

SAY KNOW: Indigenous art and social issues in the context of tradition and the postmodern

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The catalyst of this journal article is the mural on Lawson Street, Redfern, adjacent to Redfern Station. This site's significance lies in the way it reflects, and responds to, historical and contemporary social issues that have affected, and continue to affect, the Indigenous community of Australia. By interrogating these issues, and inspecting what makes this site significant in relation to notions of tradition and postmodernism, as well as the related theory of postcolonialism, we can place this site in an historical and contemporary context. By doing this, we come to not only a greater understanding of the 'meaning' of the sites, but the place of these issues in our own context, and thus can hint at the very nature of our 'present moment'.



This mural was produced as part of the "Tribes" project, organised by the National Users and Aids Association, and painted by members of "The Mob", the Indigenous Redfern community. This project aimed to attack intravenous drug use and its destructive effects, both on the individual and on the community, by funding community groups for the purposes of education and harm prevention. The distinctive feature of this project was the aim to promote a perspective that didn't homogenise drug users, but approached them as members of 'tribes', of a particular community, with its own unique language (Madden & Carey 1998). Known as "the black heart" of Sydney, Redfern has always been a hub for Indigenous people, but also one associated with crime and poverty; thus the suburb is quite infamous, particularly the area known as "The Block". But Redfern is undergoing a rapid gentrification process that threatens to push the poor out of their local community, a phenomenon that the artists of the exhibition "*There Goes the Neighbourhood*" (2009) see as causing the alienation of a marginalised people further from their urban space. They explore the impact of gentrification on the demography of the area as a question of democracy according to the assumption that "*the tussle over space is always one over the social relationships which are generated within the logic of place...*"

(<http://www.theregoestheneighbourhood.org/project%20brief.htm> para. five). The social issues referred to in the mural are made more immediate in the evolving urban environment, where they are in danger of being pushed further into the background as the space in which the local community exists and is fostered, in turns fostering, is altered.



Indeed, the community is shown as very important here in terms of Indigenous experience. The mural's emphasis on community asks Indigenous Australians to be proud of- and reminds all of us of- their community's integrity and importance. Yet, Indigenous Australians continue to be marginalised and disadvantaged within Australian society. This is not only a direct appeal to the Indigenous Australians who are affected by these issues to work as a community against them, but an appeal to the wider population. It calls on all of us to acknowledge the importance of education in combating not only drug use, but other social issues associated with Indigenous marginalisation. The causes of this are manifold, steeped in a colonial history; and discourse that has arisen from this, often perpetuating historical prejudice in contemporary terms. In the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation's 1994 publication "*Addressing Disadvantage*", Davidson and Jennett conclude "*Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's extreme disadvantage is well-established and undeniable.*" (1994: 8) The mural establishes many of these social issues, and *The Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2009* report released by the government July 2nd, 2009 reinforces the immediacy of action required, offering a multitude of statistics demonstrating this disadvantage.



Some of the shocking statistics include that life expectancy for Indigenous males and females compared to non-Indigenous males and females remains 12 years and 10 years younger respectively (19); infant mortality remains two to three times higher in the Indigenous population (20); the employment to population ratio and labour force participation remains 24% and 19% lower respectively than the non-Indigenous population (25); the median weekly income of Indigenous Australians totalled only 59% of what a non-Indigenous Australian would earn (\$248 compared to \$473); Indigenous Australians were three times more likely to be hospitalised due to mental and physical problems caused by drug use (62); and Indigenous Australians were 13 times more likely to be imprisoned than non-Indigenous Australians (31).

Low socio-economic status, low employment, overcrowding, and substance and alcohol abuse all contribute to these disturbing figures (2009: 30). Davidson and Jennett have claimed

...this disadvantage exists largely because for most of Australia's history since 1788 indigenous Australians have been treated unjustly, deprived of many basic human rights and excluded, through laws and actions of government, from mainstream society and its economic opportunities... Even today, discrimination, exclusion and control continue, although more subtly. (1994: 3)

These conditions continue to be perpetuated discursively, through unconscious beliefs many non-Indigenous Australians have that Indigenous people are to blame for their situation because they are unmotivated to change it (Davidson & Jennett 1994). These views urgently need to be changed, so that the conditions which perpetuate social problems may be dealt with more proactively throughout the community. What is required is a space known as *hybridity* in postcolonial thought, a space between cultures in which understanding is reciprocal and mutual (Ashcroft et al 1998). This requires a connection to be established, which is difficult in light of the lack of empathy from the larger population. But visual art can allow this space to be created, as it elicits an emotional response, which may, ideally, serve to create sympathy in the viewers.

"Art doesn't exist on its own. It has its own responsibility and asks for its own response." (Ngadhu et al 2008: 21) Artistic practice, placed within both a context of tradition and postmodernism, is one of the key ways in which Indigenous Australians respond to social issues of both past and present. Artistic practice is integral to Indigenous culture, with art remaining an important link to the past for Indigenous people. In colonial times, this art was ignored as 'primitive', reflecting general European perceptions of those who were different to them (Berndt & Berndt 1982), a perspective simplifying a sophisticated and spiritual visual art. The art has according to Berndt and Berndt "...*something to convey to those who were in a position to identify its imagery and symbolism, who knew its socio-cultural context.*" (1982: 20). They explain that Indigenous Australians harnessed nature through myth, and represented the symbolic nature of this through art; and thus both the spiritual and physical impact of dispossession is often reflected in the pieces themselves. Indeed much Indigenous art now reflects the wrenching apart of peoples from their land and past, and the ensuing spiritual tumult.

Indigenous art garnered more attention over time, but this was and on occasion continues to be based often upon stereotypical views of not only the art pieces but the people themselves. Thus, its growth paradoxically served to limit its potential because those who sought to buy it had preconceived ideas about what it looked like (Berndt and Berndt 1982). Additionally, it led to mass production and thus deconsecrating of spiritual objects (Napier 1997); a commodification of Indigenous tradition Cowlshaw (2009) further connects with the alienation of Indigenous people from a sense of their own culture, as this process demands symbols of Indigenous culture become explicit, and in many ways artificial. 'Indigenous culture' becomes an abstract entity more often based on Western perceptions than the reality most experience. Napier (1997) also points out that the romanticisation of their nature and lifestyle as anachronistic

often entails the marginalisation of Indigenous peoples. Thus stereotypes are ossified, the community homogenised, and those speaking outside expected views unheard. In light of this, during the mid-twentieth century Indigenous artists started to more fully embrace Western styles of art to express their disenchantment with the compartmentalisation of their art, and of them as human beings (Berndt & Berndt 1982).

But questions of ‘authenticity’ manifest in various discourses. Once a unified Indigenous identity was liberating, crystallising cohesiveness in the community, but it has become increasingly burdensome as the question becomes politically loaded within and without the Indigenous community (Cowlshaw 2009). Ngadhu et al (2008) further connect the ‘invisibility’ of much Indigenous art with the question of the legitimacy of mixed-descent people; asking, “*what now forces us to be one of two stereotypes: urban or traditional...?*” (15). These Indigenous Australians, whether mixed descent or merely breaking the stereotype that Indigenous people cannot be ‘bourgeois’ (Cowlshaw 2009), are forced into a borderlands between cultures; forced to prove their own legitimacy as not just members of a community but as people. Cowlshaw defines Indigenousness as a social identity; a place in a social rather than cultural world, a community constructed based not on cultural or even ethnic identity but on empathy of shared social ills, as many Indigenous people are cut off from the roots of their culture, while still suffering in the social conditions history has bred. Cowlshaw records a remark made by an Indigenous woman Norrie on this: “*I wouldn't know how to define Aboriginality. I've never lived any other way.*” (2009: 161) Rather than an explicit identity that may be publicly performed or defined, Indigenousness is an experience not easily expressed.

Just as the people should not be, Indigenous art cannot be classified to one niche. Contemporary Indigenous art is then best understood when analysed in terms of both tradition and postmodernism. Many artists use it as way of connecting themselves to their people and past- thus embracing the spiritualism of the tradition- but many of these also use their art as a bridge between Indigenous culture and larger Australian society. Indigenous art created now often embodies a challenge to inequality and the status quo, a demand for the acknowledgement of their legitimacy. An appreciation of what tradition and postmodernism terms means is then necessary, as they not only inform contemporary art but contemporary society, or our ‘present moment’, and the necessity of challenge within it. In the immediacy of now, we lack the advantage of hindsight to readily classify this period, but maybe this is best because it allows us to embrace the ambiguities and pluralities of discourse of any society and fully appreciate these challenges. This phrase, *the present moment*, further reflects the instability of time; how one moment slips into the next. But one can never forget the enduring influence of the past on the present: the present is shaped and reshaped by the past, by shifts in perception of our memories.

At its most basic level tradition is something which has been handed down from the past and has a tendency to endure. This is the wide definition E. Shils (1981) proposes, and he furthermore points out this does not mean the transferred customs, objects, states, et cetera are mandatory or static. According to Shils’ view, all contemporary cultures must be traditional to some degree: and indeed, there is no present without the foundations of the past. But he also asserts no truly ‘traditional’ society can actually exist, because humans never universally find contentment in a

single state. He thus emphasises the folly of classifying tradition as either a utopian or dystopian state of stasis. The things passed on may endure but they are constantly re-evaluated, constantly reshaping the present. Our perceptions of Indigenous Australians are a legacy of a colonial history and can embody a 'tradition' of prejudice but by looking back at the roots of these beliefs, we can reconsider our actions and ourselves. The question, "*how do we remember our national past?*" has had an ongoing relevance in terms of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians' different experiences and perceptions of those experiences; the Indigenous artist Daniel Boyd for example explains "*questioning the romantic notions that surround the birth of Australia*" is paramount to his work.
(<http://www.theregoestheneighbourhood.org/daniel.htm> para. 1)



Self-Portrait
1788-2006

Self Portrait 1788

2007, 2006

Drawing

(<http://www.theregoestheneighbourhood.org/daniel.htm>)

Tradition and modernity are often held as opposites, with the modern defining itself against the old, but by classifying tradition as a state completely distinct from 'modernity' and 'postmodernism', one is in danger of gross oversimplification of these terms. Latour (1993) goes so far as to argue that we have never been 'modern'; contemporary civilisation (culture) has never transcended nature, and by doing so he breaks down many of the oppositions constructed between *modern* and *primitive* societies. 'Primitive' is one of those words left-over from colonial times, a way of classifying cultures heavily influenced by tradition. In a contemporary context we may avoid explicitly using the word, but Thomas (1994) argues even in 'left-liberal culture' we reinforce boundaries with new names through our reverence of the exotic, mystical, simpler and 'purer' ways of life of traditional cultures. This kind of 'primitivism' "*frequently shares the progressivist understanding of tribal society as an original and antecedent form, but revalues its rudimentary character as something to be upheld.*" (174) While, indeed, access to traditional knowledge and practices should be allowed and promoted, as all people should be able to access and understand their heritage, Indigenous people should not be forced to embody tradition. Firstly, due to dislocation many Indigenous Australians do not have physical, spiritual or emotional access to their traditions; and secondly, everyone should have the freedom to reject or embrace parts of their identity. These demands of tradition throw more flames on the 'authenticity' issue, further serving to trivialise the

lived experiences of many Indigenous people, as well the forms of appeal and protest they may invoke, often Western in nature.

The challenging inherent in much, if not most, contemporary Indigenous art is characteristic of the influence of postmodern thought on society. Postmodernism is an elusive entity to describe; though it may be defined against modernity, to view the two in opposition is a logical fallacy. Modernity itself is very much based on binary oppositions, but Derrida's work crystallises the privileging of these components: in a binary opposition, one is always perceived as being the better. He further argues that such concepts do not have an identity independent of the other; we know what something is by what it isn't, not actually what it is. Postmodernists like Lyotard decentre the Cartesian-style subject, seeing difference as constitutive of language, and in turn, subjectivity. (Anderson 2008) The hierarchical ordering of concepts in the binary is thus inherently flawed, because they cannot actually be separated- something that has a great significance in colonial terms.

Colonialism is based on a fundamental binary between 'us' and 'them'. Edward Said's work on 'Othering' remains seminal in postcolonial responses. The Other is seen as that which opposes Western values, and its oppositional existence serves to validate Western discourses and practices; but the Other is a purely textual and discursive construction born out of misunderstanding, created based on comparison, devoid of its own identity (Cavallaro 2001). The ideal space of *hybridity* is one where the Other has been destroyed and the interdependence of colonised/ coloniser finally celebrated. Homi K. Bhabha has become closely associated with this facet of the term, highlighting the mutual and reciprocal construction of the Other and the self, or the 'other' culture and the 'mainstream'. These are shown as false constructions because identity is created in an ambivalent cultural space; the result is the impurity of cultures which means cultural hierarchies are illogical (Ashcroft et al 1998).

Postcolonialism exemplifies one of the most political incarnations of postmodern ideas (Young 2003), seeking to undo the structures and discourses, such as the Other, that justified and continue to reinforce indirectly colonial practices. The 'post' then is something of a "*semantic trap... signalling an epochal sequentiality*" (Hoogvelt 2001: 166) when it is not actually meant to imply we are living in a world that is beyond colonialism; 'neo-colonialism', for example, refers to the ongoing, indirect practices reinforcing the divide between colonised/ colonising peoples (Ashcroft et al 1998). These discourses, such as of the concept of primitive vs. civilised society, which inevitably universalise human nature and behaviour are examples of *metanarratives*, one of the key concepts of postmodernism. Lyotard refers to the 'postmodern condition' as being characterised by "*incredulity towards metanarratives*" (1984: xxiv, cited in Anderson 2009). An example is the notion of progress, ubiquitous in modernist thought to the degree it was like a secular religion (Wright 2004). But Wright posits it as an enduring 'myth', in the Barthesian sense; an inherently ideological concept that is so ingrained in our culture we do not question it. So, to unequivocally say contemporary society is postmodern would be inaccurate; all kinds of discourses exist, which is somewhat paradoxically another key idea in postmodern theories. Thus while postmodernism does register a definite break in society, and there are many clear distinctions between the postmodern condition and the modernist one, we cannot easily classify now as pure postmodernism.

But the questioning that postmodernists like Lyotard propound is key in our present moment. What is important are not the futile 'big stories' but the 'little stories', the stories once pushed away: the stories of the marginalised, which can help achieve the goal of postcolonialism: "*turning the world upside down*" (Young 2003: 2).

Postcolonialism is a demand for a complete metamorphosis in the relationships and relations between West and non-West, colonisers and colonised. While, as Thomas (1994) tells us, it would be inaccurate to describe us as living in a postcolonial epoch as this would require us to have transcended the typification of the Other, of other ethnicities, postcolonial thought is a key part of our epoch. As a theory it seeks to give us the tools and the understanding to break down the disparity that exists between the experiences of different ethnicities and nationalities. This mural is an implicit demand on a local level for this, attesting to the disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Additionally, artistic practice is one of the key ways these postcolonial demands may manifest. As has been argued throughout the article, only through an understanding of this social, economic and political divide can we begin to take action against it. Art is a way this understanding may be evoked, and this is why this site and contemporary Indigenous art in general are so important in the present moment.

The diversity of Indigenous artistic practice further reinforces the importance of acknowledging the variety of discourses found throughout contemporary society. While we may be eager to understand the time we live in exactly, Lyotard's argument against metanarratives reminds us we cannot describe our epoch in unambiguous terms. While our present moment has many postmodern features, and postcolonialism is an important force now, our society is structured in the past, not just the present, so tradition is also important. The tradition of modernist thought still lingers, so our clear-cut classifying of these 'periods' is impractical; thus, it is far more important to embrace diversity and multiplicity to understand the present moment, whose nature can merely be hinted at through our lived experience.

To challenge what needs to be changed in the present moment requires an understanding of the way discourse operates in the present to reinforce views that are steeped in history. This article has sought to explain this in terms of the social issues affecting Indigenous Australians, and thus to demonstrate the urgency with which these discourses must be broken down so our society may truly embody progress- not as a modernist myth, but as a hybrid space that has transcended the textual and practical tradition of colonialism. This site thus shows us that a connection to tradition is still alive; augmented, not destroyed, in a postmodern world. By innovating, challenging and expanding upon traditional practices, Indigenous Australians have a way of connecting past and present for the betterment of their futures; a way of connecting themselves and other Australians so we may all better understand each other in the confusion of the present moment.

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