

# *Edge of the Trees: Aboriginality and Australian Identity*

Kathryn Petropoulos

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

'Edge of the Trees; Aboriginality and Australian Identity' is a definitive investigation into the dispossession of Aboriginality in Australian culture. This essay traces the history of Aboriginal culture within the larger Australian culture, and the interplay of this with the traditional modern and post-modern ideals. The chapter focuses on the art installation 'Edge of The Trees' to explore the traditional and modern formations of Australian identity, as well as postmodernist interpretations. This chapter illustrates the ways in which identity can be a cultural construct, and one which is continually transforming.

**Keywords:** Aboriginal Identity, Tradition, Postmodernism, Modernity

From Russian folk dances to the Maori haka, from Chinese Opera to Hawaiian Hula, 'traditional culture' is performed in national and local contexts, for tourists and dignitaries and in local celebrations (Cowlshaw in *Mythologising culture*, 2010).

Within the past two decades Australia has witnessed unprecedented acts of reconciliation that have promoted social equality, epitomised by the Sorry Speech of 2008 that broke through an era of cultural amnesia seeking to forget the racial inequalities that shape Australia's past. An increasing acknowledgement of Aboriginal presence has revealed itself in the form of artworks, especially in Fiona Folley and Janet Laurence's *Edge of the Trees*, as well as cultural displays, social gatherings, and parliamentary decisions, with Aboriginal motifs dominating the representation of Australia as a nation in many public outlets. However, whilst these actions signify an inversion of the forgotten Aboriginal community, it must be asked whether this public and 'official nurturing' of Aboriginal expression (Cowlshaw 2009, p. 180), accurately reflects contemporary society. Through an analysis of the traditional and modern forms of Australian identity, it can be understood how the postmodern endeavour to create a universalised identity, which in reality reinforced cultural marginalisation.

Paradoxically, what defines Australia as a nation is an understanding that there is no definable way of being 'Australian'. Physically manifested by the installation *Edge of the Trees*, the innate tensions between the country's Aboriginal and colonial foundations have engendered the fragmented identity that our postmodern Australia seeks to refashion. Created by a collaboration of Aboriginal artist Fiona Folley and non-Aboriginal artist Janet Laurence in 1995, the work consists of twenty-eight columns of wood, steel, and sandstone standing up to seven metres tall, situated in the entrance courtyard of the Museum of Sydney (De Lorenzo 2005, p. 108). Located on the symbolic site that marks the first meeting point between Aboriginal and white settlers, later to be the location of the First Government House from 1788 to 1846 (De Lorenzo 2005, p. 108), the work was intended explicitly to: 'respond to oral and written histories relating to the first 20 years of white occupation/settlement in Sydney, as well as to the historical and contemporary meanings of the site' (De Lorenzo 2005, p. 108). A

major component expressed by the work is of the perspective held by traditional Aboriginal culture.



*Edge of the trees*, 2008, Flickr, viewed 1 November 2012,  
[http://www.flickr.com/photos/sydneywatertiger/22878218\\_10/](http://www.flickr.com/photos/sydneywatertiger/22878218_10/)

In order to understand the concepts of identity held by ancient Aboriginal culture, it is important to define 'tradition'. The concept of tradition is often defined in terms of its 'stagnant' nature (Morley 1996, p. 52), in which a community's 'potential to evolve and improve was virtually unknown' (Gillen & Ghosh 2006, p. 33). This was due to the fundamental importance stressed on maintaining a rigid set of beliefs, practices and ideals. Whilst modernist ideology is known to attribute a primitive, archaic and simplistic discourse to tradition, it overlooks an underlying complexity of the Aboriginal belief system. It was through the Dreamtime mythology that a way of being, and a way of knowing was negotiated (Art gallery NSW 2012), providing a continuous chain to the past and thus stabilising social existence (Gross 1992, p. 21).

The installation embodies the cultural complexity of ancient Aboriginal communities that is often disregarded by modern critics. Here, the tall column structures present inbuilt glass alcoves storing organic materials, including shell, ash, bone and hair (De Lorenzo 2005, p. 108). These materials establish the undeniable presence of Aboriginal tradition in Australia's history, a presence shaping the land for over forty thousand years, with the confronting inclusion of human substances. Furthermore, these naturally occurring substances physically manifest the link between traditional customs to the Australian landscape, in sharp contrast to the rigid metal structures of the pillars, in which spirituality required a tangible connection to the land.

Exemplified in primary education, artworks and numerous public exhibitions, it is a well-established notion that belonging for traditional Aborigines encompassed an elemental connection to the land and community. The words of Gagudju Elder Big Bill Neidjie encapsulate this connection: 'I feel with my body, with my blood. Feeling all these trees, all this country. When this wind blow you can feel it. Same for country. You feel it, you can look, but feeling...that make you' (Art gallery NSW 2012). Such notions are emphasised in

the Australian Museum exhibit, which describes the environment as more than ‘just soil, rocks or minerals’, a factor sustaining Aboriginal culture (Australian Museum 2012). Whilst the cyclical inertia of religious systems is critiqued for preventing social progress, this engrained sense of communal belonging has long since evaded modern and postmodern societies whose primary mode of existence is defined by individualism and commercial gain. What distinguishes the intricate practice of traditional Aboriginality to both modern and contemporary counterpart is the concept of being ‘Australian’. As White aptly summarises, ‘Aborigines did not think of themselves as ‘Australian’’. Whilst the concepts of a connection with the country and people living within it is maintained by Aboriginal culture, it can be seen as key determinants of ‘nationhood’ (Billig 1995, p. 24), where tradition defied the need to make such categorisations.

However within a modern context, this complex interrelationship between social and cultural practices was equated with, in Descartes’s (as cited in Gross 1992) words, ‘a chaos of customs and unverified opinions’ (p. 25). Driven by Enlightenment values of progress, the concept of tradition has come to be considered presently as ‘old-fashioned’ and ‘undesirable’ (Cowlshaw 2009, p. 188). Whilst modern traits tend to be sustained in present society, the difference between the ‘modern’ and the ‘contemporary’ must be defined. Modernity encompasses the social and cultural developments in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, bringing with it an economy of capitalism, the focus of nation-state identities, and significant improvements in the areas of science and reason (Morley 1996, pp. 51-52). Situated primarily in Europe, the movement was fostered by fundamental ideals of self-improvement privileged by the Enlightenment. Contrasting to tradition’s static nature, the unprecedented notion that humanity could be improved upon (Gascoigne 2002, p. 3) through scientific method, rationalisation and empirical thought, empowered a new period of thought, a new understanding of ‘truth’ (Gascoigne 2002, p. 2), and a new perspective on life (Gross 1992, p. 25).

With Enlightenment discourses acting upon the ‘mentality’ of European settlers in Australia (Gascoigne 2002, p.14), inevitably ‘traditional’ Aboriginal culture was subjugated by the invasion of modernity (Thomas 1996, p. 177). Foley and Laurence’s installation embodies this clash of cultural identity, where Modity is translated into thin repetitive columns, emulating modernist architecture of ‘abstract efficiency’ (Morley 1996, p. 58), which manifested in condensed, repetitive high-rise apartment complexes distinctive of the era. This inhumane construction of the Enlightenment narrative mirrors the modern practice of universalism, a belief in ultimate truth. With the construction of a nation-state identity, modern colonisers were enabled to prescribe ‘universal interests’ (Billig 1995, p. 10) to the world. Nationhood, according to Billig (1995), makes universal claims, appearing to present the entire essence of the nation (p. 27).

It is this essentialism that is manifested through the notions of truth presented by science. With classification of social class and race, the laws of nature ultimately infiltrated the laws of humanity. The categorisation of ‘degrees of identity’ (Cowlshaw 2009, p. 184) not only influenced society as a whole, but furthered methods of ‘protecting’ the seemingly fragile cultures of tradition, translating into projects of assimilation which would later be known as The Stolen generation. Whilst *Edge of the Trees* represents the Eora clan who originally inhabited the land it is situated on, the use of both Eora and Latin botanical names for Australian flora inscribed on the pillars emulates the ‘empirical scholarship’ (De Lorenzo 2005, p. 109) of classification that encouraged progressive acts of ‘civilisation’, merely

legitimising racist ideologies. This is furthered by the presence of the names of those on the First Fleet presenting an emphasis on European settlement.

Such universalities pervaded representations of the 'primitive' other. A prominent example of modern literature promoting a universal, homogenised Aboriginal discourse is Eve Pownall's 1951 'The Australia Book', in which a multitude of European figures are depicted as a more progressed society (represented by imagery of new technologies), whilst a single Aboriginal man holds a spear and faces in the opposite direction, visually signifying a 'backward' culture (Bradford 2001, p. 20). Such discourses were embodied through 'mechanisms of forgetfulness' (Bradford 2001, p. 20), and portrayals of elemental, archaic figures associated with the Romantic and the primitive, acting to infantilise traditional customs that appeared to adopt and resolve the idea of 'self-imposed immaturity' (Kant 1784, p. 1).

The essential powerlessness of traditional tribes is presented through the "fatal impact" thesis commonly ascribed to 'primeval people' (Thomas 1996, p. 177) ascribed by modern colonisers who both assumed and furthered the eradication of traditional peoples. While the site itself is initially used for the use of glass niches storing the human and plant material conjures, this image of preservation similar to that of a museum exhibit (emphasised further by the artwork's location at the Museum of Sydney), suggesting that Aboriginal culture has in fact 'died out', or at the very least, must be 'preserved'. Indeed this minimal presence of Aboriginality embodies the silenced voice of Aboriginal communities throughout the era of modernity.

As the colonisation of Botany Bay brought the 'violent seizure of land', and introduction of a industrial-oriented 'anonymity of city life' (Healy 2008, p. 12), the very environmental and communal foundations of the traditional Aboriginal community were disrupted. Therefore, the onslaught of capitalism is a primary factor whose perpetuate ideals changed Aboriginal way of life. With rationalisation, industrialisation and the focus on individual advancement came the emergence of what Weber describes as 'zweckrational (purpose-rational) behaviour' (as cited in Gross 1992, p. 29). With the Industrial Revolution spurring a nation-wide displacement from traditional pastoral lifestyles, the removal of Aboriginal communities from their traditional 'social habits and customs' changed the very face of Aboriginal ways of life (Gross 1992, p. 38). As capital accumulation directed daily life, the indigenous sense of communal culture was enveloped by an ideology based on material need. Just as the wood used in *Edge of the Trees* represents a link to the natural, this material was sourced from industrial settings around Sydney, conjuring an image of recycled processes of commodification produced by factory based work modes.

Essentially it is the detrimental universalities of modernity which spurs racial inequality that contemporary Australia seeks to diminish. As Berman (as cited in Morley 1996) identifies, 'industrialisation, urbanisation and mechanisation' as the primary conditions of modernity (p. 56), modernity has been defined as a repudiation of these themes. Modernity is defined only in contrast to tradition, so it is claimed that postmodernity is interlinked with modernity (Morley 1996, p. 56). Lyotard (1994) defines the postmodern as an 'incredulity toward metanarratives' (p. 36), where the term 'metanarrative' describes the overarching explanations of aspects of life offered by specific modes of thought. With repercussions of the belief in progress being realised, manifesting through social inequality and war, 'growing doubts' of this ideology fuelled postmodern thought (Gillen & Ghosh 2006, p. 33). In rejecting the conception of a linear, rational progression towards a universalised utopia, postmodernity encourages new discourse on the notion of 'truth' that modernity sought to

define. The underlying ideals of this era contradict the central 'ethos' of modernity (Morley 1996, p. 58), primarily, the totalising claims of truth encouraged by modern thought. In effect, the notion of 'Australia' has evolved from the concept of connection to community and the land, to a geographically defined nation-state bound version of 'white-Australia'. This idea is founded upon European national belonging that by its definition, excludes others of differing practices.

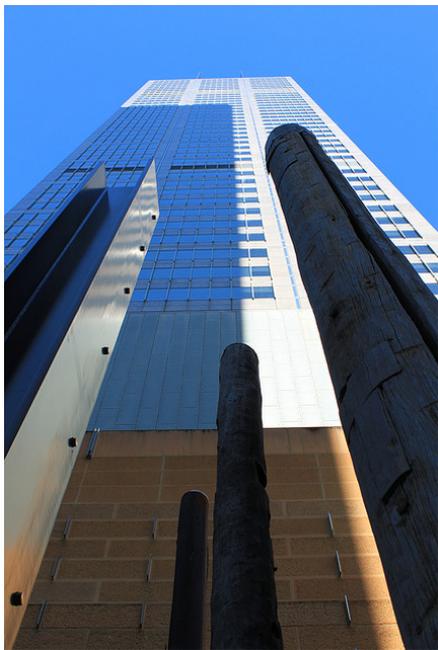
However, as postmodernity has enabled a negation of the social inequalities promoted by modernist thought, Australia has sought to reconnect with its traditional past. This attitude of social equality defying identity classified by ethnicity has presented itself in the very multicultural demography of the country, as well as in the social inclusiveness of Aboriginality in the nation's identity. Apparent in revolutionary steps towards acceptance in terms of political equality: The Mabo Decision of 1992, Native Title Act of 1993, Wik Decision of 1996 and the 'Bringing them Home' report (Australian Human Rights Commission 2012), Aboriginal communities indeed have had to fight for such recognition. However throughout national media, particularly tourism campaigns, Australia's multifaceted heritage is actively promoted to the world.

With the production of artefacts and enactment of cultural rituals, indigenous Australians have reversed an era of cultural amnesia, and such 'cultural maintenance' (Kleinert 2010, p. 1) has successfully re-established pride within Aboriginal communities. Presently, Aboriginal iconography manifests through tourist campaigns, where ancient symbolic sites (such as Uluru and Kakadu) are promoted alongside the country's famed beaches and busy city life; numerous public locations feature Aboriginal dot painting; and a new 'intensity of interest' in Aboriginal souvenirs promote a national image that celebrates its traditional foundations.

Edge of the Trees demonstrates a newfound cultural unity, embodied by the collaboration between Aboriginal artist Fiona Foley and non-Aboriginal artist Janet Laurence. By bringing to 'the public sphere' an emphasis on previously marginalised communities, in this case, both Aboriginal and female artists (De Lorenzo 2005, p. 110), the sculpture exudes postmodern equality. Postmodernism can further be described as an art style that shocks the viewer through use of unique and often confronting materials and social messages, as well as the use of interactive installation designs that engage the audience. Through a pastiche of collected natural materials, these act to appropriate the traditional and modern lifestyles through art form. This is built upon by the interactive qualities of the work: widely spaced columns inviting viewers to take a closer look to 'engage with affective materials, sounds, words and forms' (De Lorenzo 2005, p. 109), and as a recorded audio layer of Aboriginal voices listing Eora names of places, flora and fauna. Just as postmodernist art breaks established conventions through the use of parody, irony and appropriation, so does the contemporary condition of Late Capitalism spurring on a new form of nostalgia concerning ideas of the past.

Whilst postmodernity is thought of as 'some kind of watershed or transition' (Morley 1996, p. 50) from modernity, Australia's contemporary identity is inextricably linked to the universal idealism of its colonial past. What is characteristic of the overt displays of Aboriginality mentioned is the notion of 'invented traditions' (Hobsbawm 1993, p. 1) a term coined by Hobsbawm, in which practices of 'Welcome to the Country' and Aboriginal culture performances enacted on a national scale reify patriotic constructs, where acknowledgements of indigenous custodians of the land and Aboriginal street performers become 'banal' reproductions of nationalism (Billig 1995, p. 29).

This exhausted promotion of Aboriginality is embodied throughout *Edge of the Trees*. Physically located to the side of the museum forecourt, the installation can easily be ignored, just as the term ‘edge’ subconsciously affirms the marginalisation of this community that occurs today (De Lorenzo 2005, p. 109). When viewing the works from ground level facing skyward, the columns mirror the towering skyscrapers of the nearby buildings, physically disempowering the comparatively miniscule representation of a culture. Whilst an audible recording emulates a heard voice of the indigenous community, it can only be heard when the viewer is directly beside the work, and is still muffled by the sound of traffic of the busy metropolis. This in turn mimics how the plight of Indigenous people can go unnoticed when not subject to discussion in the public sphere. In addition, the statuesque quality and amount of columns emulates a graveyard, signifying the apparent ‘death’ of Aboriginality in Australia. The work effectively conveys how Aboriginal identity is portrayed and commoditised in the public eye, yet holds little sway in the nation itself.



Edge of the Trees and Governor Phillip Tower, 2008, Flickr, viewed 1 November 2012, [http://www.flickr.com/photos/kyle\\_briscoe/3687854328/](http://www.flickr.com/photos/kyle_briscoe/3687854328/)

It can be noted that colonial ‘fetishizations’ of simplistic, archaic Aboriginality have been reinserted into contemporary representations (Thomas 1994, p. 171). Thriving on the logic of ‘late’ capitalism, to use Jameson’s (1991) phrasing, unprecedented levels of consumption of both of commercial goods and of media products have resulted in a ‘dephlessness’ (p. 55, 60) of Indigenous representations. An overexposure of traditional representations in ‘imitation of dead styles’ (Jameson 1991, p. 65) permeates Australian media, and poses the question as to how far the nation has truly diverged from the universal claims of Aboriginal identity made by throughout modernity.

It is true that postmodern creates a ‘world of appearances’ (Morley 1996, p. 59), where simulacra of Aboriginality are packaged in kitsch forms of mass-produced souvenirs, appropriating traditional and spiritual the tools of an ancient way of life repackaged as a commodity. Appropriating the easily identifiable image of the ‘colonised Other’ to reclaim a sense of national identity (Lattas 1997, p. 242) has consequently encouraged a *performed*,

‘state-sponsored’ culture (Cowlshaw 2012, p. 223). These displays of Indigenous culture invests a Romanticised primitivism within the Aboriginal community. Celebrated through a range of public displays, ranging from traditional dance performances, smoking ceremonies, ‘Acknowledgement of the Traditional Custodians’, ‘Welcome to the Country’, and ‘material references’ of indigenous iconography (Cowlshaw 2010, p. 213) including dot painting prints on Qantas planes and in-flight brochures, and miniature boomerangs sold at tourist boutiques, this constructed identity is internationally recognised. It has been recognised, for example, by the indigenous souvenir producer Aboriginal Enterprises, that the Western desire to encounter the ‘primitive other’ (Kleinert 2012, p. 177) indeed shaped the output and designs chosen by the company. Producing over 20,000 boomerangs annually (Kleinert 2010, p. 182) it is demonstrated that a manufactured image of cultural diversity is mass-produced.

Whilst these idealizations are actively reproduced by Indigenous groups in the interest of advancing recognition (Thomas 1996, p. 172), this cultural nostalgia ascribes harmful totalising ideals of Aboriginality to contemporary Indigenous people. What has emerged is a new homogenising representation of Aboriginal culture, where a knowledge and interaction with practices undertaken thousands of years ago are attributed to urban Aboriginal people. As Cowlshaw has investigated, identity for urban Aboriginals must be negotiated between individual experiences and cultural idealisations. While one subject expresses ‘deep embarrassment’ (Cowlshaw 2009, p. 179) concerning the spectacle of a performance of Aboriginal ritual, Bill, an Aboriginal painter, aptly summarises in a mere four words the stereotypical narratives placed upon urban Aboriginals - when asked about his artistic ability, his reply mirrored a cultural understanding: ‘I don’t do dots’ (as cited in Cowlshaw 2009, p. 177).

As the nation places value on Indigenous communities due to this connection with the narratives of a spiritual heritage, culture has become mythologised (Cowlshaw 2010, p. 209). It has been hypothesised that such universal narratives enthusiastically drawn upon in Australia are adopted to with the aspiration of ‘aestheticizing’ and ‘spiritualising’ (Cowlshaw 2010, p. 238) Australia’s link to a ‘transcendental’ past (Cowlshaw 2009, p. 182). Perhaps this is a result of the nation seeking a unique identity, in an escape of being merely a copy of other cultures (Lattas 1997, p. 243). However what is most clear is that social inequality has yet to be reached. Education and life-expectancy levels remain significantly low in comparison to non-indigenous Australians, with indigenous people reaching the age of sixty-five years and over which is less than half of non-indigenous people in 2011 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2011).

Following this, Australia’s identity of cultural inclusiveness has been inverted, where cultural amnesia through ‘forgetting’, has transformed into cultural amnesia through ‘remembering’. Therefore that image of nation promoted by Australia has commoditised its Indigenous community, encouraging multiculturalism yet displaying that certain cultures are less equal than others (White 1997, p. 18). As modern universalisations and capitalist themes have in fact endured into the postmodern era, *Edge of the Trees* embodies the collision between the two cultures, and between the three intermingling modes of thought, bearing testament to the largely unnoticed ramifications of a nation’s quest for a postmodern identity of equality.

### **Notes on Contributor**

Kathryn Petropoulos is studying communication at the University of Technology, Sydney.

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