Limitations of "Indigenous Modernity," The problems of culture-tradition, authenticity and the hybrid.

Nina Pace
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Technology Sydney

> "Every historical era is...simultaneously drawing from the obsolete, the contemporary, the futuristic. An object, a circumstance, is thus polychronic, multitemporal and reveals a time that is gathered together with multiple pleats" Michel Serres.

Before setting off on the quest to unravel the possibility and plausibly of an 'Indigenous Modernity,' it is important to examine the founding notions on which the assumptions of Australian "Aboriginality" rests. At the time of European settlement, up to 500 Indigenous tribes inhabited the land. So how was the diversity and variation which existed between these separate groups homogenised to create a pan-continental idea of a singular "Aboriginality?" I will argue that the creation of this mass stereotype, the undifferentiated 'Other,' essentially exemplifies the battle between the 'Ancients' and the 'Moderns.'

I will argue that this essentialist depiction served to concrete European power and identity, and hence, that the creation of the tradition-culture view of Aboriginality is in fact a European construction. This discourse, rising out of the colonial invasion, has permeated through the ages and begs the question; could it be that there is, in fact, no real 'Aboriginality?'

The starting point for this analysis was 'The Dreamers' exhibition at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. It displays a supposedly 'modern' depiction of Aboriginal Artworks, with the description describing the artists as "Dreamers of the Future." I attempt to explore how Aboriginal art perpetuates the European stereotype of Aboriginality, whilst examining how and why the 'culture' was created by early colonisers. In addition, the economic and material commoditisation of the artworks itself - into a million dollar 'luxury goods' industry is central in examining the reciprocal and inextricable relationship between the modern and the cultural. The concept of the hybrid and the problem of 'authenticity' is further examined.

In examining how the Indigenous peoples of Australia were made to become the subjectified "Other," and how the idea of a homogenised Aboriginality was developed, it is vital to analyse the founding principles which influenced 18th century thought. It is a interesting coincidence that the invasion of Australia coincided roughly with The Age of Enlightenment, and there is no doubt that the influence of these ideas underpinned European mentality in its colonial conquest. (In fact, it could be argued that the idea of rational progression towards higher intellectual states and achievement still permeates society today.) It is this logic, the idea that man must evolve from wild savage to rational intellectual, that allowed Europeans to create what they deemed a 'cultureless' people, - and through this construction, give rise to the generalised notion of "Aboriginality." The categorical pigeon-holing of an entire people

served to both differentiate between the power elite and the powerless, while the concept of 'The Other' was vital in defining the European identity; *we are everything you are not.*

The European construction of an undifferentiated 'Aboriginality' was created through the notion of the savage, and through the assertion of the land as a non-cultural entity. The legislative implementation of *'Terrae Nullius'* served to "deny that the indigenous landscape represented a framework through which history was created...de-legitimising Aboriginal associations with their land" (Russel, 2001) This delineation of the people and the acultural depiction of their land supported the notion of the savage, and allowed settler-colonial representations to homogenise spatial variation and categorise the Indigenous as more closely related to fauna than to man. As such, "the theme of 'natural man' was extended and Aboriginal society was discerned as bereft of historical dynamism" (Russel, 2001)

> "These aboriginal inhabitants...are indeed beyond comparison the most barbarous on the surface of the globe" (Turnbull, as quoted in Anderson & Perrin)

This undoubtedly elucidates the debate between "The Ancients" and "The Moderns" - ideas of progression and the developmental schema that founded supposedly 'modern' thought. It is clear that the latter is defined by the previous - in other words, the idea of the modern rests on the creation of the ancient. This leads to an interesting point - the idea of identity and identity formation. In terms of Australian history, it is a "non-event." The European Australian presence commenced some few hundred years ago, out of the thousands of years of human history. As such, the European comes to rely on the antithetical relationship he has with the Indigenous in order to define himself.

> "The process of locating, objectifying and describing the Other informs and constructs the Euro-Australian self within the Australian context" (Russel ,2001)

The perpetuation of this stereotype, and the idea of "Aboriginal culture" as it exists today, is also interesting to explore. The concept of a singular "Aboriginality" has undoubtedly lasted across centuries, and may be explained through analysing the silent hegemonic discourses which lace society and its institutions. It is a Foucauldian like notion; that western ideals permeate every aspect of society, including the vast warehouses of 'culture' - such as museums and art galleries. The institutions, stock holds of what is deemed "art" and "high culture," are based precisely on western value systems. The exhibitions are based on what European ideals judge as 'worthy.' There is a slight Eurocentric vanity, an almost heroine-like display of the authoritative West in its "protection" of antics, and the unsaid notion that these relics from a superseded past would inevitably decay without the sacred sanctity of the Institution.

> "The authority of the European observer has been articulated in textual depictions, museum collections, displays and visual renditions...The contemporary practice of displaying ethnographic items as native or primitive art forms continues the practice of subjectation; that is, the Other is rendered the subject of, and is objectified, by the exhibition." (Russel, 2001)

The authority of the European observer apparent in these sites may hence be said to be modern examples of colonial control (Benedict Anderson 1993 SI6) This is an interesting point in examining the impossible distinction between the "ancient" and the "modern." Surely, modern society has struggled against the shackles imposed by dogmatic colonial thought, and freed itself of the dogmatic western thought that claimed Europeans as superior to the Aboriginal race. Or has it?

> "The map and museum is a site of cultural objectification...The Other is an object of display, to be viewed, experienced and investigated" (Mitchell 1991: 6 as quotes in Russel, 2001)

Simply in the presentation of Aboriginal art and relics in an Institutionalised Western setting reveals the crucial ideas of 'modernity' and the continuation of European control. The European culture "continues to gain strength and identity by setting itself off against the Other" (Said, as quoted in Anderson & Perrin)

This again brings us to an impossibility in defining the 'modern' and the 'cultural' as two distinctly opposite entities. It is hence clear there is no clear dichotomy, and that "modernity, an inconsistent and paradoxical combination of claims about nature and culture, passes itself off as the clean, enlightened alternative to a messy, primitivistic cosmology." (Jane Bennett, drawing on Bruno Latour in Mvecke, 2004)

This is apparent through the Western concept of the museum, based on a linear and forward-thrusting idea of 'time.' Since it does not encompass alternate views, it presents a singular depiction of what is modern and informed. Sufficing the deep philosophical debate which is inherent in such a topic, it is fair to say that the notion of 'time' as seen by the West is radically different to the complex time-place circularity shared by Indigenous peoples. As such, to label this "race" as "culturally located in the past" simply would not make sense in the Aboriginal concept of "time" - which is closer to a circular infinity than it is to the chronological progression depicted by the West. This means that there is a possibility for alternate 'modernities' which is at large ignored by the hegemonic views of today. It is clear that "white Australia still tends to hold indigenous time at an arm's length as it imagines for itself a uniform and dominant modernity." (Mvecke, 2004.)

It is this limitation imposed by the current hegemony, the silent control which denies us the ability to perceive our era differently, that denies the Indigenous a right to *our* 'modernity.' Therein lies the problem of authenticity and the hybrid, encapsulating the fundamental flaws of the western definition of 'culture.'

The problem with the 'tradition-culture' view of Aboriginality is its interchangeability with the 'authentic' and the 'pristine.' Not only do the Indigenous peoples suffer from the lasting and continually perpetuated stereotype, but moreover, it is doomed to remain loyal to this oversimplification - or else face accusations of illegitimacy. That is - there is no room for adaptation in the rigid categorisation which is 'culture,' and so it is essentially forever denied access to the 'modern.' This extends the subjectification of the race, in that any art relies on the notion that it stems from relics, from a primitive past.

> "The Other is the dark side, the people described as forgotten and
> timelocked in the past, repressed and undeveloped" (Russel, 2001)

Hence, the observer is deemed the most modern, a state which a true "authentic" Indigenous person could never achieve nor aspire to. This coincides with the ideas of the savage, in that the people are unchanging - and forbidden to change. On a social note, this idea extends past art and cultural relics, and transfers its beliefs to the place of Indigenous peoples in todays society. The essentialist depictions which characterised the Aboriginal stereotype, such as the inability of the 'savages' to adapt or evolve, has implications in todays world. The common racial stereotype of Aboriginals as reliant on welfare dependance, for example, is an example of the idea of savagery that has infiltrated contemporary thought. This unfair assumption suggests that all Indigenous peoples can not fend for themselves without constant Western support (or control.)

> "Contemporary hybridity is constantly battling against a past which
> emphasises and valued purity over its antithesis, the degraded and diluted
> hybrid" (Russel, 2001)

As such, Indigenous Australians are limited to what they can produce in terms of art that is deemed "authentic." There is a continued oppression which marks the insidious limitations posed by the ideals of 'culture.' Aboriginals who rebel against the stereotype "face a two-way loss. Firstly, they lose out when they buy into the debate because...they are demonstrating their unauthenticity - after all, real Aborigines are silent. Secondly, as contemporary Koori individuals appeal to the great antiquity of their culture, aspects of the stereotype are maintaing and entry into the Aboriginal-European debate is possible only at points determined by the dominant hegemony" (Russel, 2001)

An alternate view which informs understanding on matters of the modern arises from the concept of the pristine. Due to the increasingly market-orientated nature of society, the rapid commoditisation of Aboriginal art is undeniable and provides an interesting insight into the altered use of the cultural. Despite the fact that communities have bartered and traded goods for centuries, there is an immediate ethical dilemma, as the supposedly "sacred" artworks retail as 'luxury goods.' Herein lies yet another problem between the demands of the "modern" and the value associated with the "cultural."

> "It is very difficult to accurately define and estimate the overall value of
> the Aboriginal visual arts market - in 1980 it was estimated to be worth
> $2.5 million (Pascoe 1981); in 1987-88, $18.5 million (Altman 1989); and
> most recently somewhere around $100 million per annum (see Altman
> 2003)" (Altman, 2005)

The rapid rise in Aboriginal art marketing and trading may be viewed as either a success of modern Indigenous affairs over the past three decades, or an ethic crumbling and regression to the simplistic, material views of the west. The influence of modern technologies has also altered methods of production and distribution, into an 'Aboriginal Arts and Craft Industry' which has thrived since the late 1970s. (Altman, 2005) The influence of modernity in altering the value of what would have initially been simply sentimental pieces is interesting - as the

influence of supply and demand, a relatively modern concept, may alter both the purpose and importance of art.

There is hence heavy debate surrounding the ethical use of Aboriginal art; with debate arising in the late 20th century surrounding the cultural verses commercial use of art. In certain cases, "some Aboriginal artists, often without access to convention forms of financial credit and with constant pressures from kin, do convert stored cultural knowledge to cash by quickly producing art for sale outside the arrangement they have with art centres" (Altman, 2005) Moreover, what is interesting is the reliance of this industry on "state support" with an "underinvestment" in the Aboriginal arts sector. Even pursuits which aim to increase the quality of life for Indigenous peoples have thick undercurrents of welfare reliance - that it is the western role to provide support for a peoples who are still not capable of fending for themselves.

> "On one hand, there is a strong Indigenous sentiment that as Aboriginal art embodies living culture heritage, its integrity must e protected at any cost and that its role ad that of art centres is fundamentally cultural. On the other hand, there is public policy pressure to interest the marketing of Aboriginal art as commercial, with some expectation that the market demand will influence art supply" (Altman 2005)

In a case study which exemplifies core differences between art purposes, it is clear that the line between religious art and commercial is at best ambiguous. The creation of Aboriginal Christian art is worth a thesis in itself, highlighting the tradition-cross-modern hybrids which arise out of European domination. As previously stated, the existence of the hybrid can exist only if it serves the dominant interest, and so while this is interesting in its revelation of cross cultural influences, it does not necessarily suggest that hybrid manifestations are freeing the Indigenous peoples from the stereotype. The discovery by Rosemay Crumlin of an "Aboriginal Madonna" found in Turkey Creek, in The Kimberly, Western Australia, is startling for its ability to skew the boundaries between what is art, culture, and trade.

> "George Mung had carved a statue out of a piece of tree, a work of extraordinary beauty. Here it was, sitting on top of a hot-water system. About a metre high, it is an Aboriginal woman, a Madonna, pregnant with a man-child who stands in a shield just below her heard, his feet extended and his hands tipping the edges of the shield. It's almost like the image you get in the Leonardo drawing, but also like a Russian icon (which George Mung could never have seen). (Crumlin, 1991)

In this revelation comes the question of value and purpose. It is stated that a piece of work such as this would be worth "millions of dollars to a collector," and yet it must be considered - what would happen if this religious icon was removed from the small town where it served as a religious icon. "You take it. You take it. I'll do another one," was Mungs reply when confronted with the question. There is hence an incongruity between the artists sense of time and ego and the immediate monetary value judgement that is so profound in contemporary society.

As such, it is clear that contemporary depictions of Aboriginality reveal the inextricable relationship between 'culture' and 'modernity,' questioning the tenets of both assumptions.

This exemplifies the impossibility of isolating either as singular concepts; as each plays a vital part in the definition, creation and perpetuation of the other. The creation of what is deemed 'culture' through 'modern' feats such as colonialism is thus core, yet the limitations due to generalised stereotypes are both evident and stifling. Hence, the hybridity of Aboriginal Art is deemed a complex and tedious issue, as the only deviation from the 'authentic' allowed is the one which supports the dominant hegemony. Moreover, the increased commodification of 'art' into a multi million dollar industry reveals an increasingly materialistic ideology. Exploring these notions reveals significant ethical, philosophical and complex questions arising from the influence of modernity on culture, and vice versa.

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