest that modern narcissism manifests itself in a rejection of death whereby the modern individual reasons, "I know I must die but, on the basis of my experience of self, I refuse to accept that I will cease to exist." Undoubtedly, the desacralisation and privatisation of death has led to a strategy of self care and increased anxiety regarding the finiteness of existence.

As a result of the absence of traditional sources of identity and the modern insistence on constructed identity, the discovery of 'self' is seen as impossible in the postmodern world. Proponents of postmodern thought are critical of the universalising theories of modernity. These grand narratives present the individual subject as a unified self, with a core identity which can be discovered or constructed. In addition, modernity regards self-realisation as the central objective of Western culture. Contrary to this, in The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism, Stuart Sim (2001, p366-7) describes the postmodern subject as a fragmented being in a continual state of dissolution. This view is problematic as it indicates that individuals are never able to identify their core self. In Who Needs 'Identity'?, Stuart Hall (2000, p17) is confronted by "the radically disturbing recognition that it is only through the relation to the Other ... that the 'positive' meaning of any term - and thus its 'identity' - can be constructed." It is argued that one's understanding of 'self' is perceivable only through a marking of difference from 'other.' This concept is of particular significance to minority groups, such as the GLBT community. Stuart Sim (2001, p7) asserts that, "this insistence on the norm at the expense of the different is all part of the authoritarianism that thinkers like Foucault associate with modern culture." The drag queens who perform at Kinselas Hotel are seen as 'other' relative to mainstream society. In addition, their juxtaposition of feminine and masculine traits is emblematic of society's perception of identity through oppositions. When there is no clear 'other' to whom one may oppose 'self,' identity remains suspended and enigmatic. The identities of the drag queens who perform at Kinselas Hotel are not fixed, but constantly evolving relative to the context in which they are perceived. This rejection of modern binarism is typical of postmodern society's skepticism towards stereotypes and fixed labels. As identity is only apparent through opposites, the 'self' should be regarded as a fluid, constantly evolving concept. The anxiety this prospect imbues within the individual is eloquently expressed by Simon Malpas (2005, p69), "our identity is shaped by the recognition we receive from others and the possibility of ever fully knowing ourselves is forever denied." Indisputably, the postmodern assertion that one's identity is constantly changing relative to perspective is problematic as it denies the individual a sense of self.

As well as problematising the project of the 'self' through relativism, postmodern thought suggests it is impossible to determine one's identity in a hyperrealistic, ultra-consumerist society. Nigel Watson (2001, p59) suggests that the traditional individual made sense of the world by associating signs and symbols to relevant meanings. The postmodern emancipation of the sign means that once accepted truths are now open to interpretation. This creates what Jean Baudrillard (1988, p1), identifies as a "real without origin or reality: a hyperreal." According to Baudrillard (1988, p1), postmodern society substitutes the sign of the real for the real itself, creating a confusing "precession of simulacra." This disorientating amalgamation of simulations further displaces the individual. According to David Morley (1996, p60), the postmodern denial of truth has cultivated a "society of the spectacle, where the real has been replaced by its image, and the image supplanted by the 'simulacrum' which is of course, itself hyperreal." Kinselas Hotel is a real chapel, made faux by its use as a public bar, but made to appear authentic through its decoration with religious paraphernalia, vigil-like lighting and pew seating. In addition, the chapel hosts drag shows where men, dressed as women, indulge in extreme femininity, and in doing so produce a parody of the feminine. In this way, it is a quintessentially hyperreal space, whereby the individual is disconnected from reality and transplanted into a realm of simulacrum. This further decentring of the subject heightens the sense of disorientation and thereby problematises the individual's quest for identity. In addition, the modernist claim that identity can be constructed is confronted by the parody of postmodern pastiche. Watson (2001, p61) identifies that postmodern buildings combine different styles and references from historical periods in an ironic and eclectic way. Kinselas Hotel is a pastiche of art-deco architecture, traditional religious references and modern consumerism. Society's acceptance of this eclectic, playful combination of styles and references is symbolic of the understanding of a constantly evolving self. However, this acceptance of amalgamated symbols further entrenches the belief that there is no one, stark reality. Rather, the postmodern subject is invited to construct their reality, and identity, through consumption, commodification and representation. This is expressed best by Watson (2001, p55), "to a significant extent we have become tourists in our own cultures. Sunday no longer means a trip to church or chapel, but rather a visit to the cathedrals of consumerism." Evidently, the postmodern assertion of a hyperrealistic, ultra-consumerist society further problematises the concept of 'identity' for the individual.

While postmodern thought destabilises the grand narratives of modernity, it fails to provide a complete theorisation of identity in replacement. Rather than abandoning the notion of 'identity' in wealthy, western society, postmodern thought may be utilised to broaden one's understanding of 'self.' An individual's sense of identity may be derived from a multitude of sources, including religious tradition, lifestyle choices and consumption of good and services. However, the individual must carefully reconsider what is perceived as 'identity' and how this is constructed relative to 'other.' Through this, one may sustain a sense of identity without the necessary submission to the grand narratives of modernity or traditional shared identity. This reconsideration of the construction of 'self' relative to 'other' is evidenced through the frequenting of Kinselas Hotel by a great diversity of individuals. People of different genders, sexualities, religions and ages are able to appreciate the environment which the eclectic bar provides. As such, postmodern thought is useful as a reforming tool for the consideration of identity in a wealthy, western society.

The theorisation of identity has evolved significantly as a result of the impact of tradition, modernity and postmodernity. Tradition provided individuals with a comforting sense of shared identity, allowing individuals to cope with the world around them. However, the rise

of modernity led to the corrosion of traditional values. As such, the individual must construct a sense of identity through lifestyle choices and consumption. Postmodernity is critical of the universalising theories of enlightenment thinkers, arguing that the perception of 'self' is only valid relative to 'other.' Although this destabilises the concept of 'identity,' it is useful in reconsidering how one's sense of identity is constructed through opposition. These changes in the theorisation of identity are made manifest in Kinselas Hotel's metamorphosis from a traditional place of communal worship, to an eclectic place of leisure. Undoubtedly, the theorisation of identity has been shaped and reshaped by shifts in ideas throughout history.

### Notes on Contributor

Natasha Greenwood is studying Journalism and International Studies at the University of Technology Sydney.

### References

- Baudrillard, J. 1988, 'Simulacra and Simulations' in Poster, M (eds), Jean Baudrillard, Selected Writings, Stanford University Press, Stanford, pp.166-184.
- Bauman, Z. 1989, 1987: *Legislators and interpreters - On Modernity, Post-Modernity, Intellectuals*. Cornell University Press, New York.
- Fuat Firat, A. 1991, "The Consumer in Postmodernity", in Advances in Consumer Research Volume 18, (eds) Rebecca H. Holman and Michael R. Solomon. pp.70-76.
- Gascoigne, J. 2002, *The Enlightenment and the origins of European Australia*, Cambridge University Press, Port Melbourne, Victoria, pp1-16.
- Giddens, A. 1991, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, Polity Press, Cambridge, UK, pp. 1-10, 189-208.
- Gross, D. 1992, *The past in ruins: tradition and the critique of modernity*, The University of Massachusetts Press, Massachusetts, pp 20-40.
- Hall, S. 1996, 'Introduction: Who Needs Identity?' in Hall, S and du Gay, P (eds), *Questions of Cultural Identity*, Sage, London, pp.1-17.
- Hobsbawm, E. 1993, 'Introduction: Inventing traditions' in E. Hobsbawm and T.Ranger (eds), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, England, pp 1-14.
- Kinselas Hotel. 2012, Kinselas, viewed 15/08/12 <<http://www.kinselas.com.au/>>
- Malpas, S. 2005, *The Postmodern*, Routledge, London. pp 11- 17 & 31-36.
- Mellor, P & Shilling, C. 1993, 'Modernity, Self-Identity and the Sequestration of Death,' *Sociology*, Vol. 27 No. 3. pp411-413.
- Morley, D. 1996 Postmodernism: the rough guide in J.Curran, D. Morley and V. Walkerdine (eds) Cultural Studies and Communication, Arnold, New York
- New South Wales Environment and Heritage. 1998, Kinsela House Heritage Listing, viewed 17/08/12 <<http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/heritageapp/ViewHeritageItemDetails.aspx?ID=2420331>>
- Sim, S. 1999, 'Postmodernism And Philosophy' in *The Routledge Companion To Postmodernism*. New York, Routledge. pp 3-15
- Thornham, S. 1999, 'Postmodernism And Feminism' in *The Routledge Companion To Postmodernism*. New York, Routledge. pp 41-53

Watson, N. 1999, 'Postmodernism And Lifestyles' in *The Routledge Companion To Postmodernism*. New York, Routledge. pp 53-65.